

On the Verge of Converge?

Ken Gilleo
Ken@ET-Trends.com

Computing and telecommunications have been attempting to mate for decades. That's the dream of the convergence crusaders. Anything, anytime, anywhere – and it fits in your pocket or you can wear it! But the successful telecom-computing linkage has been mostly through wired telephone networks. Most of us are still hard-wired to the Internet with copper. But this is changing.

The chaotic *Wireless Wars* may finally be sorting things out. Sure, there are still too many systems, but we finally have a GSM-like network in the USA that's being deployed as the General Packet Radio System (GPRS). Data rates are a respectable 119kb/sec – on a good day. Actually, providers in New England are doing a good job with reliable Internet connections - and ordinary voice phone calls actually get through. Better wireless networks are bringing on more sophisticated mobile communicators (phones, plus). Although Internet-linked phones are not new, it's now much easier to check e-mail, receive and send instant messages and surf the web. The new phones have attractive color screens and these feature-rich wonders typically weigh less than 4 ounces. Meanwhile, let's see what's been happening with computer miniaturization.

The PDA (Personal Digital Assistant) has graduated to the status of a real computer. Remember how long we waited for the big, heavy “luggables” to become truly portable laptops? Well, the latest crop of PDAs can do almost everything that you expect from your laptop, and maybe more. Microsoft (Windows) and Intel have teamed up to enable the Pocket PC class of PDAs so, like it or not, “WinTel” has invaded palm-scape. Microsoft has delivered a good operating system (CE 2002) and the lite versions of Word and Excel have the “look and feel” of the standard programs. And yes, you can run PowerPoint and display it on rather good color screens. Computing speed just hit 400 MHz and is climbing. The new class of PDA is an authentic computer that could soon be just as potent as laptops, but smaller and lighter. You can also take pictures (add-on), record voice, add a GPS talking locator, and send files by infrared. The versatile plug-in concept is reminiscent of the days when we customized our desktop PC by plugging in cards. But what are the communications options for PDAs?

You can connect to the Internet by modem, a network card or through your PC and laptop. You can also go wireless by plugging in a Bluetooth, Wi-Fi (IEEE 802.11b) or a direct wireless module although some PDAs come with built-in capabilities.

Will the high-tech phones and Pocket PCs battle it out or coexist as symbiotic pairs? Many advanced mobile phone makers are adding more and more computer-like functions. And the computer industry is building PDA-phones.

Microsoft has launched the Pocket PC Phone Edition and the phone-PDAs, or computing communicators like the SmartPhone, are on the market. Will phones become computers or will PDAs become phones? How far should convergence go or does it really matter? Right now, it's a free-for-all with no clear outcome.

We're on the verge of something small, but will it be neat & slick or techno-hash? It's anyone's guess what this product zone will look like in 2003. The new game in town deals with hardware, software, systems and the Internet – converge or die!

My vote is for each product to become the best that it can be. Give me a phone that works well and has a reasonably fast data link. And please keep adding performance and software to the PDAs along with more plug-in gadgets. Keep the two separate or merge them, but give the customer some choices and we'll decide.

One thing I'll bet on, "pocket wireless" is really here – direct or converged. Forget wires! We don't want to be tethered. But what if you want to keep your phone and PDA separate? Fine, there are several choices. You can link the PDA directly to the network with a plug-in AirCard, or tap into a local hot spot using Wi-Fi. But you can link the PDA and phone with Bluetooth or infrared since many phones have both and the Pocket PCs have infrared and some come with Bluetooth but it's an easy add-on anyway. So get ready to converge technology, products, systems and maybe your life style, for better or for worse. Anywhere, anytime anyhow is here – don't leave home without it!