

Which way next?

As travellers, we want our journeys to be as easy or quick as possible, and we want any decisions to be made on the basis of good, trustworthy information. We want to avoid inconveniences like congestion or roadworks, delayed trains or buses, or full car parks, and we want to minimise the number of changes required between different modes of transport. Most of the information needed to help us make these decisions already exists in one form or another somewhere in a database, or even on the internet. However, most of us only use one or two sources of travel information regularly and so do not have access to the full picture. Also, once on the move, the opportunity to access travel information is limited by our ability to use handheld devices and to get wireless access.

What we need is a system that knows our travel requirements and preferences and can collect together all the relevant information for the journeys we are making. Just such a system was envisaged and discussed by delegates at a workshop we held in late 2008, who went on to imagine how we might interact with it via devices.

We need real-time, context-aware services that provide the up-to-date and relevant information for us when planning our journey. These would extend beyond the current web-based and mobile phone planning tools by tailoring the journey to meet our specific requirements and maintaining an awareness of the expected and actual status of other travellers. Key to the success of advanced journey planning would be real-time access to data warehouses of transport information, including timetables, costs, bookings and current usage of the relevant transport network. Integration of the new services with existing ubiquitous portals such as Google or Yahoo maps would provide a real incentive for businesses to offer their data.

The technology required for this should not be a barrier. Wireless communication is becoming more widespread, and devices are location-aware, know our diaries, and will understand how to feed us relevant information when they think we need it. So it really is just a matter of getting the right information together from its different locations and presenting it in context-appropriate ways that suit the needs of the traveller wherever they are.

This presents a number of apparently lucrative opportunities for innovative companies to take market-leading positions, developing devices and/or the services to run on them. Indeed, we are already seeing some convergence of data in satellite navigation systems, and some in online services, but there has yet to be a revolutionary partnership of the sort needed to create a really effective fusion. Neither has there yet been an effective convergence between these specifically travel-related technologies and our existing 'time-management' or communications systems.

When we do start to see these - and we don't think it will be too long now - we could quickly start to use our infrastructure more efficiently, bringing vast improvements to our journeys.

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