

'Wireless home' becomes a reality

The wireless home, where multiple gadgets share an online connection, is moving from sci-fi speculation to reality for millions of WiFi users. According to reports from StrategyAnalytics, 20 percent of broadband subscribers across the United States and Europe now use WiFi to share their Internet connection between PCs and other devices. The group estimate that WiFi now becoming the dominant home networking choice for the majority of broadband subscribers.

The cause of the rise is twofold and interconnected -- more folks are buying portable wireless gadgets whilst also getting broadband installed in their homes to get the most of their new appliances. The number of different portable wireless devices hitting the market is spiralling ever upwards now that wireless connectivity has moved beyond the confines of PCs and laptops to cell phones, games consoles, PDAs, and home entertainment systems. The market is booming, with WiFi system unit shipments growing from 82 million in 2004 to an estimated 185 million units in 2006.

The European broadband market in particular is also growing rapidly, driven by falling prices and new services. These include IPTV (Internet Protocol Television), a digital subscription service where a digital television service is delivered to customers via their broadband connection, and can include Web access as part of the package. 18.3 million households in Western Europe alone added broadband during 2005, in an increase over the 15.4 million who subscribed in 2004. Much of this European growth has come from the larger markets of Germany and the UK, where competition has been stimulated by consolidation and new entrants to the market. In other regions operators including the French operators Free, Italy's FastWeb and the Spanish operating company Jazztel have incited adoption with competitively priced packages of broadband Internet, IPTV and telephony.

The growth of the WiFi and broadband markets is expected to continue unabated into the future, possibly to the point of saturation. StrategyAnalytics have placed long-term predictions on these markets, estimating that in 2010 over 400 million WiFi units will be sold, and 108 million households in Western Europe -- 63 percent of all households - will use broadband to connect their PCs to the Internet.

The move to a wireless household may seem a little contradictory at a time when the biggest trend in telecommunications focuses on enabling wireless access any time, any place, anywhere. Telephony operating companies around the world have been working on deals to install localised broadband access areas, known as WiFi hotspots, in various cities. Last week BT announced that they would set up these hotspots in 12 cities around the UK, including Leeds, Liverpool and Westminster in London. Communal commercial locations such as cafes, airports, trains and hotels have also been quick to install WiFi for their customers, and the popular GoogleMaps tool even allows users to search for WiFi access in their local area.

There are fears, however, that the push for universal wireless access is not entirely for the greater good. The UK telephony services provider Orange released their Organisational Lives report this month pointed to the disadvantages of such access, namely through the blurring of the lines between home and work. Of the millions of households installing broadband over the coming years, the winners will be those who know when to switch off, knowing how to use wireless access selectively, whilst the losers will fail to adapt their routines to the incoming tidal wave of mobile data. The report also warns that widespread virtual interconnectedness will actually diminish human contact. Although home workers will be able to structure their days around their own needs, such as childcare, personal interests and obligations, they will place less emphasis on the casual office politics and gossip that comes with real-life day-to-day interactions. Organisations must take care to "incentivise staff to continue investing in the organisation as a whole".

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