IT Analysis

Comment Article

ITAnalysis - Finding MeMo2 (Memorable Mobile applications)

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Mobile application development is full of hard choices. Although there is a seemingly insatiable appetite for ever-smarter handheld mobile devices and the applications these platforms encourage, developers have to decide which subset of the available mobile market they want to write applications for, in order to get a profitable return for their effort.

At one time it seemed like there might have been some uniformity and a common platform might emerge, but most attempts have faltered, and ultimately fallen short of the ideal they set out to achieve – SIM toolkit (too simple), WAP (too telco), Java (too fragmented), Symbian (too European?).

None of these approaches were particularly faulty; they simply satisfied a set of needs at a moment in time in the evolution of mobile devices that made the best of prevailing hardware and network limitations. The problem for each of them has been the speed of evolution of mobile capability.

True, handheld mobile devices are still limited by screen size and the lack of a 'real' keyboard and, despite continual improvements in wireless data transmission technology, there will never be as much bandwidth available over air waves as that down copper wires or fibre optics.

There are already plenty of handheld devices with bright readable screens capable of fast and watchable video, 3D graphics and the potential for 3DTV/video in the near future. Touch screens, haptics (buzz) feedback, accelerometers, compasses, GPS now augment the input options and user interfaces of increasing numbers of devices.

Most have decent audio capability, many for music and ringtones, and of course they should all have decent enough audio for phone use (although this is not always the case as early BlackBerry and Apple users opined). The functionality is in place for some fantastic 'killer' applications and for smart developers to exploit.

However, there is little uniformity as hardware manufacturers strive to get the best out of their devices and network operators do likewise with their networks and the tweaks they often demand from the handset providers.

Additionally, there is still an industry propensity towards being overly proprietary, something that was mostly beaten out of the IT industry in the 1990s as the internet and associated open protocols and de jure and de facto standards took hold.

What many in the mobile industry fail to recognise is that real momentum stems from a wide swell of common interest, rather than the generally chaotic pushing of narrow vested interests.

In spite of this, the mobile operator community are (again) having an attempt to pull things together through the Wholesale Applications Community initiative. A creditable concept, although it could appear a bit like a nervous reaction by the mobile operators to Apple's success with its App Store, and the other efforts of hardware companies, from Nokia to BlackBerry and Samsung, rather than a pro-active idea.

The initiative has on the face of it a very significant group of operators lined up in support and between them they account for over 3 billion subscribers worldwide. These operators and their industry body, the GSMA can help push towards common standards, closer links between fixed and mobile and perhaps common platforms for mobile applications. All good stuff, especially if the hardware manufacturers line up to standardise too, although some will see this as a loss of differentiation.

The real issue is what do developers do in the meantime? Harmonisation towards a 'precious few' rather than an unwieldy handful of mobile platforms might help their long term cross platform and portability challenges, but right now, developers need to be able to create

applications that will sell in large enough numbers to cover costs and make a profit. It is not simply a matter of being able to develop for a platform, or even an easy way to download and sell – there has to be user appeal, and in large enough numbers for developers to cost effectively reach.

That means technically taking advantage of the 'cool stuff' that users want, in whatever funky handset it appears. Applications also have to be available across as many handsets that are out there now as is possible, not just those that will be ready to ship 'in time for Christmas'.

From a commercial perspective, charging enough to recoup the effort is going to be harder with the more platforms and differences that have to be covered, especially if there is a 'tax' to online stores, whether these are operator led or not.

In short, the mobile industry and operator community in particular, needs to recognise that its success is dependent on the success of the broader ecosystem, and the big fish need to stop trying to eat up the food of the little ones. For more thoughts on stimulating the mobile applications market, download Quocirca's free paper regarding Mobile Application Momentum.

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Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

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