Smart innovation for non-smart phones

By Tim Bishop   24 Aug 2015

A large portion of the South Africa's user market is being left unprovided for when it comes to mobile innovation. This opens up a huge opportunity for those that look at human innovation rather than just high-end smart technology.

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The mobile innovation trend in this country generally follows the rest of the world, where developers and companies are geared towards providing new services for the iOS and Android platforms. Whilst these platforms own the lion's share worldwide, in South Africa, where between them they only represent 10% of all phones, it leaves in excess of 40 million Africans potentially not catered for.

Millions of SA phones have no data capability at all, and of those that have, the may not be activated or the users cannot afford or understand data services. So if you're not thinking mobility innovation in terms of all mobile technologies including USSD, mobi and SMS, you're going to miss a huge chunk of the SA population.

Humanising ERP

Smart innovation without smartphones is possible. For example, at Deloitte Digital we have recently enabled employee leave request via USSD, Mobi and SMS into SAP, as well as other comprehensive ERP services into SAP using our own custom built Amanzi framework that enables enterprise software to plug into the employees and the mobile technology of Africa.

The new USSD services allow workers (such as miners) to book leave, have it approved, report sick and perform a myriad of other employee services from the convenience of any cellphone without data. This is part of Deloitte Digital's 'Humanising ERP' program to innovate and create human-centered ERP solutions for African employees, while versatile enough to be

compatible across all mobile platforms - from operator-level USSD on dumb-phones to smartphones.

'Amanzi' is built using the latest technologies, including the single page web application approach. This means no constant page reloads increasing usability, speed and network efficiency. It also uses flash of unstyled content (FOUC) and data handling and binding, and abides by industry standards and technologies, using approaches citizen developers are already familiar with. This makes it easy for them to quickly and easily write applications as customised as they please. The framework sits alongside already deployed enterprise software so has very few dependencies and is efficient, easy to customise and deploy.

Missing your target market

The reality is that feature or non-smart phones will be with us for some time to come, and as a global digital company, our clients also sit in developing countries worldwide who are seeing similar trends.

That said, Smartphone penetration in South Africa is growing rapidly. Some estimates have it reaching 30% by the end of the year, but feature phones and the non-smart phones are also the here and now. Companies could be missing as much as 80% of their target market if they're not thinking about innovation opportunities available for 'old school' technologies.

The possible applications for USSD, mobile, SMS and other innovations for non-smart phones extend into other areas of workforce engagement such as those to manage employee health, wellness and productivity. They can also be used to measure customer and workforce sentiment. The data these solutions provide forms the basis from which rational, evidence-based decisions can be made.

Very little of non-smart phone innovation will come from American or European markets, where feature phones are steadily on the decline. That said, there is not a single country in the world with 100% smartphone penetration and why shouldn't everyone have access to employee or consumer services from their phone?

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