CRAFTING KILLER MOBILE APPS

Success starts with a solid overall strategy for anywhere, anytime communications.

Since 2001, Lextech Global Services has developed custom technology solutions that enable organizations of all sizes to increase efficiency, reduce costs and serve clients more effectively.

Now a leading force in the mobile application market, the Chicago-based company employs nearly 45 business and technology experts who help business-to-business clients create comprehensive mobile strategies and design successful mobile apps.

“The key characteristic for a mobile app is that it delivers value to the organization — it’s well designed, excites end-users and keeps them engaged,” says John McGill, V.P. of business development for Lextech.

In the following interview, McGill explains in detail how organizations can derive quantifiable value from mobile solutions and avoid the pitfalls that derail many mobile initiatives.

**QUESTION:** In terms of vertical markets, what areas are hot today for mobile apps?

**ANSWER:** Retail is a big opportunity for mobile and we are seeing pretty consistent growth in healthcare, which traditionally has been on the leading edge for new technologies. Growth among government agencies is also strong, particularly as they look for new ways to advance security, and collect and distribute data. Certainly, education is an area where mobile solutions are just starting to take off.

Even sectors where you might not expect to see mobile tech being prevalent, such as construction and manufacturing, are moving aggressively to deploy mobile applications.

Q: What are these organizations looking to gain from their mobile apps?

A: Typically, they are the same benefits that organizations want from other types of solutions — bottom- and top-line opportunities for saving time and money or increasing revenue. The difference is that, in many cases, mobile apps empower organizations to achieve these goals and realize a return much more quickly than other mediums.

Q: Lextech has been involved in app development for a while — from your perspective, how mature is the mobile app market at this point?

A: Some applications are very mature, especially on the consumer-facing side. However, business-to-business solutions are somewhere between infancy and just beginning to pick up strength.

MOBILE USERS WILL DOWNLOAD **73 BILLION APPS THIS YEAR; THAT NUMBER WILL SPIKE TO ALMOST 288 BILLION BY 2016.**

SOURCE: Gartner, Inc.
There are a number of organizations that are still using off-the-shelf apps that are only slightly modified variations of traditional enterprise applications. As far as rolling out more sophisticated business applications, I would say that most enterprise organizations are still in the infancy and early testing phase.

Q: Why is this — are there common barriers or obstacles slowing adoption?
A: Many companies, even larger organizations and Fortune 500 firms, are still struggling to figure out how mobility fits into their daily operations and workflow and how they can utilize mobile applications to become more efficient.

Q: What will it take for them to reach the tipping point to wider mobile adoption?
A: When organizations see the return that can be achieved using mobile apps, they go all in. It takes one successful app to open their eyes to the power of mobile, so it is critical to take the right approach with the first app.

At the start of each engagement, we don’t talk about the type of app a customer may want. We ask about their overall business goals. We want to ensure that the mobile solutions we create are aligned with those business goals and that the solution’s results are quantifiable. Those metrics are key to ensuring that we can make a customer successful with their mobility solutions.

Fast ROIs

Q: How long on average does it take to create a mobile app?
A: That depends on how complex the app is in terms of features, design and integration with backend systems — such as those that manage pricing, product availability and product selection.

It may mean integrating with a customer relationship management (CRM) system to capture customer data. These systems require expertise with the backend applications to bring data into a mobile framework very quickly, very efficiently and in small packets — all while maintaining a positive user experience.

But what’s unique about mobile is that even with complex backend system integrations, we often create apps in just eight to 12 weeks, versus the nine to 12 months it often takes for traditional development projects.

Q: And related to that, how quickly do organizations see an ROI for a new mobile app?
A: For most engagements, we expect to see significant efficiency gains or cost savings within a year. We stand behind the apps we create to improve processes. In fact, we guarantee a 100 percent return on app ROI investment within one year.

Q: Where do these efficiencies and savings come from?
A: We have a strategic mobility process that we call “Billion Dollar Apps.” This process is really about recognizing workflows and business processes in larger organizations where there are hidden opportunities worth perhaps hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars. If these organizations reinvent a portion of their business by leveraging mobile enterprise apps, they may be able to see significant cost savings and revenue opportunities.

It is typical to see a return of $5,000 per user for enterprise apps, but with

You should be able to leverage mobility to execute your enterprise resource planning (ERP) system or any other connections within your organization.”
- John McGill

JOHN McGILL
V.P. of Business Development
Lextech Global Services
Lisle, Ill.
suites of apps working together, we’ve seen billion dollar returns.

**Q:** Can you give us an example of an app that opened up one of these opportunities?

**A:** We have a number of examples – one in particular is for a construction organization that sells building materials. Their field sales force didn’t have the most current materials pricing information available while on the job site, so they were placing orders with old pricing data and as a result, the company was losing money.

We created an application that serves updated pricing data to the field sales team as it becomes available. The company’s managers now say they’re recovering close to a million dollars per week in what would’ve been lost revenue due to pricing errors.

Another example is BlueStar Energy, a company that provides energy audits for corporate structures. Our mobile app helped reduce the average time to complete an energy audit from 12 hours to four hours. So instead of performing one energy audit per day, the auditors can do three, which increases revenues for the company and the auditors who are compensated per audit. The solution was great for the organization and its contractors.

**Customization is Key**

**Q:** Given that each mobile worker may have unique requirements, what’s your process for tailoring and customizing solutions for particular needs?

**A:** Early in the process, we work with clients to understand exactly what their requirements are. We do ride-alongs and walk-alongs or go on sales calls to understand their business workflows. This is crucial for making sure the mobile tools will fit seamlessly into the user’s daily workflow and that the solutions will make those processes much more efficient.

Any organization that’s creating a mobile strategy should be looking at how their existing (non-mobile) applications can be integrated with the proposed mobile apps. Planning how to make those connections ahead of time will make development easier and more efficient.

For example, you should be able to leverage mobility to get data, like inventory numbers, from your ERP [enterprise resource planning] system. It is important to account for all of the technologies that must be woven together, so we always talk to our customers about where they are headed next so we can make sure we are connecting the dots and building for the future.

**Q:** What’s the most unique business app you’ve ever developed?

**A:** Lextech has created a really unique suite of mobile apps for a Fortune 500 automotive retailer, Sonic Automotive. The applications share data and address multiple workflows, creating a seamless experience for the employee and the customer. At most dealerships, it takes four-to-five hours to go through the car buying process. Sonic’s goal for these apps is to reduce it to just one hour.

For example, if a customer comes in with a car to trade, a staff member using the mobile app captures the appropriate data (pictures, VIN, mileage) immediately out in the lot. The app then passes that information on to corporate headquarters for appraisal.

**Q:** You mentioned that customer-facing apps are the most popular ones today. Why is that? Will that continue into the near future?

**A:** Customer-facing apps are the most popular because organizations realize that they need to have multiple engagement points with their audiences. Certainly, mobile is one of the key ways that consumer-based businesses

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**5 CHARACTERISTICS OF A KILLER APP**

What makes a mobile app great? Lextech’s John McGill points to these core characteristics:

1. They deliver quantifiable business value – increase efficiency, lower costs, boost sales.
2. They offer an intuitive interface that keeps users interested and engaged.
3. Top apps provide essential information whenever it’s needed, such as on-the-go product data for consumers or client-buying histories that help sales forces serve customers more effectively.
4. The best and brightest display only the data needed by a user at any time, not extraneous information that detracts from the overall user experience.
5. Where necessary, great business apps integrate with all the enterprise systems that support internal business processes versus providing one-off, siloed services that address the needs of only a limited number of users.
are talking to their customers.

Organizations that picked up on this early are realizing that the consumer audience is broad, active and spends more time with mobile hardware than any other devices – more than with TVs, home computers or even work computers. Therefore, mobile is a crucial way to access consumers.

**Q: How does that translate into business benefits?**

**A:** They definitely see increases in sales, audience reach and loyalty. For example, consumers can use mobile tools to learn about products before they even get to the store. They can use the tools while they are in the store to do price and product comparisons. That gives retailers a lot more flexibility to engage with customers while they are mobile and on the go.

An engaging mobile app becomes another customer touchpoint and in many cases is the only face of the brand the customer will see. How many people have stopped visiting physical banks to deposit money now that they can easily do so using an app? The app is their only interaction with the brand, so it better be a good experience.

**Q: How important are mobile commerce capabilities for customer-facing apps today?**

**A:** If you have an electronic commerce business, and you don’t have a mobile version, you are probably missing out on many new opportunities to reach your audience. It’s an area that’s growing rapidly and in some cases is outpacing web e-commerce opportunities.

So, I would encourage any organization that sells to consumers or markets business-to-business to consider a mobile e-commerce platform. It can extend their reach and give customers the flexibility to make purchases in any place, at any time.

**Q: What are some of the most popular capabilities that you are seeing in business-to-business apps today?**

**A:** It really depends on the specific workflow. For example, a field workforce may need the native functionality of a smartphone’s GPS and camera to capture information in specific locations. Others may require efficiency for talking to backend systems to provide just-in-time information. An outside salesperson may need to see customer histories or contact information at a client account, and then capture some new information from that particular customer. A different set of features would apply for service technicians doing repairs in the field.

**Mobile Pitfalls to Avoid**

**Q:** You’ve described a number of potential benefits with mobile apps, but what challenges do organizations face when they try to develop them?

**A:** The first challenge is that they often don’t have the right concept. Organizations may be looking at which app is easiest to build or which one satisfies a need in a certain portion of the business. Or they may be looking at porting part of their website to a mobile app. This could set them up for immediate failure because the app they create may not be the right choice for the business from the start.

The second challenge relates to problems with how the app is produced. We find that many mobile application developers within organizations have specific experience and in some cases they don’t have the depth to produce solutions that make sense. In fact, many companies come to us after they’ve developed a mobile app that doesn’t work and ask, “Can you rescue this for us?”

**Q:** Are you usually able to step in at that point and help them?

**A:** We typically ask to look at the code first and see what may be salvageable. In most cases, we find they don’t have the right code and they haven’t created the right user experience. Sometimes we can leverage the existing code, but we often advise them to start from scratch because, unfortunately, they got off to a bad start.

**Q:** In summary, what advice do you have for organizations as they develop their strategies for mobile apps?

**A:** It’s important to take a top-down approach by deciding what their overall goals are for the organization and then align the mobility strategy with those goals. That will help them to avoid the problems that result if a request for an app comes from a particular department and it’s then created with a silo approach as a one-off solution. It makes more sense to think about mobile as a strategic tool that solves business problems, increases revenue opportunities, and saves time and money. That analysis up front is critical.