

by Douglas Clark

Mobile **CONNECTIVITY**

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Until recently, mobile connectivity has not been a pressing concern for most hotel development projects. This needs to be carefully reconsidered for future developments in order to meet what is fast becoming a core guest requirement.

Mobile communication has radically changed how people communicate and the perception of their availability. Initially, the mobile phone meant that people were not tied to their desks in order to be connected by voice and this was felt to be an enormous productivity boost. As the costs for mobile phone services rapidly came down, penetration grew exponentially and now there are close to 200 million subscribers in the U.S. alone. The mobile phone is now a basic business tool of the business traveller.

The advent of real time e-mail on mobile devices has even further increased the perceived availability of individuals. People can now receive e-mail wherever they can get a signal and, when it is known that someone carries such a device, senders assume that their messages are received and read immediately. While the individuals carrying these devices may question the effect on their personal productivity, most rapidly become accustomed to a high level of availability. Penetration of mobile e-mail devices is rapidly growing as well with, for example, 3.2 million Blackberry users in the U.S. For hotels this issue then becomes not so much whether the guest is receiving calls and e-mail on his mobile device but rather whether the guest's boss and clients expect that he is. For many guests, this now, and will increasingly, affect their choice in accommodation. If they are travelling on business, then they need their business tools to function.

Most of the services that deliver voice and e-mail are based on the cellular networks. These networks work diligently to enhance their service coverage, but they cannot easily overcome many of the challenges



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of penetrating buildings. In-building connectivity is influenced by many factors such as distance and direction from transmission locations, building height, overall depth from external walls, construction materials, window glazing and finishes. The net effect of all these can result in different levels of connectivity and penetration from different carriers. In a corporate environment, such issues are relatively easily addressed as, typically, the business has chosen a single carrier and can install signal boosters where they are believed necessary.

Hotels face a much different challenge. Guest mobile devices will cover the spectrum of carriers and fully expect that the device will work everywhere they go in the building. There are several companies offering solutions to resolve this, but they are expensive to implement in new-builds and the costs are much greater to retrofit. The requirement cannot be denied, however. Recently on construction sites I have truly understood the productivity challenges faced by contractors, vendors and hotel staff themselves as they continually have communication chal-

lenges. Construction projects are typical of venues where the greatest benefits of mobile connectivity can be realized, but as buildings begin to be closed in, connectivity begins to fail. The variety of different entities onsite mimics the same range of carriers that will be used by the eventual guests of the hotel. If the connectivity challenges faced during construction are not addressed, the guests will experience the identical issues themselves.

Mobile connectivity should be likened to the earlier pressure to deploy high-speed Internet access in hotels. The new requirement for mobile connectivity is not a fad, but a reality of modern business life. Hotels have always sought to provide guests with the basic essentials of home and business while travelling and mobile connectivity is quickly reaching that status.

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