

UnderstandIT

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A publication designed to inform and enable businesses to understand the implications, costs and advantages of using Information and Communications Technology. Distributed through Chambers of Commerce.

CONTACTLESS PAYMENTS?

Another technology is about to hit you, in the steady increase in the use of technology when paying for goods and services. Both MasterCard and Visa Europe are beginning trials of systems for paying for goods without the need to physically insert or swipe your credit card through a machine.

The new services, known as PAYPASS (MasterCard) and PAYWAVE (Visa) are aimed at high-volume, low-value purchases, typically under £10, for example in fast-food restaurants and small stores etc. The technology builds on the existing “chip and pin” credit cards and existing cards can be updated easily.

With these new systems, you will only have to offer your credit card within a short distance of a point of sale terminal or till and the amount will be transferred from your account to the vendor’s account. So, we will now have “tap and go” as well as “chip and pin”!

The roll-out of this technology has begun in London, with trials at outlets like McDonalds, Krispy Kreme, Coffee Republic, amongst others. It is estimated that by the end of 2008, 100,000 outlets in the UK will be enabled to use these systems, with more than 5 million “tap and go” enabled cards in circulation.

FIREFOX WEB BROWSER UPDATE

Many of you may have taken up our recommendation last year to try out the Firefox web browser from the Mozilla Foundation. The open-source web browser (“open source” just means that the basic code behind the product is published openly and can be modified by anyone) appears to have continued to go from strength to strength against its erstwhile rival, Microsoft’s Internet Explorer.

The Mozilla Foundation has just announced that they have recorded their 400 millionth download of the free browser, and now claim to have around 25% of the web browser market.

Many have asked why Mozilla Firefox has been so successful. The answer is two-fold - firstly Microsoft became a little complacent with the dominance of its Internet Explorer browser. IE became the subject of security alert after security alert and users became tired of the vulnerabilities that it presented. Although Microsoft did issue patches to close any security loopholes, it was maybe too late to avoid turning away what was a loyal user base.

Secondly, Mozilla has produced a browser which has improved speed, does not use Active X controls (so considerably more secure) and introduced innovative features like tabbed browsing (the ability to open many browser windows within the one window by using tabs along to the top of the window). This feature has now been included in the latest incarnation of IE (version 7). However, it has been too little, too late for Microsoft.

Firefox has also benefited from many enhancements, add-ons and other features developed by many experienced and qualified professionals across the world. It therefore benefits from this distributed development effort, and all contributed for free. It is now available in over 40 different languages, and will run on Windows, Mac OS and Linux operating systems.

If you have not tried out Firefox, you can download the latest version (at the time of writing, version 2.0.0.6) from here:

<http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/>

INSTALL YOUR OWN VOICE OVER IP PABX!

The title of this article may be a little tongue-in-cheek, but the following article demonstrates that the installation of such new technology is now becoming within similar realms of installing a PC network or WiFi network.

We have covered aspects of Voice Over IP (VOIP) telephony in *Understand IT* in the past - this article talks a little about some of the latest developments and how easy it is becoming to implement VOIP.

A VOIP telephone system (or PABX using rather dated parlance) is really only a computer running some specialist software. It is now a relatively simple job to install a computer and purchase VOIP software that turns that computer (with some additional bits of hardware) into a fully functional and flexible telephone system.

One supplier of such software (Swyx Solutions), a German company with offices in the UK, are offering boxed software packages that can provide a very respectable IP telephony solution for a company with as little as 10 users. The system even runs on Windows XP (the larger version for around 100 users does require something a little more sophisticated like Windows Server).

You need not worry about the physical connections to the regular telephone network, which is typically handled by one or more ISDN services, plus an Internet connection. You can also opt to use now freely available IP telephone instruments, or if your users have PCs with microphones and speakers, there are a range of “Soft” telephones (computer programme) that provide all the functionality of a conventional phone, but using a software window on the PC.

Apart from providing the basic telephone requirements, add-on packages are available to add facsimile, integrated e-mail and other features to create an extremely flexible and inexpensive telephone solution for your organisation.

You can find out more about the software discussed above by going here:

<http://www.swyx.com/uk/>

If you need assistance in evaluating this system or any of the other similar systems that are now becoming available, then please contact Alan Finch on (01224) 697457.

APPLE IPHONE – MORE HYPE

Many of you may have read the advance press hype that preceded the launch of the new Apple iPhone in the US. Well, the much publicised iPhone is due to be launched in the UK on November 9th - an event that is no doubt eagerly awaited by many.

Whilst those of us behind *Understand IT* do try to stay impartial when it comes to the recommendation or promotion of any brand or piece of technology, we do feel the need to provide constructive criticism of particular products or services from time to time.

The iPhone is, without doubt quite innovative and provides users with a number of new experiences. The individual technologies that it uses are not new, but the combination of these technologies in one device is new and has led to a massive up-take of devices in the US.

The plus points are the look and feel of the device, which will appeal to the Apple aficionados and the fashion conscious. The touch-screen that does not need a stylus, just your finger, to function is excellent – which is OK if you happen to have small narrow fingers, but if you happen to have rather large fingers, then it maybe not so good.

However, the human interface is without doubt extremely good and the device does combine the functions of a digital camera, mobile phone, handheld computer and entertainment centre into one device, which is quite some feat.

Unfortunately, along the way, Apple made some fairly basic design flaws. They are not necessarily all “show-stoppers”, but you might want to consider their impact on your use of such a device:

- EDGE and not 3G – the EDGE cellular radio network protocol is now quite aged. Most new devices now use the much faster 3G (third generation) cellular radio technology. The result is that the transmission of data = web browsing experience on the iPhone is very slow.
- Sound quality – the quality of sound transmission when using the phone function has been found to be sadly very lacking.
- No Java or Flash support – now used on many web pages, which are therefore unavailable to the iPhone user.
- There is no support for multi-media messaging. You cannot therefore send any photograph taken on the integrated camera via the MMS service.
- Whilst the iPhone does support Wi-Fi and Bluetooth, it is not possible to connect a Bluetooth headphone - nor can you synchronise your contacts, messages or other information with a PC using Bluetooth.
- Sealed battery – has to be shipped back to Apple for a refit when it requires a replacement!
- No memory expansion capability. You are restricted to the memory capacity in whichever model you initial purchase. You cannot supplement this using one of the many memory card formats now readily available.
- Tied to one contracting network. This, we feel, goes against the tenet of choice and competition. In the US the iPhone is tied to the AT&T network. When the iPhone was initially launched, this caused major problems, since the network failed many times, due to the amount of activity. AT&T is also not known to be a particularly dynamic organisation and has been slow to respond to such problems. In the UK the selected tied network has now been announced as O2. We wonder if the same fate will await UK users of this new device?
- Finally – the cost. Since you are tied to one network provider, then you need to study the total cost of ownership over the planned 18 month contract that you will be expected to commit to.

In summary, we suggest that you seriously consider the above points and look at alternative devices that are already beginning to appear, offering similar features, without necessarily all the flaws.

We wish to acknowledge with thanks that some of the material contained within this publication has been sourced from Computer Weekly, PC Pro, BBC and other reputable sources..

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