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Federal Mobile Applications: Lessons Learned and Best Practices in Supporting the Mobile and Digital Agenda to Enhance Citizen Services

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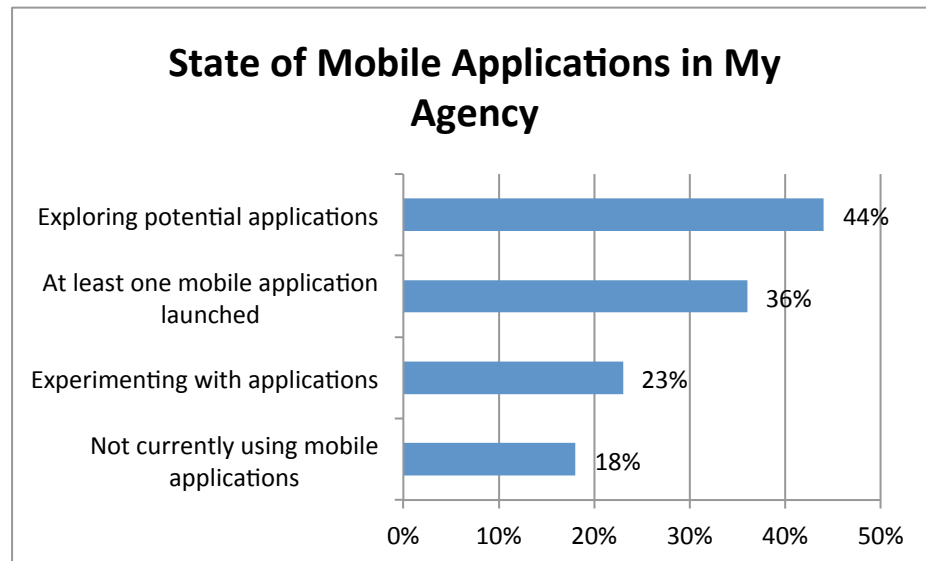
Introduction:

With more and more users carrying smart devices for both personal and business communications, technology organizations are quickly developing and deploying mobile applications for them. Many federal government agencies have already taken advantage of mobile technology to empower their employees or deliver information and services to their constituents. However, many more are just now entering the learning curve to understand the requirements and capabilities of these powerful new mobile tools.

In the first quarter of 2011, Mobomo, a Bethesda, MD-based developer of mobile applications and partner of the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), U.S Department of Commerce (DOC) – hosted a webcast featuring a panel of experts from various federal organizations, including:

- NTIS,
- The General Services Administration (GSA); and
- The National Institutes of Health (NIH), of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

The panel discussed their experience in building and operating successful mobile solutions. NTIS and GSA in particular, act as government-wide resources to assist other agencies in formulating and implementing mobile app strategies. Over the course of the online discussion, a poll of the 130 government officials who participated in the webinar was conducted regarding agency utilization of mobile apps. Of the participants, more than one-third (36 percent) of respondents' agencies have already launched at least one mobile app in their agency.



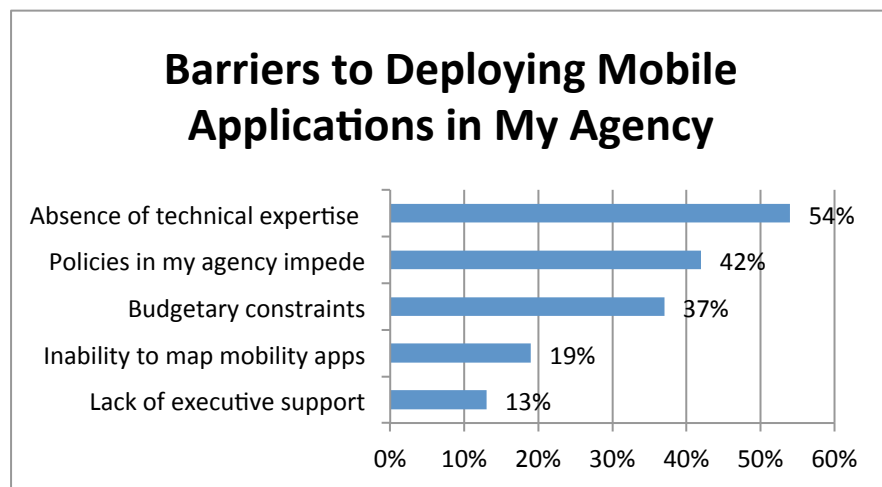
Gwynne Kostin, Director of Mobile Strategy at the Office of Citizen Services & Innovative Technologies (OCSIT), GSA reported that while many agencies see the potential benefits of providing mobile apps to their employees or to the public, many organizations are simply unsure about how to begin.

The mobile app is not the goal – your mission is the goal

As an initial step in evaluating whether a mobile app or mobile web site would enhance an agency’s performance, it’s critical to first define a specific scope of functionality that it wants to provide to mobile users.

“I always ask folks what they’re trying to accomplish,” Kostin said. “The mobile app is not the goal – your mission is the goal. That’s a critical differentiation to make. The first thing is to identify what is the mobile service that you want to provide. Second is how to get started, find the right focus, and get through the policy hoops that we have to go through. There are service agreements that have to be cleared through agencies’ legal departments, and that’s always a barrier.”

According to the online poll, 42 percent of respondents believed that agency policies impede them from deploying mobile apps, but an even greater number (54 percent) reported that a lack of technical expertise was preventing them from moving forward.



“People don’t know where to get started. They don’t know what the process is, and in some ways, it’s like a black box,” Kostin said.

“By process I mean both the development and then getting the app into the commercial stores. A lot of folks are really having a hard time ginning up support within their own organizations and the resources [deploy applications].

“Another barrier revolves around finding the technology support [for projects such as] developing a mobile-friendly web site. Agencies don’t want to have multiple websites. So the question is, how do you use technology to have one website that’s delivered effectively across multiple platforms?”

“I know that a lot of agencies have concerns about technical expertise,” said **LaShemma Simmons**, of the NTIS. “Security is another concern and a block for deploying mobile apps. Many of those issues can be addressed by the NTIS, through our office of CIO. We are working with organizations like Mobomo so that we can help agencies overcome technical hurdles.”

Case Study: NIH Office of Dietary Supplements

One example of a public-facing mobile app that has been deployed by a government was developed by the NIH Office of Dietary Supplements (ODS). They undertook a mobile app project to help users track and share information about

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supplements with physicians and the public at large. The app – known as MyDietarySupplements (MyDS) – allows ODS to provide health information on supplements directly to users’ devices.

“More than 50 percent of Americans take at least one dietary supplement each day,” said **Jody Engel, MA, RD**, a nutritionist with the Communications Program at ODS. “We co-fund research on dietary supplements, and we disseminate results out to scientists, healthcare providers, and consumers. Our largest group of stakeholders is consumers, and we’re always looking for ways to increase our outreach to them.”

“Dietary supplements can sometimes interact with medication so it is very important that healthcare providers know what supplements their patients are taking. So we thought that a mobile app would be a great way for patients to keep this information all in one place and to be able to easily share it with their doctors,” said Engel.

“Our app gives consumers a free mobile tracking list of the supplements they are taking. It also gives them the ability to share this list with their healthcare providers, have it with them while they’re shopping, and they can also email their list and then print it out. It also provides reliable, science-based information about dietary supplements, and finally it gives general information about the NIH ODS, so it acts as a PR tool for our office.”

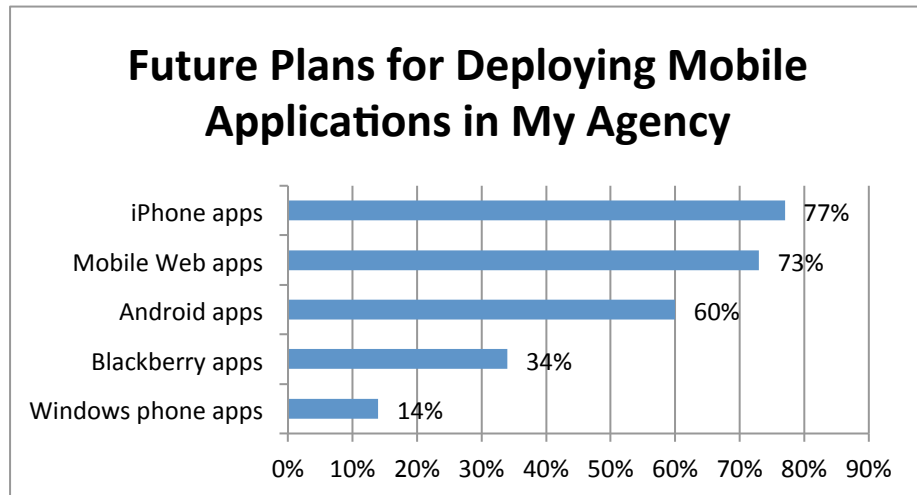
Bumps on the Road

“One of the biggest obstacles that we encountered early on was setting up a developer account for ODS as an office within the federal government,” Engel said.

“Apple was just not set up yet to receive requests from the government, and they sent us multiple emails requesting required documents such as our business license and charter documents, which as a federal agency, of course, do not exist. This continued for eight weeks of back and forth and dead-end emails. This was finally resolved because I made contact with GSA, who knew of contacts at Apple.”

Through GSA, ODS reached the Apple Federal Group, which assisted in setting up MyDS as an offering on the Apple app store.

“I’m happy to report that thanks to this and some other requests at the same time, Apple is now much better able to handle submissions from the federal government,” Engel said.



There are just so many operating systems and so many phones, and each one has all these different requirements that to go to a Mobile Web app that works across all platforms seems to be the logical next step.

Mobile Web apps make a lot of sense, especially for information-heavy applications

Prioritizing Mobile Operating System Environments

It is interesting to note that the highest percentage of respondents (77 percent) are focusing their future plans on apps for the Apple iPhone, whose users are considered the most engaged in using mobile apps.

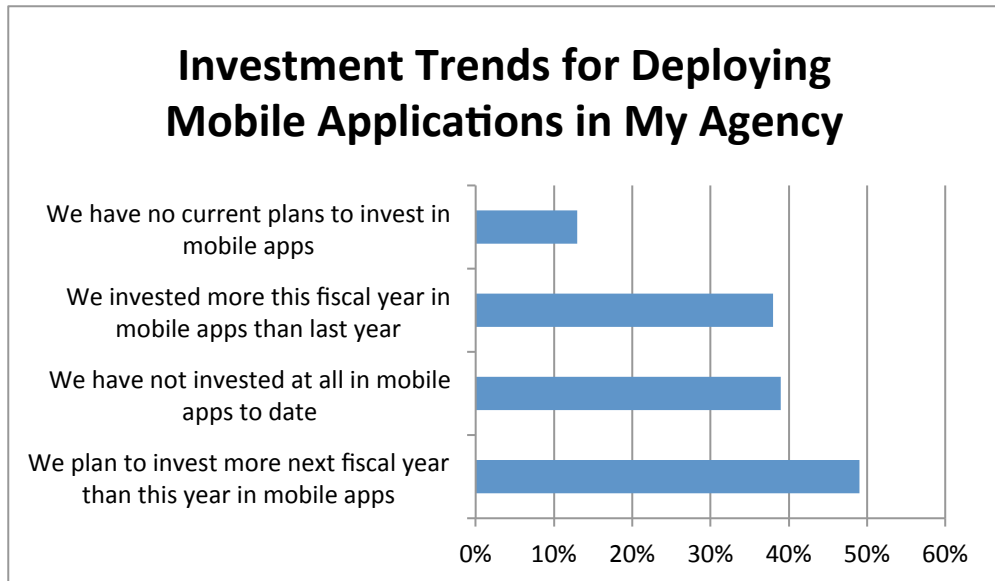
A close second, however, were respondents planning apps for the Mobile Web (73 percent), which offers the most versatility as users can access Mobile Web apps from a variety of devices and operating systems.

“That’s where we’re planning to go next,” said OSD’s Engel. “There are just so many operating systems and so many phones, and each one has all these different requirements that to go to a Mobile Web app that works across all platforms seems to be the logical next step.”

“Mobile Web apps make a lot of sense, especially for information-heavy applications,” said GSA’s Kostin.

“You can even build apps that lead people back to your web site, so you get the best of both worlds. But again the critical thing is identifying what you’re trying to do. The more interactive it is – such as gaming aspects, or uses that optimize the tactile nature of mobile devices – that’s what seems to make the most sense for apps. But for information-heavy sites or ones that are potentially transactional Mobile Web apps make a lot of sense.”

“Within our own organization we have several different devices being used, from the Directors office to the Office of Federal Services,” Simmons said. “So I think that this poll leaning towards the Mobile Web apps makes sense because it’s a lot easier and more efficient to push it out that way to users. But we’re seeing – from Blackberry to iPhone to Android – there’s a lot more diversity now, where before we were sort of peg-holed into the Blackberry apps.”



A major, complex app could cost \$100,000 to \$150,000 to build out and have the infrastructure behind it.

A Mobile Federal Future

While 39 percent of respondents indicated that their agencies had not yet invested in mobile apps, almost half (49 percent) said they plan to invest more in mobile apps during the next fiscal year. Panelists agreed that understanding the costs and budgeting for initial and ongoing investments are critical elements of a mobile app strategy.

“It’s important for everyone to realize that you have to think of an app like a website. It will evolve over time. It’s not a final product,” Engel said. “You don’t just put it up there and forget about it. It’s an ongoing project, and you need to think about that and prepare for that. As the scope expands and changes, the costs may increase, so it’s not just one number.”

“For small apps, it’s really not that expensive – I know that’s a relative term,” Kostin added. “Depending on the organization and how you’re funded, you can do a small app for 30 to 50 thousand dollars. As you get more complex and use more data, it can cost a lot more money, and then there are ongoing costs. So for a major, complex app, it could cost you \$100,000 to \$150,000 to build it out and have the infrastructure behind it.”

Conclusion

As always, each agency must carefully analyze its own user base and technology environment in order to best allocate its development resources. One critical decision to be made early on is selection of the device platform that an agency wants to reach with a new mobile app, noted **Barg Upende**r, Founder and CEO of Mobomo.

“The technology that the iPhone and Android have is basically built ground-up for the modern touch-based smartphone,” said Upende.

“The newer technology makes it easier, so therefore people are spending a lot more time building applications there. More people use iPhone and Android for broader purposes than Blackberry. So people, when they invest their money, they invest in the iPhone because engagement is deeper there. And then usually the Mobile Web to get the broader coverage of all the other devices, and then they focus on Android, and then Windows and Blackberry are next on the priority list,” he said.

But popularity and engagement are not the only factors that federal organizations must consider. Security and compliance with federal technology policies are also integral to agencies’ mobile development efforts. “Now we have to look at FIPS compliance on these devices and many of the vendors – Apple and Google and them – are looking to towards getting that,” Upende concluded.

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About Mobomo

Founded in 2009 by Barg Upender — serial entrepreneur and Washingtonian Tech Titan — Mobomo is headquartered in the metro Washington, DC area and is 100% focused on developing mobile applications. Mobomo provides end-to-end mobile strategy, design, development, for businesses and organizations that want to acquire, retain, or otherwise engage mobile customers. We combine mobile expertise with disciplines in business strategy, interactive marketing, web development, and systems engineering to create the most innovative mobile applications on the Apple iPhone, Apple iPad, Google Android, Blackberry, Windows Phone and other smart phone platforms. For more information visit: www.mobomo.com

About Disruptathon

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