

Location, location, location

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It matters

MICHAEL HALBHERR was driving from Berlin to Budapest the other day when he passed what looked like an empty field. The fact that his mobile phone stayed quiet annoyed him. Here he was, speeding by the site of Napoleon's great victory at Austerlitz, and nothing even vibrated.

Mr Halbherr, admittedly, had professional reasons to ponder this shortcoming. He runs "location-based services" (LBS) for Nokia, the world's largest handset-maker. Not letting things such as Austerlitz slip by unnoticed is exactly what LBS is in business for. Some people think it is the "next big thing". It was Nokia's reason for spending \$8.1 billion to buy Navteq, a firm that collects map data around the world.

One advantage that mobile phones have over PCs is that they increasingly know and care where they are. Some use the global positioning system (GPS), which uses satellites, others a slightly less accurate method that calculates the distances of nearby cellular towers and Wi-Fi hotspots.

This is a huge advance, says Stephen Johnson, one of Nokia's strategists, because it adds the third element ("where") required to understand a person's context, the other two being who and when. Most obviously, this means that "the idea of being lost will be unheard of", he says. More interestingly, it allows people to become "more immersed in the real world around them". Within a few years, for example, phones will know where you are at what time, and where you are going next, based on your electronic diary. The phone may also know, from your address book, that you have a friend in the building whose diary says that he is going to the same place. Your two phones will alert you so that you can share a taxi. If you have been sleeping with his wife, or are just not feeling very sociable that day, you can always claim that your battery died at that very instant.

Illustration by Bell Mellor

