APPS HERE TO HELP YOU

Mobile device apps are only just beginning to be taken seriously and local developers are still sizing up the market. What's out there for local builders and designers?

By Chris Bell, Business Writer, wordsSHIFTminds.co.nz

More than 11 million Google hits for 'There's an app for that' suggest apps are here to stay. While construction sites may not be the safest place for your favourite mobile device, apps do offer builders, architects and designers a means of collaborating and increasing productivity. However, interoperability – using individual app modules to share role-specific data – is still some way off, so developers are targeting industry niches.

Whether you favour an iPhone, tablet or smartphone, there are currently few apps compatible with New Zealand Building Codes, but there are numerous international apps designed for the construction trades. Most offer iPad and iPhone versions, with some also operable on an iPod Touch, and there's a separate category of apps for Android – the mobile device, smartphone and tablet operating system owned by Google.

Best for builders

PROCORE FOR IPAD
Designed for iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch, Procore is an iPad Documents tool for construction project management. It gives builders and project managers access to the archive in Procore's cloud-based document repository to view pdfs, Word documents and Excel spreadsheets. Free.

BUILDERTREND
An Android app that its developer describes as 'web-based construction software'. It has won several awards, including the Constructech Top Product award for Home Building Software. It can also be accessed from an iPad or iPhone. Free.

TRADIES
Helps users keep track of all aspects of their job site and, as it was developed by an Australian builder, is the closest thing you'll currently find to an app suited to New Zealand. Free as a download, but if you want to use it without watermarks, you will need to buy it. $52.99.

Applying to architects

AUTODESK CONSTRUCTWARE FIELD
An iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad app, it connects with Autodesk's Constructware enterprise software, allowing you to securely view, download and upload architecture, engineering and construction documents from anywhere. Free.

GRAPHPAD PRO – RELEASE 2
A productivity tool aimed at draughtsmen, landscapers and architects. The latest release includes improvements in precision for drawing floor plans and an image store. $15.99.

ARCHITACTILE INCEPTION
An app designed to help accelerate early project definition. Pdfs displaying your own branding can be created for emailing to clients from an iPad. Hand-drawn fonts give it a messy look in places, but it's a powerful app. $64.99.

TOTAL FOR IPAD
Formerly known as DaVinci, this app allows you to fill out inspection forms, draw accurate floor plans and return files to head office. Free.

Resources for interior designers

REMODELISTA
An online sourcebook, the app's 'Steal this look' function allows you to replicate furniture, lighting and design elements. $4.19.

MARK ON CALL
Interior designer Mark Lewison created this app for iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch that enables users to back up, publish and transfer designs to other mobile device users and take photos of finishes and furniture, then 'skin' them onto any item from the camera or photo library. $2.59.

HOME DESIGN 3D GOLD
This LiveCad app for iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad allows designers to create 2D drawings from a catalogue of 150 objects. The latest version offers unlimited floor levels and advanced 3D rendering of reflections, shadows and lighting. $15.99.

ON THE HORIZON

Local app developers are taking the needs of the construction industry seriously and doing research before launching their products.

SmartBuild

Dan Albert is a former builder who began working on SmartBuild around 6 years ago, using cellphones with pre-web mobile browsers. 'Small-screen devices were pretty limited in those days,' he says. 'The iPad and iPhones are a lot more capable.'

Albert is working with Auckland-based company Nextspace, which provides technology and services to help cities, utilities and the building industry to make decisions using 3D visualisation. Its CEO, Gavin Lennox, says the company helped SmartBuild to develop a proof of concept. 'We provide a platform for the management of data in 3D, and SmartBuild is a great example of one of the applications to be built on it.'

Albert sees an opportunity for SmartBuild to create an app encompassing the entire building process. 'At the moment, we're looking for functionality that's required by restricted work and the Licensed Building Practitioner Scheme,' he says. 'SmartBuild is planning to set a standard so good that it will become the industry benchmark.' He doesn't yet know when the app will launch.

Document[AR]

Dr Dermott McMeel, a lecturer in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Auckland, is a former architect who, with Associate Professor Robert Amor from the Department of Computer Science, prototyped Document[AR] for the construction trades. 'It provides the ability to have general arrangements, digital models and detail drawings that are usually in different formats and in different locations literally at your fingertips if you need them,' he says.

Rather than the security and data-loss threats of mobile technology use, McMeel warns the dangers for builders may be workplace related. 'A construction site is an unforgiving environment, and most builders I know have a cheap mobile they can discard if something happens to it.'

As an architect, McMeel worked with a builder who kept his mobile phone in his sock. 'He lost his phone with its messages and notes with decisions and specifications, causing havoc. This problem can be amplified if a lot of information is stored.' ◀