

Wearable Computers To Provide A Boost For Mobile Data Services

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Cambridge UK, 3rd July 2003: They say clothes maketh a man - but can they keep him healthy as well? According to a report by UK based consultants, Wireless Healthcare, one day computers embedded in clothes could be monitoring our health. This would cut the cost of healthcare, give a boost to textile and IT producers and provide mobile phone companies with a new market for their data services.

Like Internet enabled home appliances, wearable computing captured the imagination of both the media and the public. Even so, for some time this enthusiasm failed to translate into commercially successful products. Recently, however, a number of companies have started marketing garments, or 'healthware', which monitor the breathing, temperature and heart rates of athletes and keep fit enthusiasts. As well, healthcare providers have identified a role for wearable computers in remote patient monitoring. While we are a long way from a Utopia where clothing continually monitors our health a growing number of wearable computers are being used in telemedicine applications and clinical trials.

Wireless Healthcare point to RFID (Radio Frequency Identification) as a potential driver for the healthware market. If retailers insist that RFID, rather than a barcode, is used to identify a product then textile manufacturers will seek to maximise their investment in technology that embeds the device in a garment. Consumer products, such as miniaturised MP3 players, are likely to be early applications of wearable computing. However ehealth and patient monitoring vendors should be able to exploit the falling cost of intelligent garment manufacture and the growth of supporting wireless infrastructure.

Already a number of niche textiles companies are attempting to differentiate themselves from larger players by marketing smart clothes. Wireless Healthcare believes the wearable computer market will gain further from thermogenerators that turn the body's heat into electrical power so that garments no longer need to accommodate bulky battery packs.

The report suggests that healthcare providers will need to aggregate healthware applications to ensure maximum use of networks and supporting infrastructure. As well, clinicians and IT vendors will need to work together to ensure that products originally intended to monitor athletes can be classified as medical devices.

According to Peter Kruger, a senior analyst with Wireless Healthcare, mobile phone companies are well positioned to exploit the healthware market "Data has to be transported from the patient to a control centre and an 'always on' wireless network, such as 3G, would be ideal for this purpose." However, he also points out that specially adapted handsets, or PDAs, will be needed to support wearable computing applications. "Although the development of specialised equipment may not be justified by the revenue from ehealth alone carriers could sell ehealth services alongside other wearable computer applications."

Wireless Healthcare believes healthware services could provide mobile carriers with a number of benefits - both tangible and intangible. Supplying services wholesale to the public sector would represent a departure from the operators' present model based around applications for consumer and corporate markets. However, healthware services would provide a steady revenue stream, based around older subscribers, at a time when shifting demographics leaves fewer subscribers for youth orientated services. Also, by

providing what could be regarded as an essential public service, mobile operators may have increased leverage over governments with respect to spectrum licensing issues and 3G infrastructure planning regulations.

Wireless Healthcare (www.wirelesshealthcare.co.uk) is a UK based consultancy specialising in ehealth and telemedicine.

'Healthware - Wearable Computers In Healthcare' examines the potential impact of wearable computing on the ehealth market and sets out the business case for potential users and vendors of healthware equipment. The report also profiles Clothing+, Bodymedia, Benefon, Vitaphone, Infineon and Sensatex.

The report is available in printed format for £56 + vat or electronically for £49 + vat.

Press copies available on request.

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