

Providing Network Flexibility for Cellphones

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A new breed of startups is closing in on a high-tech holy grail: chips that could help cellphones jump between different communications networks to give users the best service. The Wall Street Journal reports.

"Sandbridge Technology, after four years of effort on Monday is announcing that it has completed the design of a chameleon-like chip that can communicate using different kinds of cellular technologies as well as fast wireless networks such as Wi-Fi. The approach uses software to give cellphones multiple capabilities, which can be modified after they are sold rather than having features set permanently in hardware.

... the basic idea of multifunction phones face a chicken-and-egg problem. Though cellphone users now can roam among some networks when they travel, carriers are not exactly eager to let users jump among services in their home market.

"The idea of having a handset that can roam from Cingular to Verizon to Sprint will never happen," said Will Strauss, an analyst at Forward Concepts. "The operators don't want it to happen."

But some companies are betting that new wireless technologies, such as a high-speed cousin of Wi-Fi called WiMAX, will allow new services to enter the wireless market with flexible strategies. Users may one day change networks "multiple times a day, depending on what type or kind of feature or service might be offered by a specific network operator," predicts Vernon Fotheringham, chief executive of Seattle-based Adaptix Inc."