

Using Wi-Fi for sustainable development

Even though Wi-Fi is not a new technology, it has a fundamentally important role to play in providing people, especially those in developing countries, with reliable access to broadband connectivity says Ruckus Wireless.



Michael Fletcher

A recent Informa White Paper* examining how smartphone usage is changing, points out that the Wi-Fi has cemented its position as the world's most successful wireless technology thanks to its widespread adoption across a host of devices and its role as the dominant carrier of data traffic on smartphones.

"Given that World Telecommunications and Information Society Day took place on Saturday, 17 May 2014 with the theme of broadband for sustainable development, it makes sense to examine how a cost-effective technology such as Wi-Fi can be used in Africa to help bridge the digital divide," says Michael Fletcher, sales director for Ruckus Wireless sub-Saharan Africa.

Wi-Fi does not have a spectrum requirement from the regulators so it is much faster and cheaper to deploy than many other wireless technologies. "Even in South Africa, we are seeing the mobile operators educating customers on the benefits of using Wi-Fi for their mobile data requirements with GSM being positioned for voice," says Fletcher.

Still a long way to go for Wi-Fi

While Wi-Fi continues to grow, unfortunately Wi-Fi connectivity is far from ubiquitous in South Africa and the rest of the continent. This results in it being positioned by many analysts as a complementary technology to GSM connectivity until such time as it is more pervasive.

"Yet, for a continent driven by mobility, Wi-Fi presents a significant opportunity to aid in the socio-economic development of people," adds Fletcher. "We all know that fixed-line access is virtually unheard of in rural communities and people rely on their mobile phones for anything from staying in touch with loved ones to doing business. Having Wi-Fi networks in place in

these communities suddenly present people with options they would not normally have had due to the high cost and limitations of other broadband solutions."

The Informa White Paper also found that the average monthly Wi-Fi use on a 3G devices increased 24% between January and December 2013, to 3.2GB per user. This usage also reflects how more people are relying on Wi-Fi connectivity for data intensive services.

"The regulatory environment in South Africa is opening up and starting to promote the development of Wi-Fi networks across the country. Already, we are seeing more consumer-facing businesses such as restaurants and hotels providing customers with free access. What is needed is to expand the net and make Wi-Fi even more broadly available to people from all walks of life," continues Fletcher.

Despite the relative ease of deploying Wi-Fi networks, companies can benefit the most from partnering with specialists who understand the intricacies of implementing the technology.

"Each Wi-Fi implementation is unique and requires subtle changes in network infrastructure. So whether it is rolling out a community-wide network or connecting the head office of a company, solutions need to be customised to suit the environment. Wi-Fi access has so much potential to shape the business and consumer landscape in South Africa and other developing countries. It only makes sense to implement the technology in such a way to draw the most benefit from it," concludes Fletcher.

** Smartphone use transforming with the rise of 4G Wi-Fi, Informa in association with Mobidia, February 2014*

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