

# Out of office solutions

THE LONG-AWAITED THIRD GENERATION OF MOBILE TELECOMS IS STILL TO FULLY MATERIALISE, BUT THE DATA SERVICES OFFERED BY THE CURRENT GENERATION OF DEVICES IS AMPLE FOR MANY BUSINESS REQUIREMENTS. **TIM CHAPMAN** REPORTS

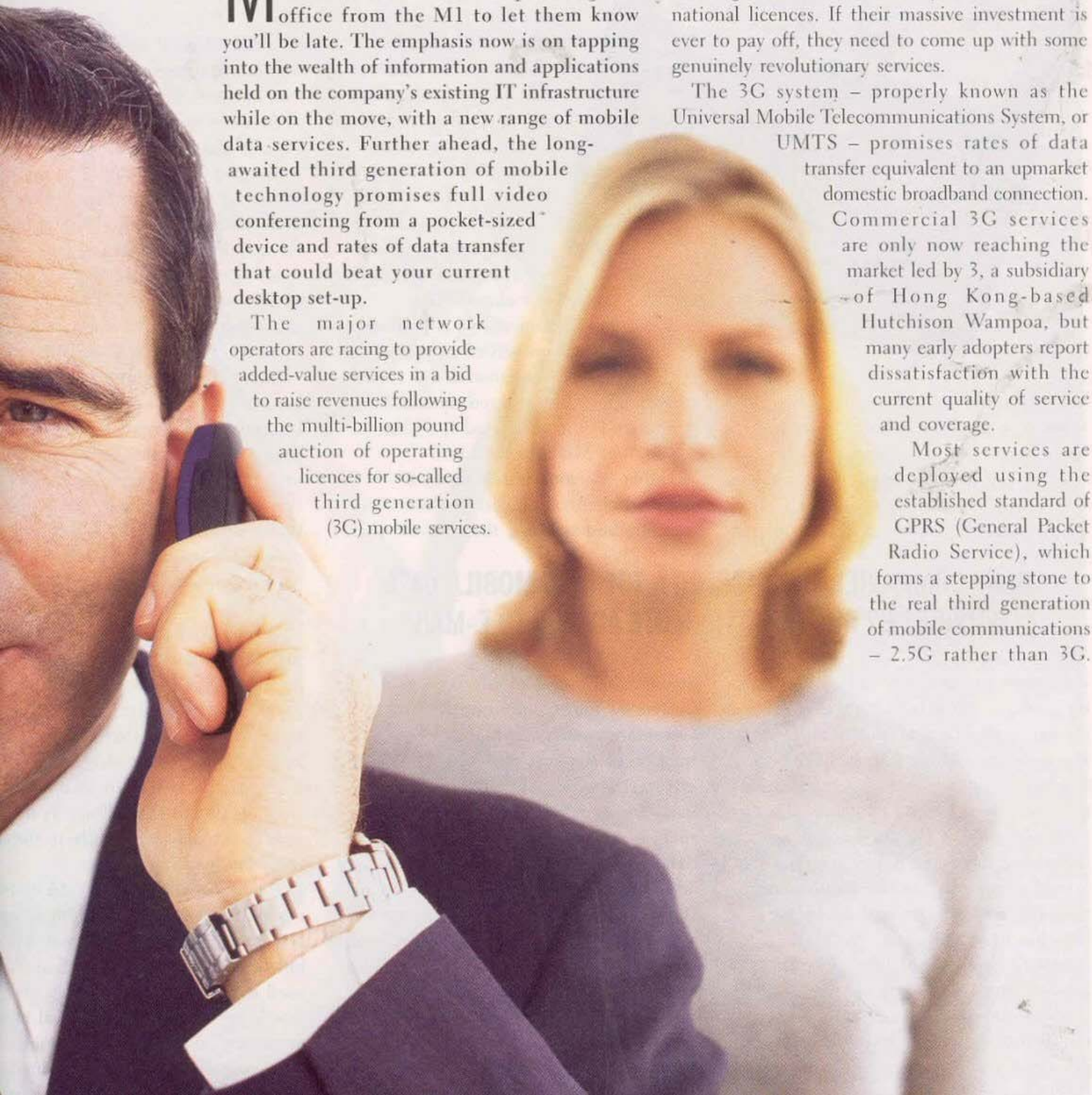
**M**obile communications for business is about a lot more than phoning the office from the M1 to let them know you'll be late. The emphasis now is on tapping into the wealth of information and applications held on the company's existing IT infrastructure while on the move, with a new range of mobile data services. Further ahead, the long-awaited third generation of mobile technology promises full video conferencing from a pocket-sized device and rates of data transfer that could beat your current desktop set-up.

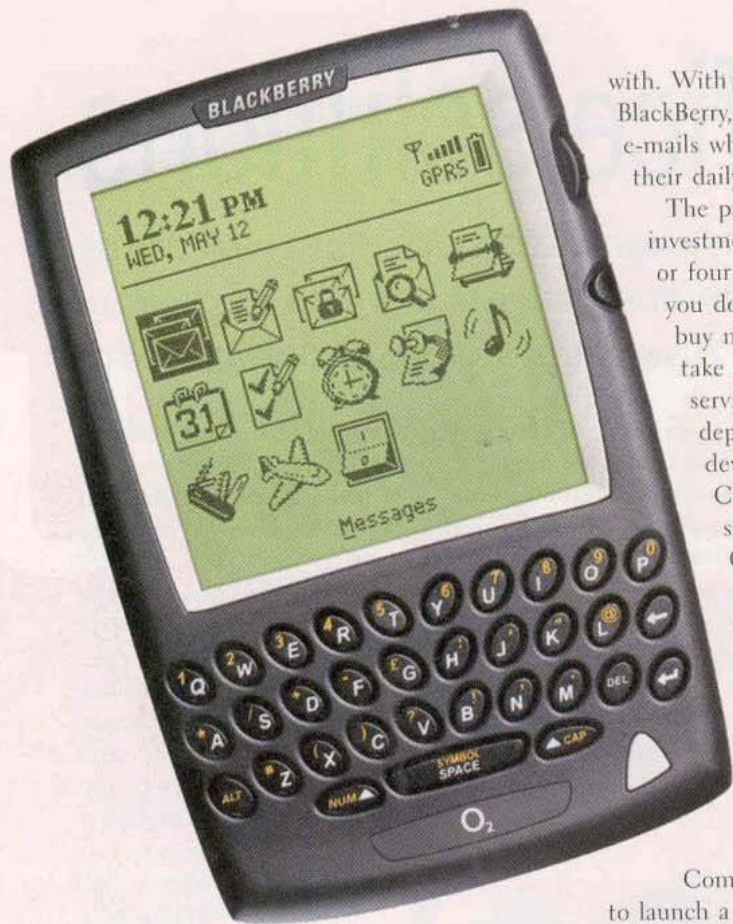
The major network operators are racing to provide added-value services in a bid to raise revenues following the multi-billion pound auction of operating licences for so-called third generation (3G) mobile services.

Five operators each paid at least £4 billion at the height of the new economy bubble to secure national licences. If their massive investment is ever to pay off, they need to come up with some genuinely revolutionary services.

The 3G system – properly known as the Universal Mobile Telecommunications System, or UMTS – promises rates of data transfer equivalent to an upmarket domestic broadband connection. Commercial 3G services are only now reaching the market led by 3, a subsidiary of Hong Kong-based Hutchison Wampoa, but many early adopters report dissatisfaction with the current quality of service and coverage.

Most services are deployed using the established standard of GPRS (General Packet Radio Service), which forms a stepping stone to the real third generation of mobile communications – 2.5G rather than 3G.





The data transfer rates of GPRS are a fraction of those achievable with UMTS, but are ample for most mobile data services. GPRS data services are used on devices such as BlackBerry, pictured above, an increasingly common tool for corporate

## MANY COMPANIES ARE DIPPING A TOE INTO MOBILE DATA SERVICES BY PROVIDING REMOTE ACCESS TO E-MAIL

customers supported by all of the major operators. Mobile data services are changing the face of the mobile phone market, says Mark Cope, of business telecoms provider Your Communications, a subsidiary of United Utilities.

"Historically, it has been about airtime and cheap handsets. It has been a bit of a me-too industry, but companies are realising you can get real business benefits by making mobiles more productive and are deploying more applications," Cope says.

Many companies are dipping a first toe into mobile data services by providing remote access to e-mail via BlackBerry units or existing personal digital assistants (PDAs).

"E-mail is the lifeblood of most organisations – it is the most immediately beneficial way of communicating with business," Cope notes.

"Mobile workers, when they get back to the office from doing their job, have stacks of e-mails waiting to be dealt

with. With something like BlackBerry, they can access a lot of e-mails while they are out doing their daily role."

The payback time on initial investment in BlackBerry is three or four months, says Cope. But you don't necessarily need to buy new mobile devices to take advantage of mobile data services – most can be deployed on to existing devices such as PDAs. Your Communications offers a service called Your Communicator, which links PDAs to corporate information management applications such as Microsoft Exchange or Lotus Notes.

Some providers are also helping reduce the initial investment for clients. Your

Communications is preparing to launch a new service in partnership with Siemens Communications, providing a fully-managed mobile data services platform delivered to PDAs called Your Mobility Platform.

Unlike previous systems, which required clients to invest in their own software and systems, the software that

enables the Your Mobility services is hosted by Your Communications. Corporate clients can tap into this at a fraction of the cost of buying their own systems. The bespoke platform allows users to tap into corporate applications such as customer and scheduling databases, sales order processing systems and customer relationship management (CRM) systems while out of the office.

As well as helping remote workers tap into the resources of the office, mobile technology can also help the office keep track of the workers. Because each mobile phone or device has a chip – the Subscriber Identity Module or SIM card – that uniquely identifies it and its position in the network of base stations, each device can be used to keep track of its user.

"Nowadays it's more and more important that all companies can track where their headcount resource is," says Cope.

"We've got a product called Easyreach, which gives companies the ability to

track remote workers by their SIM cards. It is a new, inexpensive way to keep track of people, and you can send SMS messages to them. Any company with a sales force or field staff with mobile phones will probably find it advantageous to have this application at their disposal." Because of data protection laws, all users have to opt into the system.

Some users are also exploring the possibilities of text messaging as a business tool. The Simple Messaging Service (SMS) protocol may have established itself as a primary means of communication for gossiping teenagers, but business use is relatively low.

A recent survey by the industry group Mobile Data Association found that text messaging is mainly used as an informal means of communication between staff and colleagues. While SMS is often used to send brief messages to people in meetings or in transit or to confirm appointments, it is still perceived as unprofessional and inappropriate for business, the survey found.

But text messaging can be used as a simple way to tap into some sophisticated systems. Leeds-based internet solutions provider (aq) Limited specialises in mobile messaging communications for corporate and business use. Through its text solutions subsidiary, sms2email, it provides a range of applications to help its clients improve their business processes.

Global Coal, an international online marketplace for coal and related services, uses sms2email to send trade alerts and updates to its clients. Specialist courier company G2wo Deliveries, whose clients include furniture retailer MFI, has deployed the system in an online tracking system that allows its drivers to update the delivery manifesto directly from the road.

"Many people only consider SMS marketing campaigns or think of spam texts when they think of mobile messaging, but this form of communication is being used by an increasing number of businesses to improve essential business processes," says Adam Beaumont, managing director of (aq) Limited.

"Many of our clients now rely on mobile technology as an integral part of how their business operates and because it is fast, reliable and direct it can make a real difference to their systems.

"Far from being non-essential wizardry, mobile technology helps companies to be more efficient and competitive and keeps them ahead of the game." ■