

MICHAEL J. TONSING

## An Absence of iPhone Envy, But a Hearty Sigh of Relief as a New BlackBerry Application Surfaces

No, I do not have iPhone™ envy ... yet. But the one “app” I must confess I’ve been waiting for impatiently for my Verizon™ BlackBerry™ Bold™—an application that has been available to iPhone users and others for some time—is a good mobile VoIP (Voiceover Internet Protocol—that is, Internet-based phoning) client that will allow me to make and receive calls over both Wi-Fi and my Verizon 3G connection. The other three major smart phone platforms—iPhone OS, Android, and Symbian—have multiple mobile VoIP applications, including Nimbuzz and Truphone. Until very recently,

however, BlackBerry has had none. Some suggest that the fact that RIM (Research in Motion, the company behind the BlackBerry) has not moved strongly in this direction is attributable to resistance by the carriers it serves. (See, for example, an article on *ZDNet*’s site in the United Kingdom: [www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-apps/2010/08/23/blackberry-users-get-first-native-voip-client-40089896/](http://www.zdnet.co.uk/news/mobile-apps/2010/08/23/blackberry-users-get-first-native-voip-client-40089896/).)

According to industry sources, nearly 100 million users are expected to be using mobile VoIP by 2012. With more than 470 billion calls likely to be made via mobile VoIP by 2015, it seems strange that BlackBerry has been missing from the parade. It may well be more than malevolence or monopoly thinking. It is true that RIM’s architecture for the BlackBerry has presented daunting hurdles for application vendors interested in filling the BlackBerry vacuum. Now, it appears, TringMe™, an Indian VoIP start-up based in Bangalore, has solved the technology riddles and filled the void, introducing a new VoIP application for BlackBerry operating systems that can make calls over Wi-Fi. Rolled out earlier for the Curve™ and the Bold, TringMe is now also available for the BlackBerry Torch 9800™. This nifty new app also allows for single-click, worldwide conference calling and, when there’s no Wi-Fi connection available, the app can switch to the local access number/callback over the Verizon cellular network. (As the saying goes, additional charges will apply, but they should be minimal.) But, wait, there’s more. If one’s BlackBerry services do not include Internet connections, TringMe can also use a smart phone’s e-mail channel to initiate calls.

TringMe for BlackBerry is, according to the

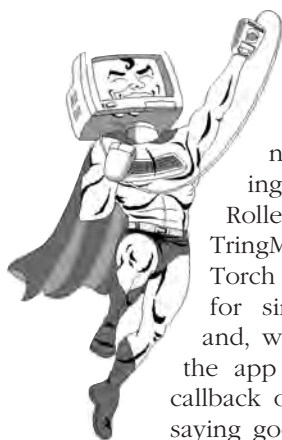
company, the “world’s first true VoIP application for BlackBerry”—though I’m not exactly sure that claim is entirely true. (Skype™ is an icon that has been on my BlackBerry since my last trip abroad in the spring. And products like Truphone, Raketu™, EQO™, and others have been around for a while.) In any event, it cannot be denied that TringMe is a technological breakthrough. Unlike other VoIP applications, TringMe doesn’t require using cellular minutes to make VoIP calls if you do not have Wi-Fi, local access numbers, and callback options available to place your calls.

If you are a BlackBerry user and you want to try TringMe, go to [bb.tringme.com](http://bb.tringme.com) via your BlackBerry’s browser. After you install the app, “Call Using TringMe” appears as an option whenever you attempt to call a contact from your address book or call log.

The best way to describe this product “in a nutshell” is probably to quote directly from the TringMe Web site ([www.tringme.com](http://www.tringme.com)): “Yes, it’s true. Calls can now be directly made over Wi-Fi. TringMe is the first Blackberry application to make it possible. Unlike other VoIP application [*sic*], it doesn’t require your cellular minutes to make VoIP calls. If you do not have Wi-Fi, we also have local access numbers and callback options available to place your calls. And the best part is, TringMe users will be able to call for free to each other over Wi-Fi.” To put it simply, TringMe will attempt to employ available Wi-Fi networks to make your calls, and if no such networks are available, the app will automatically convert to your mobile Internet connection and attempt to place VoIP calls by that means so that, whichever the case, you don’t have to use any of your contracted cellular voice minutes.

If you use the application over Wi-Fi and connect to other TringMe users, calls are—at least in theory—absolutely free, no matter where you place them and whom you call, the company claims. Even when the situation is otherwise, the cost of the calls is attention-getting—they are even cheaper than Skype’s. For instance, calls to India are about five times cheaper than they are with Skype, and calls to the United Kingdom are half as much. And lawyers will be relieved to know that the TringMe application offers end-to-end encryption for direct WiFi calls.

As a sole practitioner who uses all aspects of his BlackBerry fairly regularly, I have a Verizon data plan that allows me unlimited use of my data con-



nection. However, TringMe indicates that its new application will work with or without a BlackBerry data plan—that is, a BlackBerry Internet Service or BlackBerry Enterprise Server plan—and TringMe also states on its Web site (for those of you who work in larger offices) that the app is “enterprise ready,” with end-to-end encryption for direct Wi-Fi calls. Thus, mid-sized and larger law firms can choose to use the TringMe app right alongside their regular networks, which means that lawyers calling in from the field can connect directly to enterprise PBXs, according to the company. And, as a bonus for the firms, the app can be custom branded because of open coding.

This new TringMe app for the BlackBerry also makes me wonder when—or if—consumers who use wireless devices in the United States will ever see mainline business carriers like Verizon go VoIP (or, should I say, that the other way) and whether carriers other than T-Mobile™ will support unlicensed mobile access (UMA) technology on BlackBerry smart phones. UMA support is built into certain versions of the BlackBerry OS, and it will allow users to place Wi-Fi calls over supported Wi-Fi networks without any third-party applications. Chief users are enterprise Internet systems, because these users are employed by mid-sized and larger law firms. T-Mobile is currently the only U.S. carrier that widely supports UMA. Consumers and solo practitioners like me who are BlackBerry users in the United States on carriers other than T-Mobile and desire UMA are currently out of luck. (By the way, in case I appear to have implied otherwise, TringMe works with any BlackBerry 4.6 operating system phone supported by any carrier.)

As far as I can tell, UMA is of great potential value to lawyers and others who spend the majority of their workdays within range of Wi-Fi networks. But, it goes without saying that carriers that want their subscribers to use as many voice minutes as possible have been reluctant to embrace UMA. It may be but a pipe dream, but perhaps entrepreneurs and innovators like TringMe, excuse the expression, get over their hang-ups and offer alternative UMA services, as T-Mobile has done over the past few years. Up until now, VoIP has been, as was stated in *Wired* magazine a few months ago, a “technological underachiever.” *Wired* asked, as TringMe was in the wind, “Could easier development change all that?”

Many believe that the computer-centric VoIP should have rightfully made telephone communication by old-fashioned means as obsolete as the telephone booth or two tin cans and a string by now. However, this innovation has never really caught on in mainstream America; though Skype is popular overseas, it is less so in the United States. Maybe this is because the rather zany antics of big players like Vonage™ have tainted the image of IP calling in this country. It is hard to figure out. Then again, maybe it is nothing more than the fact that mainstream Americans just don’t get it; they don’t realize that

talking to—and seeing—one another through their personal computers is an option. Maybe they just feel a little silly talking at their monitors.

While our cars and our speakerphones move in the other direction, users sometimes seem to be getting more old-fashioned about inputting data. After all, if speaking was really preferable to typing, then why are text messaging rates skyrocketing, despite carriers’ price increases? Why hasn’t speech-to-text word processing software like Dragon’s excellent NaturallySpeaking™ (positively reviewed in a previous column in TFL) overtaken typing, a task that can only be described as archaic drudgery? And, “quo vadis” e-mail when phones are on our desks?

The Indian brains—the technologists behind TringMe—certainly aren’t the only ones bullish on using the “modern” Web by means of voice. In February, the Wizard of Microsoft himself, Bill Gates, came out from behind the curtain to tell a rapt audience at Carnegie Mellon University that spoken natural language search is “one of the big bets we’re making” at Microsoft.™ Hmmm.

## Conclusion

We may soon cast off our chains and start talking to and through our computers. As they used to say in “My Fair Lady,” “Wouldn’t that be lovely?” **TFL**

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