Cloud computing gathers steam with mobile devices

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The outlook for the wireless industry is getting cloudier. Consumers have tapped into cloud computing technology for years: sending messages via Hotmail, uploading photos to Facebook or editing a spreadsheet on Google Docs are just a few examples. Simply put, cloud computing moves data from a single machine, such as a personal computer, to the Internet. The technology frees users from needing to be at a specific PC to access saved information.

Now the cloud is going mobile, and industry players expect the number of mobile cloud computing applications and Web-enabled portable devices to grow rapidly over the next few years. Motorola is building much of its turnaround strategy for mobile phones on a cloud-based solution, and wireless broadband service provider Clearwire believes the advent of faster, more sophisticated networks will unleash the full power of cloud computing.

If the industry projections come true, cloud computing will be even more commonplace. Colleagues may edit the same document over the Internet, with one person on a home computer and the other using a touch screen built into the back of the driver's seat of a car. Or a tourist who takes photos on a phone could store them in an online album, then view the pictures from a laptop.

ABI Research forecast that the number of mobile cloud computing users will jump from 42.8 million people in 2008 to more than 998 million in 2014, representing nearly 19 percent of wireless subscribers.

"When you have a laptop or a netbook, those are true computers and have great processing power and data storage," said Mark Beccue, a senior analyst at ABI Research. "But anything from a smart phone down does not. Mobile cloud computing says: 'What if you can enable these devices to access applications and data in the cloud?' "

Motorola showed off the mobile cloud this month with a Web-based service called Motoblur, which will debut on a [social-networking](#) phone called the Cliq. Motoblur aggregates data from a user's online networks and streams updates to the phone. The content can be remotely wiped if the phone is lost, or transferred to any Motoblur-enabled handset.

Motorola's vision encompasses more than social networking, Co-Chief Executive Sanjay Jha said at an investment conference this month. "Motoblur and social networking is not the last answer," he said. "You will see fundamentally our approach ... is to think about how the mobile Internet and cloud services can solve additional problems."

One of the cloud's biggest benefits is device independence, said Raju Vegesna, spokesman for Zoho, a maker of Web-based enterprise software. "It's not just the mobile phone and your laptop," he said. "I don't see a limit to the number of devices."

AT&T has seen its network burdened by the large amount of data being consumed by iPhone users, and the strain across wireless networks will increase with growth in mobile applications and user-generated content.

"The biggest component (of mobile [cloud computing](#)) is you have to have a fat pipe wherever you are," Bill Morrow, chief executive of Clearwire, said in a recent interview. Clearwire is a provider of WiMax, a technology that is faster and more reliable than current wireless networks. Clearwire plans to expand to 80 U.S. markets by the end of 2010.

Analysts say faster networks will dovetail with the proliferation of smarter devices. "This is going to be much more accessible to a lot of us on affordable phones," Beccue said.

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