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## Wireless making foothold, but more can be done

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Tighter budgets, decreasing circulation, declining ad sales and increased competition from other media have made strict control of the production process more important than ever before.

In the quest to do more with less, production staffs are looking to technology to provide enormous benefit with little associated costs. As this mission heightens the level of complexity in job responsibility, it is up to production management to research and realize value from technology.

Understandably, the decision to adopt new technologies weighs heavy with hesitation due to a myriad of reasons: limited human and capital resource, fear of the unknown or just limited organizational support.

Enter Wi-Fi and WiMAX. These wireless communications protocols are already widely available, but even those businesses that have rolled out wireless services haven't begun to fully understand its benefits.

### Significant boost

Indeed, there are significant advantages associated with adopting a wireless program. Companies are finding that wireless technologies can boost productivity and help improve planning, distribution and communications.

Of course, many newspapers have already adopted wireless networking, deploying enterprise Wi-Fi and WiMAX networks.

In these instances, editorial, ad sales, distribution and general administration are using wireless connectivity in support of basic network and database functions.

However, there is so much more that can be done.

Wireless networking offers more than the fact there is no need to lay cable or tether computers to a single workspace.

Instead, newspapers should think seriously about extending wireless networks to link distribution, circulation, returns processing and other operations.

## **No more on edge**

Wi-Fi and WiMAX technology and their devices have evolved dramatically over recent years.

A strong case can be made for production executives to revisit potential implementations that were once considered on the “bleeding edge.”

Case in point: Following the development of improved security standards, many companies are using wide-area Wi-Fi and WiMAX as the means through which employees can access e-mail, the Web, databases and control equipment via handheld devices.

VoWLAN, or voice over wireless LAN, is yet another protocol gaining traction as companies begin to add more services over their wireless networks.

Dual-mode cellular/Wi-Fi phones are fueling that development. It's the most valuable wireless networking tool available for employees out of network range.

This device, equipped with Palm Pilot or PocketPC software and a GUI, allows users to communicate and access data through hotspots, cell systems or VoWLAN networks.

With this tool, there is no need for employees to carry multiple devices such as a pager, cell phone or handheld organizer; the dual-mode cellular/Wi-Fi phone is all an employee needs.

## **Basic support**

Meantime, newspapers are using wireless technologies for such basic operations as plant maintenance, building security and asset management. Next up: order processing and asset and inventory management.

As businesses become more comfortable with wireless technologies and networking, the applications will become even more helpful.

One intriguing possibility an attempt by a group of engineers to develop vehicle-to-vehicle Wi-Fi. As envisioned, this would enable newspapers to use their delivery trucks to extend their wireless network for miles.

With this tool, newspapers could own a voice and data network that encompasses their entire geographical area, thus providing their production staffs with more control over redelivery of single copies and returns.

Even as wireless technologies progress, stumbling blocks remain. First, it's critical that everyone supports the use of wireless technologies once they are deployed. The expense associated with extending current networks and integrating controls is too great for certain departments to resist change and adoption.

Second, the industry has yet to design an out-of-the-box handheld device that can support all the functions required.

## **Customization**

That does not mean, however, that existing handhelds can't be customized to meet most needs.

The evolution of today's wireless technology and devices enables incorporation.

What's lacking, at least for now, is the programming necessary to develop the software robust enough to unlock the potential of today's handheld devices.

Indeed, it may seem implausible to think that a newspaper plant can be controlled and monitored via a wireless handheld PDA.

But think back to the time before AGVs, Web interfaces or Internet communications became an industry standard.

Today, these systems and applications are integral components of newspaper production. Wireless technologies are simply the next step in the evolution of the production environment - a step toward a paperless plant capable of providing users with information via a tip of a finger and in the nick of time.

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