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Aug. 5--Imagine if you could use a cellphone in only a relative handful of specific locations.

Imagine, too, that all the wireless companies serviced different locations, so you needed accounts with multiple providers to ensure you could make a cellular call with reasonable convenience.

That's roughly the status today of the wireless Internet technology known as Wi-Fi.

Take your Wi-Fi-ready notebook computer into a Starbucks and you'd better have an account with T-Mobile if you want to go online. What, you have Wi-Fi service through Sprint? Tough beans, buddy.

It's the same story at hundreds of high-speed Wi-Fi "hotspots" around the nation. If you've got the wrong provider, you get no access unless you add another account to your collection.

But lately, there are signs that Wi-Fi providers are starting to cooperate with each other, a trend that would be a boon for Wi-Fi Internet lovers everywhere.

A sizeable breakthrough occurred a couple of weeks ago when SBC Communications announced that it had signed new Wi-Fi "roaming" agreements with Sprint Corp., **Concourse Communications**, Wise Technologies and Mexico's Telmex.

In short, Wi-Fi customers will be able to log on to the Internet at hotspots operated by other participating providers.

That's a considerable expansion of the available hotspots. SBC FreedomLink Wi-Fi network is the biggest in the group, with an estimated 2,000 Wi-Fi locations up and running. Telmex brings another 400 hotspots to the table, with more than 200 restaurants, 20 airports, 20 malls, 20 universities, 70 hotels and 10 hospitals in its network.

Concourse Communications and Wise Technologies have far fewer hotspots, but they exist in critical locations: namely, more than a dozen airports across the United States, including JFK, LaGuardia and Newark. (Bradley does not have Wi-Fi service.) Meanwhile, SBC has promised to expand to 20,000 hotspots by the end of 2006.

And these are only the latest roaming agreements to be announced. Other deals involving such providers and aggregators as GoRemote, iPass, Syniverse, T-Mobile and Sprint have begun to break the access logjam.

If this trend continues, Wi-Fi users will soon have vastly expanded access to high-speed hotspots around the nation, leaving to providers the task of maintaining the network and handling the billing.

That shouldn't mean the end of competition. Wi-Fi providers will still have plenty of incentive to build new hotspots, to improve performance on their networks, to add special features and-- ideally -- to cut prices.

The first beneficiaries of this new era of Wi-Fi roaming should be traveling business folks, who are the heaviest users of wireless access. After all, when you're away from the office, finding a high-speed hotspot where you can check e-mail, get news and do research is like stumbling on an oasis in the desert.

But those hardy road warriors are merely the advance party for the rest of us, just as they were the first to use cellphones heavily, before average consumers started doing the same.

And as with the cellphone system, the goal of the Wi-Fi network should be ready access from just about anywhere, good-quality connections and affordable pricing.

We're not there yet. But this new wave of roaming agreements suggests that Wi-Fi is here to stay and that providers are beginning to respond to the demands of the marketplace.

Greater access with less hassle?

Cool beans.

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