

We live in a mobile world. Recent forecasts show the mobile worker population in the U.S. growing to a staggering three quarters of the total workforce by 2020.

1) And increased mobility is not just an American business phenomenon: conservative estimates already reveal that the world's mobile worker population is more than a billion.

2) For those billions of business users, working both inside and outside of the traditional office, mobility has become synonymous with productivity.

In a data-driven world, mobile workers need high-speed, high-quality Internet connectivity for a host of business tasks, including downloading presentations, sharing large files, and accessing cloud-based applications and Unified Communications tools. And when it comes to getting connected, mobile workers have already shown a clear preference for Wi-Fi over cellular networks, which are more congested and more expensive. In fact, the overcrowding of cellular networks has already lead to major data offload to Wi-Fi, which now carries more than half of all mobile data.

However, Wi-Fi's popularity does create challenges for employers. Without intervention from IT, most mobile workers will flock to free Wi-Fi, which offers an immediate cost advantage over paid Wi-Fi. But upon further examination, free Wi-Fi is anything but free. This paper will explore the reasons why free Wi-Fi is bad for business.



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1. FREE WI-FI IS UNSAFE

Free Wi-Fi networks, unlike paid Wi-Fi, do not require authorization to access. The openness of these networks leaves mobile workers incredibly vulnerable to data and identity theft, as well as software virus and malware infection. In the words of Dutch journalist, Maurits Martijn: “We took a hacker to a café and, in 20 minutes, he knew where everyone else was born, what schools they attended, and the last five things they googled.”

An estimated 37.3 million users worldwide, and 4.5 million Americans, have fallen victim to phishing, or pharming, attempts, meaning their payment details have been stolen from hacked computers, smartphones, or browsers. That statistic is only the tip of the iceberg; report after report shows that digital identity fraud is an increasingly common problem, as hackers and cyber-criminals become increasingly adept at stealing data.

2. FREE WI-FI IS NOT PRIVATE

Using free Wi-Fi not only leaves mobile workers vulnerable to cyber-attack, but it leaves corporate data exposed to prying eyes. Offering free Wi-Fi requires a significant capital investment, and the person or entity making this investment will most likely want to recoup a return. Therefore, free Wi-Fi is usually only free on the condition that users give valuable data to network suppliers. That data can be personal, locational, or behavioral.

Along these lines, over the last few years, cities have invested heavily in rolling out public Wi-Fi to their citizens. But these deployments are not strictly public. Cities often form public-private consortia in order to finance and deploy free Wi-Fi. Participating corporations have a vested interest in collecting user data, especially as a means to focus their advertising efforts. Users rarely appreciate this fact, because corporations obscure their commercial intentions, while making users sign invasive privacy policies, often obfuscated by complex legal language.

3. FREE WI-FI SACRIFICES PRODUCTIVITY

Contrary to popular opinion, free Wi-Fi is not actually ubiquitous. Locating usable free Wi-Fi hotspots takes effort, which equates to productive time lost. Sure, a mobile worker might know that free Wi-Fi is available at the local coffee shop, but what about everywhere else? How certain can any mobile worker be that free Wi-Fi will be available when they need it most?

Actively searching for a usable, free Wi-Fi connection is not the only cost associated with free Wi-Fi. Free Wi-Fi also introduces numerous other inconveniences, such as pop-ups, spam, session time-outs, and slow speeds from congested networks. These inconveniences not only degrade the user experience, but they also cut directly into productive time.

4. FREE WI-FI IS OFTEN NOT THERE WHEN YOU NEED IT

There are numerous instances where free Wi-Fi is limited or non-existent, and where businesses lose productive hours, because their mobile workers cannot connect.

The prime example is air travel. Mobile workers who rely solely on free Wi-Fi aren't able to connect when they are flying, because accessing inflight Wi-Fi always requires payment. The time lost can be significant, especially for mobile workers who travel often and for long distances.

Furthermore, travel does not begin on the plane, it begins at the gate. Although an estimated half of all top airports in the U.S. and Europe do offer free Wi-Fi as an amenity, many other highly trafficked airports are only on the "freemium" model. That means free Wi-Fi is only available for a relatively short period of time, before users have to pay to stay online.

5. WITH FREE WI-FI, YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

Like airport Wi-Fi, hotel Wi-Fi operates on a two-tier system. With airport Wi-Fi, you tend to pay if you want to stay online longer. But with hotel Wi-Fi, you pay to have a better user experience. Some hotel chains, even top chains, offer free Wi-Fi, but they reserve high-quality Wi-Fi for their paying customers.

Why should that matter if mobile workers can use the free option? Because free Wi-Fi lowers productivity for mobile workers who need to access cloud-based apps, download video content, or make a call over Wi-Fi.

Additionally, tablets offer many of the functions of laptops while being more portable. This fact makes tablets popular with mobile workers looking to stay productive on the go. But tablets are more likely to run bandwidth-intensive multimedia applications, which means it can be difficult to fully utilize a tablet on congested free Wi-Fi networks.

CONCLUSION

Wi-Fi is booming. Mobile users love Wi-Fi, and carriers are offloading more and more data on to Wi-Fi networks. Accessing reliable Wi-Fi is no longer optional for business users; it is a necessity. But not all Wi-Fi is created equal. Although it offers an upfront cost advantage, free Wi-Fi is simply bad for business: it leaves company data vulnerable to hackers, compromises privacy, and decreases productivity. Companies need a mobility solution that's simple, private, and secure and keeps mobile workers connected wherever they are. From that vantage, paid Wi-Fi access is the only way to go.