

Build-your-own mobile app: is it worth it?

December 3, 2012

☆ [Feed list](#)

Cynthia Karena

[Email article](#) [Print](#) [Reprints & permissions](#)

Savvy businesses are developing apps to take advantage of the explosion of smartphones and tablets.

Mobile app downloads will surpass 45.6 billion worldwide this year, according to Gartner's latest forecast.

Typically businesses start developing internal apps, then might bring in consultants for apps designed for customers.

That is what Avtrac, a company providing maintenance tracking systems for corporate jets and commercial aircraft, did. It created its own apps using a do-it-yourself program, FileMaker Go.

Manager Paul Carey developed an app for the iPad ("a smartphone's screen is too small") to manage Avtrac's in-house maintenance schedules. It allows staff to enter landings and maintenance cycles which are automatically time-stamped. As work is done, schedules are automatically adjusted.

"I'm not a software guru and I can do it. There is no code to write; there are prompts. It's all point and click, drag-and-drop." He said development time was cut down by seven months.

"We can buy a shrink-wrapped program from the US, but making changes costs a fortune, or can't be done."

Avtrac has now developed about 20 small apps, including billing and time-keeping systems, one for manuals and another for keeping track of data.

"It can take me a day to make an app. I make little adjustments on the template and then data is input."

In the pipeline is an electronic authorisation app, which will replace paper sign-offs.

Avtrac's internal apps are simple. However, if Carey wanted external apps for the public then he says he would most likely go through an app developer "for security and to get them properly tested".

FileMaker is great for internal apps, but it doesn't allow for company branding and there are limitations for Android, says Lembit Pikkat, co-founder of the app development company Gridstone.

"But FileMaker could be used to create a prototype before getting in app developers.

"It is about two to three times more expensive [to contract] customised apps."

At the high end of the app development market are companies like Outware Mobile, where, according to founder Danny Gorog, you can expect to pay up to six figures for a business grade app.

He says consumers want high-performance, easily accessible and good-looking apps.

"It is worth investing the money and resources to get an app right. You could skill up and develop an app internally, but that's not what the business is good at.

"It's crazy to save on developing apps when you spend millions on marketing. Putting out a great app can be more powerful in the right demographic."

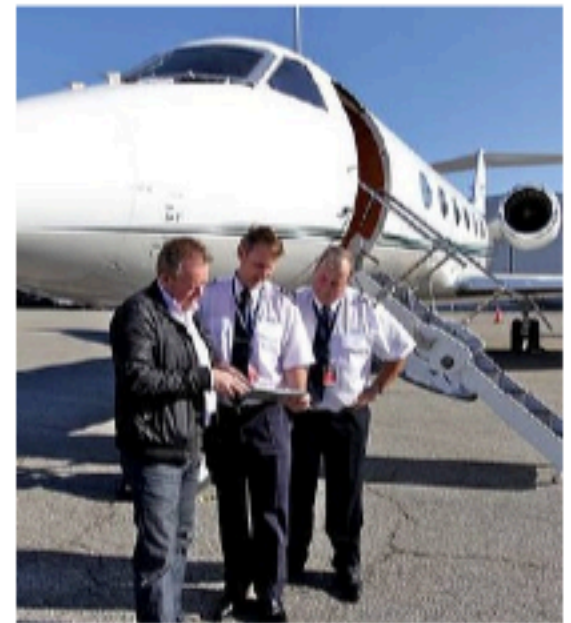
Costs increase if the app integrates with an internal system; and the price doubles if apps are built for two operating systems (for example for Android and iOS), he says.

If an app has a tightly defined purpose, this will lower the price per hour for external developers, says Gartner analyst Brian Prentice.

"Finding a purpose [or the point of an app] is not a software development process, but a design process. You need to get the design process right. These skills don't exist in most IT departments."

But businesses can bypass developers and develop their own customer apps using pre-defined app templates (that have common tasks such as browsing, shopping, delivering news, contact forms) from companies such as SeattleClouds and App Design Vault, and if you have some basic programming knowledge, then you can purchase app components from Verious, says Rhys Evans, chief technology officer of Thomas Duryea.

"You can buy the templates and they will outsource the development for you. This may cost anywhere between \$2000 and \$3000. The more you standardise functionality (the cheaper it is)," Evans says.



Paul Carey (left) of Avtrac has created apps for internal company use. *Photo: Supplied*