



“Fulfil voice over WiFi potential rather than trying to boil the sea”

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Staggering though it might seem, Voice over IP (VoIP) developments over the past 18 months mean that the features and quality of VoIP calls have improved such that they can now be better than traditional PSTN or GSM voice call quality.

And as VoIP uses the Internet which has no concept of “international” - it’s as if every call is a local one. However, users don’t want to be tied to cables, hence the interest in making VoIP wireless. Wireless VoIP is already rolling out across corporate campuses and the next step is to extend this in public places such as hotspots in airport lounges, hotels etc. But to date there have been challenges:

1. The only people to have really embraced VoWIP are the techno savvy early adopters who can navigate all the configuration hassles.
2. The public WiFi networks are set up to charge as soon as a user logs in, irrespective of whether or not a call is made.
3. There is a lack of devices that function effectively across networks.

The perception is that overcoming these hurdles is huge. Not so. There are services available where the configuration issues have been solved using secure closed loop technology, and a new approach – virtual network enablement – means that users have a consistent experience similar to their telco to simplify the connection process. Equally, ‘presence management’ addresses the problem of being charged when calls aren’t made. There are simply two levels of access control – standby mode and talking mode – and you get charged accordingly.

Many people are now talking about WiFi devices switching seamlessly to cellular networks and back again. Realistically this isn’t going to work for 2 or 3 years. However, right now there are devices that can use either network, but not do seamless handoffs.

Where handoffs have been achieved, telcos have been operating in a very insular environment which doesn’t scale i.e. operators who own both WiFi hotspots and cellular networks have got it working but they aren’t handing off to other operators in a roaming environment (say abroad) or to a location where the WiFi operator is different. The key here is to keep it simple, as users almost always stay within range of a single network (WiFi or GSM) for the duration of the call.

There is enough justification for getting VoWIP to work on its own, independent of 3G/GSM given the interest in VoIP, and there is immediate value in replacing existing non-cellular handsets. It just doesn’t make sense to have various phones. With a

VoWiFi / cellular handset you could have one phone which works at the office, home or anywhere you can get a WiFi connection.

We shouldn't get hung up on the fact that fixed-mobile convergence will not happen for a while - let's get VoWIP working properly by itself and then later with cellular. To do both today is a bit like trying to boil the sea - you're trying to do too much. VoWIP offers so much potential but we need to dismiss those who argue that if it can't be made to work with cellular straight away it's useless.

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