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Wap - wireless window on the world

Computer and mobile phone, both will be able to work with Wap

By Paul Brannan, Editor of TV text service BBC Ceefax, who has been exploring the potential for Wap.

Not so long ago mobile phones were brick-sized, reception was patchy and battery life was measured in weight rather than minutes.

Looking back now they seem laughably primitive, yet the next evolution in the soaraway success of mobile phones promises to make today's models as arcane as their early ancestors.

Wap, standing for Wireless Application Protocol, is the new kid on the block and, if you are lucky, coming to a high street near you.

It is a clever piece of software that filters text information from web pages and displays the words on your phone.

You can surf for train timetables while sitting in the wine bar, get the football scores while hiking in the hills and

track share prices without a television or PC in sight.

Software standards

The US lags behind in the global race to roll out the new platform. There, market development is being hamstrung by competing software standards and it is Japan that is setting the pace.

Since February, two million Japanese have signed up to the NTT DoCoMo's I-mode package, a home-grown standard that is similar to Wap.

Users can buy and sell shares, reserve hotel rooms, book seats on aircraft, keep up to speed with news and sport, read e-mails bounced through from the office.

The market is booming and according to a Japanese government prediction the domestic wireless market's links to the Web could be worth $130 billion a year within five years.

In Europe the potential is equally explosive. There are currently more than 140 million mobile phone users and by 2003 analysts expect another 100m to join them.

Wap growth

There are already more mobiles than PCs and forecasts suggest that within five years there will be more mobiles than TVs.

Phone giant Orange expects 60% of new hand-sets to be Wap-enabled by next year.

Last month, with Nokia's uninspiringly-titled NK7110 model, it launched the UK's first Wap phone, offering access to e-mails, news headlines, sports information and entertainment.

But what if you cannot see the point, if you are not swept up in the crusading zeal for this newest of new platforms? Consider this internal memo from Western Union in the 1870s:

"This telephone has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us."

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