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Abstract: “Voice Evolution & Fixed-Mobile-Internet Convergence”

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Continuing innovation is blurring traditional boundaries between the roles of mobile operators, content providers and Internet portals. At the same time, a new generation of mobile devices is aggregating the functionality of mobile phones, web browsers, gaming consoles, MP3 players, cameras and video recorder/players. Convergence between networks, service platforms, media producers and devices will abolish borders in tomorrow's digital world with the creation of new partnerships and source of value for industry and consumers alike.

One of the most visible manifestations of this shift in the digital ecosystem is the convergence between fixed and mobile communication networks. ‘Fixed-mobile convergence’ (FMC) provides an enhanced value proposition to customers who can access both fixed and mobile networks via a single terminal device and/or a single service proposition.

There are three critical dimensions to fixed-mobile convergence offers by operators. All provide additional sources of value to the customer, including a simpler, more convenient environment and the potential to offer advanced services. For corporates and enterprise customers in particular, FMC can deliver a significant reduction in the technical, administrative and financial overheads in managing separate fixed and mobile telephony systems.

The first of these value-added dimensions represents the bundling of services, usually accompanied by a single bill – sometimes including transparency in pricing between fixed and mobile calls – with a single point of contact for customer service. The second dimension represents service integration, typified by unified access via a single phone number to services such as voicemail for both fixed and mobile communications. The third dimension represents device convergence, providing customers with the convenience of accessing both fixed and mobile network service features via a single terminal device.

Several network operators are already marketing their own FMC propositions to consumers and business customers. Typically, these offers feature price convergence, with mobile calls made from a customer's home or office premises made at similar rates to fixed line pricing.

In terms of device convergence, some operators are already offering their customers a single handset that can switch seamlessly between VoIP calls made over a ‘home’ WLAN network or local Wi-Fi hotspot and wide-area full mobility across 2G/3G cellular networks.

There are a number of critical success factors facing operators. These include the availability of attractively-priced handsets supporting technologies such as UMA and SIP to enable smooth interworking between an IP environment and 3GPP cellular networks. In particular, UMA access technology and implementation of SIP are the first steps towards fixed-mobile convergence, before longer-term migration towards an IMS architecture designed to support a broad spectrum of converged services on an all-IP network – ranging from voice and video to conferencing, instant messaging and presence indicators.

An equally pressing challenge for operators, however, is to create FMC offerings that attract customers rather than creating confusion in the market. Efficient communication of the benefits of FMC to consumers and business customers alike is vital for stimulating market demand and uptake, supported by clear pricing plans, simple set-up and effective customer services.

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