

Tech Talk: The changing landscape of the smartphone market

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The ads have been coming out of the woodwork lately, whether for the iPhone, the BlackBerry, Windows Mobile and now Android smartphones. The mobile phone market is changing and smartphones are taking hold across businesses large and small. What was once the domain of BlackBerry and its maker Research in Motion is now becoming dominated by the iPhone and its most direct competition to date, Android.

In past columns, I have reviewed the BlackBerry, Windows Mobile and the iPhone in some depth. For this column, I am going to provide an overview of the newest mobile phone operating system, Android, and its likely place in the business market and how it compares to existing operating systems.

Android is Google's first foray into the software operating system market and the mobile phone market specifically. Many hardware manufacturers and mobile phone carriers are lining up to support it. Hardware is currently available from HTC and Motorola, both giants in the mobile phone market and, more specifically, the smartphone market. Smartphones are mobile phones that add PDA functionality to the mix. They provide real time synchronization with e-mail servers as well as Web browsing and a host of other applications. In the business community, smartphones are now just as common, if not more so, than basic mobile phones.

The Motorola Droid from Verizon Wireless is probably the most widely known Android phone on the market today. However, Google has recently introduced its own phone, the NexusOne, which is manufactured by HTC and currently available on the T-Mobile network. Every major carrier now offers one or more Android smartphones.

I have been testing a Motorola Droid on the Verizon Wireless network, and I have to say I am impressed. That's not to say I have not been through an adjustment period, as I have. The interface is very intuitive, and once you get accustomed to it, it is very easy to work with and most impressively, it is very, very fast and stable. Because of the nature of our business, we have users with different types of smartphones in our office. As compared to Windows Mobile and BlackBerry devices, the Droid is extremely fast. Even compared to the iPhone, the current king of the smartphone market according to many, the Droid, is fast, both in terms of using the phone itself as well as browsing the Web. The Web browser, as you might expect, is based on Google's Chrome browser. It delivers an online experience that rivals any desktop Web browser.

Google has packed the Android operating system with a wealth of useful features, most notably voice-enabled search and dialing.

While not new, these features are very reliable on the Android platform. As an example, while driving last week with my family, we decided to go out to dinner. I tapped the voice search button on the phone, spoke the name of the restaurant and the town it is located in and in about two seconds, the phone pulled up links to the restaurant and the phone number. I tapped the phone number and was connected to the restaurant in about five seconds from start to finish.

The main concern with all these devices in a business environment is security and the ability to seamlessly synchronize with the company mail server.

Most businesses use Microsoft Exchange and if you also use a BlackBerry, will be running BlackBerry Enterprise Server. With Exchange Server ActiveSync, Windows Mobile and the iPhone are able to synchronize with the server out of the box.

Android provides this capability as well, though not as full-featured, but there are many inexpensive third party tools available that provide full support, including for the security profiles you have in use on your mail server.

So, as a business device, the Android is a very capable option to be considered. If you find yourself considering what mobile devices your business should support, be sure that Android is on the list, and base your decision on what platform will best support your need.

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