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Wi-Fi now!

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WE have all seen the massive advertising campaigns of 3G application wannabes and the faltering WAP (Wireless Application Protocol). Unfortunately, wireless broadband applications and infrastructure, on which the success of 3G hinges, have been emerging slowly for the past five years or so. But given the level of awareness among users on wireless broadband, the situation is understandable.

   While the talk of the town in the recent past has mostly centred on 3G and various spectrum licences, another wireless solution is on the brink of a major breakthrough. Technically known among the nerds as the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) 802.11b wireless networking protocol, it's more commonly understood as simply `Wi-Fi'. A mature and established technology, Wi-Fi enables users to experience an access speed of up to 11 megabits per second. To accommodate such demand, in months to come, more and more laptop and PDA vendors are planning to include Wi-Fi capability as part of their standard configuration and product offerings.

   As Wi-Fi is low in financial risk, we can be rest assured that it is here to stay. According to experts, some cities in the Unites States are even choosing Wi-Fi over cellular networks for uses such as distributing mug shots to police cruisers. Some towns in the US already have hundreds of access points available for the public. Today, to wire a small office for a local area networking, it can typically cost as much as US$30,000. In contrast, a similar Wi-Fi installation will cost only US$500.

   Closer home, a company called Airzed Networks Sdn Bhd is preparing itself for a sudden increase in Wi-Fi infrastructure. It has already launched wireless Internet services at 10 locations in Kuala Lumpur, Cyberjaya, Petaling Jaya and Subang Jaya at selected outlets of Austin Chase Coffee, Gloria Jeans Coffee, San Francisco Coffee, and Stars Oyster Sushi Bar. The company plans to set up about 25 hotspots at these cafint establishments, including DOME Cafint by the end of November. It has also installed Wi-Fi at KIOSK Convenience Store at Pusat Bandar Damansara, Petaling Jaya.

   But just who is Airzed? The company's executive chairman is a famous corporate Malaysia citizen, Mukhriz Mahathir.

   Following the footsteps of his famous siblings, Mukhriz is on a mission with a technology solution to connect people.

   It all started back in 1994 when Mukhriz co-founded a company called Opcom Cables Sdn Bhd, which specialises in the provision of fibre optic cables. Eric Chhoa, the other co-founder of Opcom, is now Airzed's chief executive officer. Chhoa claims that Opcom provides 60 to 70 per cent of the fibre optic cables laid out in the country. `We are the largest supplier to Telekom Malaysia. We also supply to Tenaga, Petronas and Celcom,' says Chhoa.

   While fibre optic is a key enabler of communications, it, however, relies on a physical infrastructure. Enabling communications hence is in the minds of these two personalities. Wi-Fi seems like an inevitable choice for the next business venture. `We felt that we had to be in there,' says Mukhriz. `Wi-Fi is definitely going to be the one that's going to rule the waves. And it's so new; many people are not into it yet. The technology is still relatively new, it is just developing. PDAs are only coming up, they still have not caught on yet.'

Mukhriz and Chhoa pooled their resources of `under RM10 million' to get the research and development stage going in early 2000. The R&D phase took them a whole 18 months to develop the core Wi-Fi technology. Chhoa believes that that is the best way of going about it, as compared to trying to run a start-up. `Our focus today - since our technology is in place and everything is fine - is on the customer and the market. At this point of time, Mukhriz and I don't need the distraction of dealing with investors. It can take up a lot of your time,' Chhoa says, rationalising the company's need to remain a private entity.

With the advent of Wi-Fi solutions, the company plans to address the issue of the digital divide. While it is currently featured prominently only in classy joints and cafints, Chhoa sees the possibility of Wi-Fi going to the rural areas in the not-so-distant future.

Cost-conscious, small and medium enterprises are always hungry for a neat and easy way to unleash a networking solution.

Mukhriz sees an advantage in involving the company in Wi-Fi. He feels that Airzed has a clear head start. `The good thing about it is,' he says, `we have to benchmark with what's out there. Rather than comparing ourselves with what is available locally, we look at what is happening in San Francisco and what they are doing in Seoul, for example. We really need to compare ourselves with the kind of service they provide. Eventually, we too have to join in, right?'

Mukhriz cites the example of `hotspots' in cafes.  One should observe the profile of people going there. Many office workers find convenience working in the cafes for the simple reason of speed. The speed in Wi-Fi hotspots is certainly an improvement over their dreary dial-ups in the office. He adds, `The next time the boss sees you in Austin Chase, don't panic. It doesn't mean you are not working,' quips Mukhriz.

Though skepticism persists as to whether Wi-Fi would actually take off, Mukhriz feels that it is merely a matter of viewpoint. He sees Wi-Fi as not another technology solution for the sake of technology. He believes that users will not abandon it as was the case with its predecessors. `Finally, we found a technology that promises value, and does it cheaply,' he says. `We don't need to install a huge system. The pervasiveness of the system allows more people to get on it, and therefore it will grow very fast; therefore we will not charge too high.'

Currently, the service is offered free of charge. Airzed is planning to implement charges at an affordable range come January next year.  Airzed's Wi-Fi service offering includes Web-based login authentication, web-based customer self-provisioning, support for virtual private networking (VPN) and e-mails, web-based problem resolution, and in the near future, roaming capabilities with other network service providers.

When fully implemented, the Wi-Fi service can be used to check bills, usage record or make changes to your personal particulars such as address or password change and much more from your web browser. Currently, it is available for free and is compatible with Windows XP, Windows 2000 and Windows 98.

As for the subscription rate, Airzed is planning schemes like a Monthly Unlimited Plan as well as a Yearly Unlimited Plan as part of its service offering in the initial stage.

Airzed has also released the first version of its Airzed Hotspot Locator, a Wi-Fi software that `sniffs' the air for available Airzed or its roaming partners' hotspots and makes it easy for users to connect to its Wi-Fi networks in any countries where Airzed's Wi-Fi service is available. The Airzed Hotspot Locator is compatible with Windows XP, Windows 2000 and Windows 98. A Windows CE version will be released in the near future.

The company is currently working with local telecommunications service providers such as Telekom Malaysia, TIME dotCom and Maxis to introduce roaming services. Airzed is also looking into making similar arrangements with banks, which may want to offer their Internet banking customers Airzed's Wi-Fi service as well.  According to both Chhoa and Mukhriz, Airzed plans to offer its Wi-Fi system to many owners of premises such as cafints, airports, mass transit hubs, hotels, local governments and other high-traffic establishments.

Mukhriz hopes that bandwidth cost will continue to become more competitive in line with the price level in other developed countries so that the benefits can be passed on to the consumer. He feels that Airzed's Wi-Fi service is in line with the Government's policy of promoting broadband penetration and increased Internet usage in Malaysia. With Airzed's Wi-Fi solution, is broadband wireless here to stay? Perhaps. Given that the cost of technology access is getting increasingly lower, it would be not too far in the future before a man on the street can just walk into a `mamak' stall and connect wirelessly to the Internet via a PDA. Too good to be true? Fact or myth? Let's just wait and see.