Wireless World: Not just for nebbishes

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A few years ago wireless data networks were a novelty, something that only nebbishes enjoyed, and no one else really understood, or cared to understand. Now they're a business necessity -- for the corporate office or home office, supplementing, but in some cases supplanting, wired infrastructure, experts tell United Press International's Wireless World. That's changing the way we work, and reshaping our expectations about the office environment.

A new report released this week by Synergy Research Group, based in Reno, Nevada, indicates that wireless local area network equipment sales continued their surge during the fourth quarter of last year, growing seven percent during the period, and 13 percent for the entire year.

Both consumer WLANs and enterprise -- or corporate -- networks increased, with consumer network equipment sales up by nine percent, and corporate sales up by four percent.

"Both the enterprise traditional access point and the SOHO (small office/home office) segments surpassed the $1 billion landmark in 2005," said Aaron Vance, a senior analyst at Synergy Research Group.

Some companies in the field experienced unprecedented growth - with enterprise WLAN network equipment maker Aruba reporting sales increasing by 165 percent last year. That company holds fourth place now in the enterprise wireless networking market, three paces behind Cisco Systems, which grew just 18 percent last year, albeit from a larger base.

For the consumer market, companies like D-Link grew 15 percent, while market leader Linksys grew 13 percent, according to the market analysis by Synergy Research Group.

"Wireless networks have gained corporate acceptance in the enterprise -- they have transitioned from a novel technology to an indispensable and manageable part of the IT landscape," David Hoff, technical director at Optimus Consulting, based in Norcross, Ga., told Wireless World.

Most of the wireless network projects that Optimus undertakes for its clients supplement existing wired networks in offices and manufacturing plants. "This has occurred for several reasons," said Hoff. "It's hard to find a laptop or PDA that doesn't have WiFi built in."

What is more, computer chips, the memory of the mobile devices, have evolved. Power consumption issues have nearly disappeared -- and the cost of the mobile devices has dropped dramatically, said Hoff.

Little noticed standards -- affirmed by gaggles of geeky developers, meeting in dank hotel conference rooms, around the world -- have helped too. These standards, emerging in the last 18 months or so, have propelled wireless networking ahead, after a lag of several years.

"The resurgence of interest in wireless networking is the result of two new protocols impacting wireless local networks, 802.11i, which was ratified by the IEEE (Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers) in 2004 and provides enhanced security for wireless networking, and 802.11n, which significantly enhances the speed of wireless networks and will probably be ratified in the next few months," Barbara Stoops, the flex network program manager at the University of Phoenix's campus in Charlotte, N.C., told Wireless World. "These two new protocols bring wireless networking up to truly compete with our traditional, wired networks."

In short, mobile networks for data are becoming something like mobile phones -- what everyone wants to have, and thinks they need to have. It's the ultimate revenge of the nerds.

According to Forrester Research, the average number of access points on a wireless network is doubling on each new project that is deployed. That means that managers want more and more of their workers to be mobile, not tethered to a desk like some milquetoast lawyer or bureaucrat, living lives of unfathomable boredom and futility. Mobility increases flexibility - which leads to more creativity. "The mobile network is flourishing," a spokesman for H-P said, noting that even hospitals are going wireless to reduce errors of physicians and nurses, and increase their efficiency.

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