Government
Mobility Empowers the Senate

By
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What's the latest initiative that's improving the responsiveness of the United States Senate? If I'm asking the question on this page, it's mobility, of course.

Imagine that a senator is waiting for a key piece of data before making a decision on a critical piece of legislation. If that senator actually holds the swing vote on this legislative issue, the missing information becomes even more critical. The staff is working fast and feverishly to obtain the information and get it to him or her before the vote—but despite their best efforts, the information is obtained just minutes before the crucial vote, and the senator is in a session in which cell phone use is barred. All seems lost—they can't reach the senator in time—until an aide sends the information to the representative's wireless handheld. It is received, processed, and the appropriate vote is given. That's the power of mobile data.

These days, portable devices are providing senators the ability to access email, communicate with their staffs, and even message each other. These devices also let them download and create documents on the floor or while on the go. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, R-Tenn., is well known for being accessible through his BlackBerry, and he was instrumental in equipping Republican senators with BlackBerries.

While pagers and cell phones have certainly been used for many years, senators' increasing use of portable devices mirrors the use of wireless handheld gadgets in the US population at large. In fact, virtually all of the 51 Republican senators are currently equipped with some sort of mobile device. According to Tim Petty, Director of Information Services for the Senate Republican Conference, about 60 percent of Republican senators carry either a PDA or a smartphone, with Palm OS and BlackBerry being the favored devices of the Senate. The remaining senators simply carry pagers or mobile phones. The remaining handful of un-unwired senators rely on their staff, who are themselves equipped with their own mobile devices.

Security and reliability are tantamount for the members of Capitol Hill. After 9/11, the entire Senate was isssued BlackBerry two-way pagers running on the Cingular Interactive Wireless Network (former RAM Mobile Data). Mobitex is the protocol that powers Cingular's data-only network—critical, because Cingular Interative was reportedly the only wireless network that delivered uninterrupted service in New York City on 9/11. The BlackBerries also provided reliable service during the blackout that hit much of the Northeast and parts of the Midwestern US last fall.

Today, senators are using the devices and networks of their choosing, and choices abound. The task of supporting the broad array of devices used by the Senate can be quite daunting. So how is Petty managing the flow of information through the many operating systems, protocols, applications software and back end systems being used by the Senators? The AvantGo M-business platform (*www.ianywhere.com*). iAnywhere's robust, multi-functional software that powers the Avant Go service supports all of the platforms and networks that keep the senators up and running. And since those senators can use conduits to popular applications like Microsoft Word, there is not much of a learning curve. These devices communicate with an internal server that supports synchronization with back end databases and systems, provides enhanced security and contributes to data integrity. Petty points out that the AvantGo solution allows access to specific applications and data pertinent to the legislative branch such as bills and updates. Senators can get information from their office or the web virtually anytime – right through their mobile device.

What does the future hold? It's not likely that our country's legislative process will undergo an automation overhaul. The face-to-face, human factor is still an important element of decision-making. *Mobility* is, however, makings its impact on Capital Hill as well as in the everyday lives of Americans everywhere.

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