Remote Working
The virtual office

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Over-stressed workers have often been heard to say that they can't be in two places at once. But it's amazing what technology can do these days. Advances in wireless computing have made it easier to be virtually present in the office, even when you're on the road or at home.

Mobile computing allows people to use IT without being tied to a single location. Any business with staff that work away from the office can benefit from using it. Whether you or your employees are travelling to meetings, out on sales calls, working from a client's site or from home, mobile devices - from laptops and personal organisers to "third generation" (3G) phones and virtual private networks (VPNs) - can help you keep in touch and make the most productive use of your time.

Mobile IT devices can also change the way you do business - new technologies lead to new ways of working, and new products and services that can be offered to your customers. They can bring more business opportunities – by working smarter and more efficiently.

WHAT IS MOBILE TECHNOLOGY AND WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?
Mobile technology is exactly what the name implies - technology that is portable. Examples of mobile IT devices include:
- laptop computers
- palmtop computers or personal digital assistants
- mobile phones and "smart phones" - high-end phones with more advanced capabilities

Using any of the above devices it is possible to connect to your office network or the Internet while traveling.

BENEFITS
Mobile computing can improve the service you offer when you visit customers. For example, you could use your laptop computer to give a presentation. You could then transfer brochure files of your product literature to your client's computer. Or you could connect remotely to your office network, schedule a follow-up appointment in your electronic diary. Or you could place an order for the customer there and then so there would be no need to type up all your notes of the meeting or process the sales order when you return to the office.

This leads to great flexibility in working - for example, enabling home working, or working while traveling. Increasingly, networking "hot spots" are being provided in public areas that allow connection back to the office network or the Internet. It also reduces the amount of "dead time" for example it reduces the amount of time a member of sales spends traveling to the office to update the system, thereby increasing the sales team efficiency. There are costs involved in setting up the equipment and training required to make use of mobile devices. Mobile IT devices can expose valuable data to unauthorized people if the proper precautions are not taken to ensure that the devices, and the data they can access, are kept safe. Therefore it vitally important that any remote system is installed by a fully certified IT professional.

LAPTOPS AND PDAS
Handheld computers, or personal digital assistants (PDAs), are increasingly powerful devices that run cut-down versions of "standard" office software packages. The small size of handhelds can make extended use inconvenient, but they're ideal for on-the-move access to email, schedules and documents. Some PDAs can also be used as mobile phones.

Laptop computers give you the full functionality of a desktop PC and can handle the full range of office software. If you need to access the Internet and check emails while traveling, or connect to your office network, you can connect a laptop to the Internet via a landline, a mobile phone, or wireless data services. Handheld computers can often be linked to a mobile phone for data networking - exchanging information with other computers.

In the office you can connect mobile devices to the network using cables or wireless technology. Wireless-enabled devices - laptops, PDAs etc - can automatically connect to their "home" network when in signal range in order to synchronize data with office databases and file servers so that data on all devices is up to date.

MANAGING THE USE OF MOBILE DEVICES
Do:
- Look at where mobile devices may be of use in your business.
- Look at the potential for increased flexibility in the way that you work.
- Ensure that your staff are properly trained to use these devices, and understand the security issues.
- Draw up an "acceptable use" policy for your staff so that they are aware of the limits within which they can operate.
- Ensure that data is secure in the event that a mobile device is stolen.
- Ensure that mobile data is backed up regularly, along with other valuable corporate data.
- Use passwords to control access to mobile devices and your business network.

Don't:
- Allow mobile devices to have free access to all sensitive corporate data, unless strong security measures are in place.
- Leave mobile devices in areas where they can be seen or easily taken.
- Leave password information in places where others can find it.

That's it for this month. Should you require any further information or advice on any of the topics covered please do not hesitate to contact me at jgleeson@ithink.ie