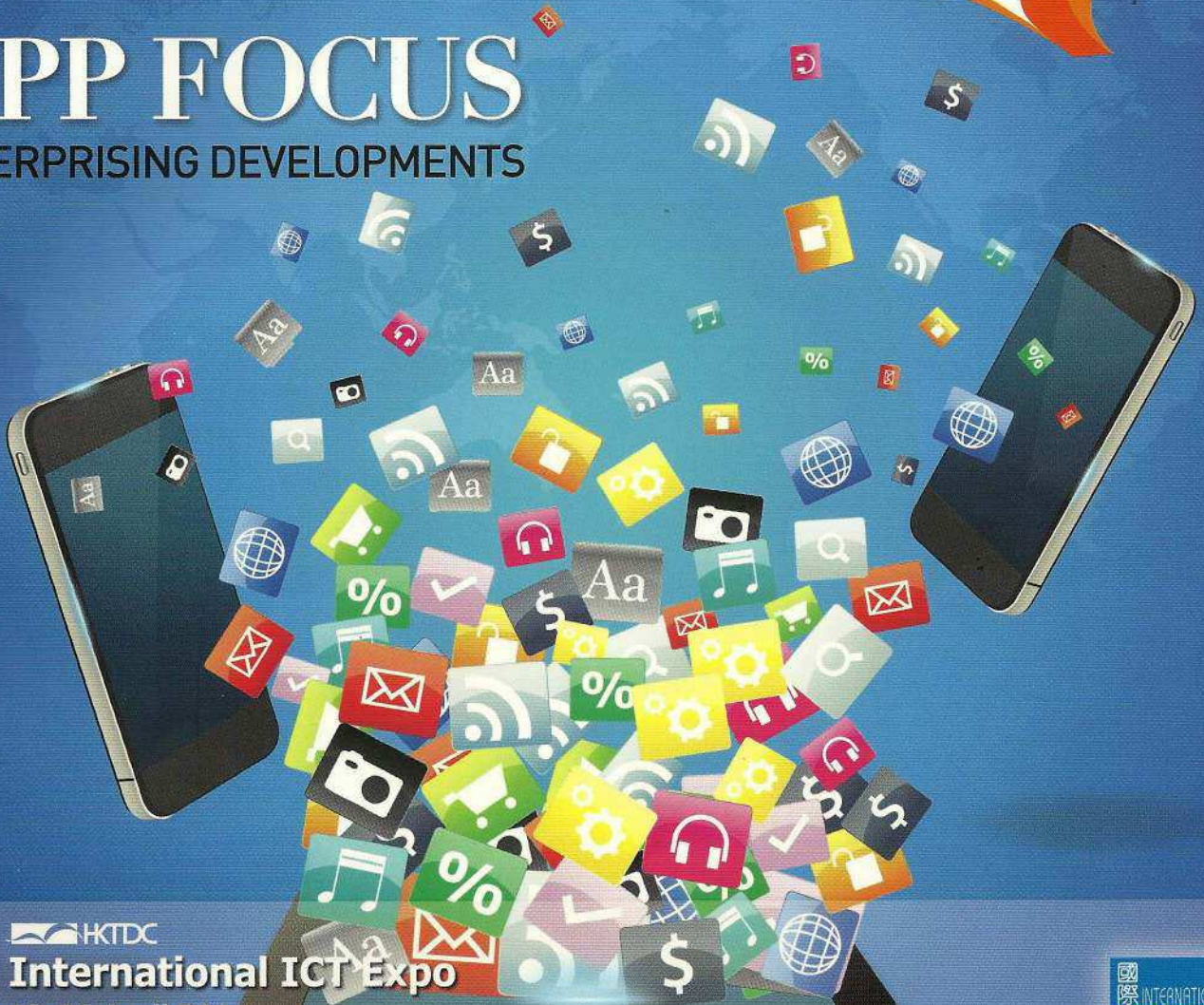


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APP FOCUS ENTERPRISING DEVELOPMENTS



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Enterprising Developments

Like other forms of ICT, apps are becoming ever-more relevant to Hong Kong's SMEs — fortunately, they are in the perfect place when it comes to sourcing these powerful programs. By Philip Annetta

Mobile technology is older than many people think. "It was around a long time before smartphones," says Roy Law, executive committee member of the Hong Kong Wireless Technology Industry Association. However, the advent of the iPhone did change a lot. "It changed the world," says Law. "Before it, the infrastructure technology wasn't ready for the mobile technology boom."

Since the iPhone's launch in 2007, mobile technology growth in Hong Kong has been dramatic, to the point where the field is seeing definite shifts, from specific product trends to a growing integration of online and offline services — and a shift from consumer to enterprise use.

"One example of what we call O2O, or online

to offline, is the popular app called GoGoVan," says Law. "Users order a parcel pickup through the app, but the driver then calls to arrange the pickup time."

Developing themes

According to Law, many businesspeople are using apps to check in for travel and business events. Further, he says, businesses are taking their concerns about information security to the app world and developing their own instant messaging (IM) apps for staff use.

Kary Wan, business development manager of local app developer Play More Ltd, agrees.

The company's flagship enterprise product, Team More, is designed to cover corporate

communication through nine modules, including: news dispatches, a company event calendar, e-newsletter publication and an instant messaging system. "It's designed to facilitate communication both within a company and between a company and its clients," says Wan.

Wan believes that as bring your own device (BYOD) initiatives grow in popularity, businesses become willing to invest more in ICT and mobile technology to enhance communication. "These types of applications are particularly popular with businesses that employ highly mobile staff, such as those in construction companies, airlines and the sales industry."

These are all part of what Ricky Lui, co-founder of Hong Kong app developer Joy Aether Ltd, calls "utility apps". "Utility apps save time and help people to work smarter and in a more organised way. We're seeing growing popularity in areas such as event management, HR management and collecting customer feedback," he says. "And another area that's seeing growth is apps that interact with physical products like electronics. Manufacturers can save costs by leveraging the computing power and user interface already on their users' smartphones."

Hardware driver

This change in computing power and other areas of functionality is already leading to changes in app capabilities. In general, according to Law, the difference between web and app interfaces on different devices is marked. "It really takes a range of skill sets to develop interfaces for different devices now — user experience is so paramount."

Law cites the examples of iBeacon, an indoor positioning system that works with iOS products

to determine users' locations for a variety of functions. The system has been adopted by retailers like coffee shops so that users with capable devices can pay for their drinks by using a fingerprint on their screen, which is received by the iBeacon sensor in the retail premises. In general, however, enterprise usage of mobile technology lags behind consumer use. "It always takes businesses a while to observe the market and figure out how best to apply the technology in a business setting," he says.

Wan and Lui agree. "More device functionality enables app development in more dimensions. For example, traditionally only a plain text e-form could be submitted via email, but in our apps we can leverage the camera and GPS functions so that photos, videos and locations can be incorporated," says Wan.

Lui also names formal procedures as one area improved by apps. The company has helped launch a loan app for an international bank that is very convenient to use. "The technology is becoming more reliable and secure all the time, so these areas of application will see more development." Further, he says, more powerful devices can use augmented reality to "immerse users into a blend of virtual world and reality, thus enhancing their experiences with companies and brands" — an area with clear application in business development.



Play More Ltd

SME suitability

SMEs are finding that their app needs are similar to those of larger businesses, though with a few differences. "Their target audiences would be more focused on clients or end-users instead of internal employees," says Wan. "Getting connected with clients is always the top priority, and clients nowadays expect more information — or information exchange — through electronic or mobile channels."

Lui agrees. "Increasingly, we see SMEs looking to use mobile apps to create innovative marketing campaigns," he says, "as well as creating innovative business models and improving their business processes."

So what do SMEs need to think about when shopping for enterprise apps? "SMEs are always concerned about budget, which is always limited," says Law. "Off-the-shelf solutions, rather than custom-developed apps, are a good choice, unless a custom app is necessary for survival. Even with off-the-shelf apps, SMEs should be able to see an advantage immediately."

"SMEs need to take a long-term view when it comes to apps," says Lui. "The first stage could

be just for improving existing business processes, but later on SMEs should have a vision of adding further innovative uses to fully leverage mobile devices as platforms, and to open doors to new business opportunities."

"There is a range of questions SMEs need to ask when considering developing an app," says Wan. "Budget is one, of course. Others include whether there are existing apps addressing most of the wants and needs, whether the project is time-sensitive, whether the app needs to be under the company's own brand, whether there will be a need to upgrade the app or to integrate it with other in-house systems, and whether there is flexibility in content management and maintenance."

All agree that cost is an important issue for SMEs; however, according to Lui, "as app technologies mature, SMEs are no longer just making their purchase decisions based on cost."

Local advantage

Fortunately for Hong Kong's SMEs, local app developers have a lot to offer by leveraging the city's natural advantages. Law, Wan and Lui all point to the city's highly developed infrastructure. Data centres, Wi-Fi networks, fast and low-cost 3G and 4G phone networks, smartphone penetration of 87 per cent and cheap broadband give the city a strong edge in app development and testing speed.

In addition, the population is highly tech-savvy; it is easy to encourage app use, and easy to find talented developers. For SMEs that work globally, as Lui points out, "mobile apps are a global business. Hong Kong has a sharp sensibility for both Eastern and Western markets, so new ideas can be tried and tested in Hong Kong and then further promoted to overseas markets."



Joy Aether Ltd



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