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App Development: Building Your Practice While Avoiding the Pitfalls

Many solution providers are making the leap to add application development to the portfolio of services they offer to customers. Here's a look at potential pitfalls and how to avoid them.

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While solution providers may be lured by the ring of app-development's many opportunities, there are several hurdles they must avoid in order to ensure their new business venture is successful.

Through planning and attention to detail, solution providers and consulting firms can be part of the application-development market. After all, with mobile apps alone expected to generate between $15 billion and $18 billion this year, many customer organizations are seeking third-party experts able to quickly deliver reliable, cost-effective, and high-performing solutions.

Organizations were expected to increase both the dollar and percentage allocated from their software budgets to new development this year, according to Forrester Research. In fact, they planned to spend 26 percent of their software budgets on custom-development projects, reported Redmond Developer.

"The overall picture is one of development shops in transition, moving from new technologies and updated development frameworks to meet evolving customer demands," said Forrester analysts.

Beating the Budget Blues

As IT history can all-too-often attest, many software development projects go over budget and schedule—and solution providers can also fall prey to this problem, cautioned Leigh Williamson, Distinguished Engineer, Software CTO Team, IBM Rational, in an interview. Frequently, this happens because there is no clear understanding of a project's status, whether it is meeting scheduled dates, and whether the software is passing functionality metrics on time, he said.

"That's something that is very applicable for mobile projects because of the very short duration of those projects, but it's really a very generic software problem we're hearing from all sorts of software development teams," Williamson said.

To address this issue, IBM Rational created Jazz, an open platform for development tool integration, as well as Jazz.net, a corresponding community for the sharing of ideas, projects, problems, and solutions, he said.

Know Thy Customer

Solution providers that have already achieved some measure of success in software development may well attest to the allure of moving too quickly or entering brand new verticals. However, channel executives recommend focusing on specific areas of expertise. This way, solution providers continue to deliver both the business and technical benefits they are known for.

When Resort Technology Partners (RTP) began developing mobile apps, it had a very specific focus: To create applications that would tie-in to its enterprise software that allows people to buy tickets and resort passes.

"Our main enterprise solution is for ticketing and commerce. Extending ticketing and commerce to mobile was a

natural step," Mary Anschutz, director of marketing, toldChannel Insider. "The apps tie to our enterprise software and allow resort guests to purchase tickets from their phones, use their phones as tickets, renew passes, and more. This gives consumers more flexibility and the resorts another commerce/revenue-generating vehicle. The mobile apps allow resorts to speak to customers via smart phones, which is what customers expect. This is another revenue opportunity for our company, as well as another revenue vehicle for the resorts and parks."

DataArt offers custom application-development for businesses in specific verticals such as finance, travel and hospitality, media, and healthcare. It began offering mobile app-development when customers began seeking this service from their long-time custom-development provider.

"Most of our clients have been boosted by mobile technology. We have seen clients come back and ask us for mobile application products," said Artyom Astafurov, senior vice president and partner at DataArt, in an interview. "Mobile development is cheap. It doesn't cost much to develop a piece of iPhone software or a piece of iPad software. That's a very good thing. It's a boost for the development community. Businesses can afford to experiment and see if something catches on with their users or their clients. Gone are the days of, 'We're planning 18 months ahead.'"

App Development: Building Your Practice While Avoiding the Pitfalls - Application Development: Learning New Languages and Skills

Speaking the Lingo

In addition to knowing their clients' businesses, software development staff must also be current on the latest software languages and skills.

When ETNA Software decided to add mobile app development services to its arsenal, the solution provider added quickly. After all, it wanted to offer these apps to its roster of financial technology firms, retail brokers, market makers, exchanges, and individual traders, and its first consideration was whether to train existing staff or hire new, said Arseniy Korobchenko, vice president of marketing, in an interview.

"We had to train our existing staff—97 percent of staff in the company are software developers—and everything the guys needed was training. They were eager to learn new technologies themselves and therefore it was a smooth transition. In the beginning we considered either hiring new people or outsourcing the app development altogether," Korobchenko said. "It was a smooth transition, but in about three months from start we were able to complete the first project for the client and it included an app. It was not a long process – the decision was made in two days, the routines and processes were adjusted in some five days more."

To address coding languages, ETNA Software provided training to its developers.

"The guys needed Objective C for iOS development – it was somewhat of a challenge. Java guys took over Android development no problem and C# and Silverlight guys started doing WP7 phones apps," he said.

In the case of Transputec, software developers at the British solution provider learned several different languages to address the company's new mobile app offerings, said Jose Castro, marketing executive, in an interview with *Channel Insider*.

"To create iPhone apps, our developers had to learn xcode and the Cocoa Cocoa Touch Framework and for Android they had learn to use the Android Development Kit," he said. "The programming skills they already possessed were enough to get them started and they did not go to any training for this but instead used the vast amount of resources available online."