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Dell Notebooks go Wireless

Dell notebooks are set to offer always-on wireless access to company networks and the Internet

February 12, 2002 - From mid-March, buyers of Dell notebooks will be able to order a GPRS-based PC Card, tailored for enterprises or small businesses, which provides always-on, wireless access to the company network or the Internet. The key benefits will be the ability to send and receive email, browse the Web and access corporate databases from almost anywhere in the UK. Later, as roaming agreements fall into place, the service will be available in other European countries too.

In related news, the Merlin G201 will be available through CSL, the second largest operator in Hong Kong with over 1 million subscribers and 70 global roaming agreements. CSL will distribute the Merlin G201 under the 1010 and One2Free brand names later this month, providing both consumer and enterprise users with international GSM/GPRS data access.

The corporate plan, announced on Tuesday, is an end-to-end product with two main parts. At the client end, in the mobile user's notebook, is a Dell TrueMobile 5000 PC Card (made by Novatel Wireless) containing a data-only GSM/GPRS SIM card from BT Cellnet. At the server end, behind the company firewall, is optimisation software from Broadcloud Communications that maximises the efficiency of the GPRS connection. Installation services -- which can include the setting up of a secure leased line (a requirement) -- will be handled by a third party.

The cost of setting up wireless access for your mobile workforce isn't exactly cheap. Companies will need to budget at least £6,000 for installation services -- connecting the LAN to the GPRS network -- and £2,000 for the optimisation software. Then there's the GPRS PC Cards, at £249 each.

Finally there's the tariff for data traffic. Dell and BT Cellnet are offering two tiers: 20MB for £30 a month, or 50MB for £50 a month. Excess data over the monthly plan will be charged at £1.50/MB and £1/MB respectively, and there's also a GPRS-only supplement of £3.50 a month and a one-time connection charge of £29.79 to consider.

If that sounds somewhat scary, Dell has calculated that a heavy mobile user will get through around 2MB of emails and attachments a day, which reduces to around 600KB thanks to the server-side optimisation software. This equates to a per-user cost of some £2 a day.

Demonstrating the optimised service, David Krathwohl, Dell's director of wireless business development, showed a 250KB Word attachment being downloaded in around 20 seconds, and a 610KB file downloading in 35 seconds. This equates to a data transfer rate of 17KB per second or 136kbps. The GPRS connection uses four 14.4kbps slots for downloads (57.6kbps in total) and one slot for uploads, the server-side optimisation software accounting for the higher apparent download speeds.

For small businesses, Dell offers a simpler solution comprising the PC Card, the SIM card and a contract with One2One rather than BT Cellnet. No leased line or server-side installation is required, but the level of security is commensurately less.

Many businesses with mobile workforces will find Dell's hand-holding approach tempting, especially if they already buy Dell notebooks. However, there are alternatives: companies whose mobile staff already have Bluetooth-equipped GPRS phones, for example, may prefer to simply plug Bluetooth PC Cards into their notebooks, although it's possible that this may prove harder to set up and manage.