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Business Apps on the iPhone: Dos and Don'ts

Techies love features and functions; business users are more focused on simplicity and speed. CIOs must seek to balance both worlds when developing a business app for the iPhone.

By Tom Kaneshige
Thu, August 11, 2011

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CIO — A retail manufacturer wanted to replace a 3-ring, 4-inch thick binder carried by field sales reps with an iPhone app, recalls Quinton Alsbury, co-founder of Mellmo, maker of mobile BI app Roambi. But the manufacturer fell into a common trap: creating a monster app that is virtually impossible for users to navigate on the iPhone's 3.5-inch touchscreen.

18 This is just one of many pitfalls facing CIOs who want to bring business analytics and field tools to their iPhone-toting workforce.

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An iPhone app that delivers a terrible user experience can spell trouble for the CIO. "The user adoption threshold is very, very thin," Alsbury says. "If it takes too long for something to happen, you'll just put the phone back in your pocket."

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Business apps on the iPhone offer a stark contrast in styles, pitting a techie's love of features and functions against a business user's expectations of simplicity and speed. Here are a few dos and don'ts to help CIOs navigate these tricky waters.

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Increasing Supply Chain Efficiency: A cloud

Don't replicate the laptop: Too many CIOs try to replicate data and features displayed on a laptop to the iPhone. This is a sure path to failure. Just look at the highly panned user experience of the Citrix Receiver app, which basically tries to deliver a virtual desktop on the iPhone. Constantly pinching and expanding text on a phone screen and inputting data using a tiny virtual keyboard sans a mouse will turn off even the most amorous gadget lover.

Do embrace mobility: The problem with replication is that it assumes users will use the iPhone in a similar way to the laptop. But the use cases are vastly different.

Consider these three scenarios: A salesperson might be at her desk with a business intelligence (BI) dashboard open on her computer, watching data change in real-time all day. On her way to a client, she might stop off at a coffee shop, fire up her laptop, open a big spreadsheet and analyze it. While in the elevator heading up to see her client, she might whip out her iPhone to find a quick answer to something.

For CIOs, this means trying to predict where mobile users might be using the app and what kind of answers they'll be looking for. There might not be a lot of time for the user to navigate and drill down into the data. There might not be Internet connectivity. Either way, the app needs to deliver answers with the speed of lightning.

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A Better Way to Decide: Advanced Analytics and Search-Based Applications

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