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App Stores and the Enterprise: Boon or Bust?

By Joanie Wexler

They all have them. Name your favorite smart phone manufacturer and you can bet it runs an online store that users can troll for cool mobile applications. But what's in it for businesses?

That seems to be a topic of contention.

Research In Motion's Tyler Lessard, director of alliances and developer relations, points to apps like customer relationship management tool salesforce.com, voice dictation app BigHand, GadgetTrak, Exgis, Salesnow and Bloomberg as excellent applications for business users.

"I think the business customers are finding that App World not only gives them a good starting point for finding business and productivity tools for their BlackBerry, but also provides them a glimpse of some of the lifestyle and fun applications that they may have passed over previously," Lessard adds.

But do the fun apps outweigh the productive ones?

"I don't think app stores have any benefit for enterprises," asserts Chris Nowak, CTO at Chicago fruits and vegetables wholesale company Anthony Marano, which supports multiple vendors' handsets and roaming between Wi-Fi and cellular networks. "They seem to just offer games and other ways for users to waste their time."

Some folks, in fact, contend that the stores are actually working against the enterprise, throwing yet another obstacle in the path of harried mobile administrators already struggling to enforce compliance and security policies outside corporate walls. At the moment, agree observers, app stores seem targeted at sating consumer appetites, serving up entertainment, money management and other personal applications to make the phones themselves more appealing.

But with users free to download apps willy-nilly, have the app stores simply unleashed more potential headaches for IT?

The Rise of the App Store

All the major smart phone makers have opened up mobile app stores to drive innovative application development and, in turn, demand for their devices. Among them:

- Apple iPhone App Store
- RIM App World
- Windows Marketplace for Mobile
- Google Android Market
- Palm App Catalog
- Nokia Ovi Store

The iPhone Catch-22

The greatest dilemma surrounds the Apple iPhone App Store. The iPhone App Store is by far the busiest, according to research company In-Stat, which predicts that by 2013, about 30% of smart phones representing 100 million shipments will run mobile operating systems supported by an app store.

Apple has historically taken a consumer-centric and proprietary approach to its iPhone and iPod Touch products – anathema to the enterprise, admittedly, yet a situation that continues to improve with each new version of the iPhone 3G's operating system. It has been reported that the iPhone App Store experienced 60 million downloads during its first month of existence and is currently up to somewhere around a half a billion downloads.

The popularity of the iPhone and the App Store has presented a Catch-22 for mobile administrators torn between accommodating salivating users demanding the devices and doing their job of centrally managing and securing mobile end points.

“The iPhone has been the poster child for consumer devices connecting to the enterprise without IT knowing,” acknowledges Dan Dearing, VP of marketing and product management at Trust Digital, a mobility management company bent on bringing BlackBerry Enterprise Server (BES)-class control and security to the iPhone and other handhelds.

BlackBerry shops, for example, can connect with app vendors directly to acquire applications and push them out to end users through a BES, Lessard explains. “Organizations looking to standardize some of their communications and information-sharing would be able to mandate that employees download necessary applications and anyone managing a corporate BlackBerry deployment would still have the ability to manage the applications and devices centrally as always,” he says.

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Dearing notes that the iPhone 3G S, launched last month, has exposed config profiles, which has allowed his company's Enterprise Mobility Management (EMM) server to become perhaps the first to block application downloads to the iPhone based on user groups. It can also control the use of embedded cameras and Bluetooth networks, Dearing says.

This is progress.

To date, says Timothy Campos, CIO at process control and yield management products KLA-Tencor, “You can turn off BlackBerry access to RIM's App World,” precluding users from running amok at the possible expense of a business's privacy or overloading the device's memory. “With the iPhone, I can't do that.”

Even so, Campos says, “I don't think the RIM app store is an enabler, either. If I want to push an application

down to employees, I just use the BES.” RIM also offers BlackBerry Enterprise Server for MDS Applications, which synchronizes and secures non-messaging, back-end applications with mobile devices.

Campos, in fact, goes so far as to call RIM App World “a significant risk” to the enterprise, albeit “one that RIM has mitigated with its controls.”

Blocking and Managing Apps

Mobile expert Ken Dulaney, VP at Gartner, agrees. “RIM and Microsoft have real good security that allows you to block” undesired applications to BlackBerry and Windows Mobile devices, respectively, he says.

Until the iPhone 3.0 software came out last month, this wasn’t possible with Apple devices and is one reason he generally recommends BlackBerry and Windows Mobile for devices with local content that needs securing or updating. Another is the lack of background processing on the iPhone, which persists in the latest software version and precludes distributing software updates to devices over the air without user intervention.

“This makes it incumbent on the user to manage” downloading the updates, he says. “Ten percent of the population will do it, another 10% will wait a few days [remaining out of sync in the meantime], and the others won’t do it at all,” he predicts, which is not good news for keeping software and security patches up to date.

And at this juncture, the new Palm webOS-based Pre and Google Android devices – with budding app stores of their own (see box) – have yet to support the ability to wipe or kill a remote lost or stolen device and to support complex passwords. These capabilities are generally deal-breakers for letting devices onto the corporate network and storing corporate data.

“Palm has said it will do that in 90 days and Android hasn’t announced” these capabilities yet, according to Dulaney. For its part, Apple only just announced this support in its iPhone 3G S last month, potentially giving it greater credence as a bona fide enterprise device.

Virtual Enterprise App Stores Coming?

The comments from Dulaney and the others beg the question: What would businesses use app stores for, given that IT departments generally already have a business application distribution model in place?

Trust Digital’s Dearing predicts that the greatest benefits for enterprises might eventually emerge in the form of virtual app stores for enterprises. “Enterprises are looking for a mechanism to put approved apps onto devices,” he says.

“What’s missing today,” he continues, “is the notion of an enterprise app store. All the components are there: encryption, VPN, passwords. IT [one day] could put its own enterprise ‘sandbox’ at an app store, point the user to the app store at activation time, download and lock the image.”

That’s an idea that has already begun to germinate. Sybase’s iAnywhere Mobile Office, for example, is in the Apple iPhone App Store, already enabling the sandbox approach to mobility. It’s technically one large virtual area into which enterprises might eventually be able to put all their enterprise data and applications and encrypt them, says Senthil Kirshnapillai, Sybase mobility management product director.

Today, only Sybase applications reside in the sandbox, but Sybase has created a partnership program to allow other developers' applications into it. SAP became the first partner in March and is connecting its Mobile CRM and Mobile Inbox applications to the secure Sybase platform for the iPhone.

In the Meantime

Until the app store mechanisms mature for enterprises, how do mobile device managers assuage users' ad hoc behavior? Downloading unapproved apps could have adverse effects such as unaudited communications being exchanged in violation of compliance mandates or Trojans being introduced into the corporate network.

One suggestion is simply for companies to centrally purchase and deploy the devices.

"If the phones are provided by the corporation, the business can take more steps" to protect compliance policies and the network, says Frank Dickson, VP in the mobile Internet group at In-Stat.

"But if the user buys his own device and the business reimburses him for usage, the user is the one with the relationship with the service provider and the app store. The enterprise is granting that individual access to the enterprise" without really knowing what's on the handset, he says.

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Publisher's Note: This is the final issue of The Wireless Pulse. Read more from Joanie Wexler in upcoming issues of Voice Report. Sign up for a FREE 2-month trial and discover Voice Report's full spectrum of in-depth reporting on wireless devices and mobility management, as well as contract negotiation, expense auditing, fixed network maintenance and much more! Sign up @ www.thevoicereport.com/FreeTrial

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