

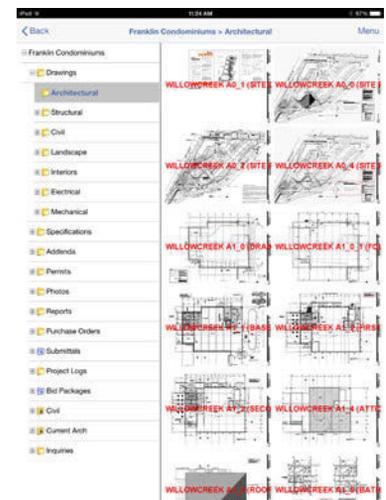
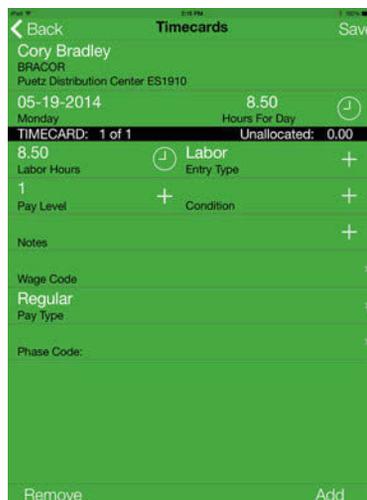
Widening the App: Developers Extend the Value Of Management Software

BY JOHN CHANEY

With literally thousands of mobile apps developed for nearly every kind of medium, the catch phrase “There’s an app for that” became so popular that Apple actually trademarked it back in 2009.

Apps have continued to add functionality and depth in the last few years. Today’s business-friendly apps allow people to communicate collaboratively on a project, enter or share data, pay bills or receive payments, arrange meetings, take digital notes, pay employees, plan events and so much more.

In the construction industry, mobile apps are being used to connect the field and the office. Contractors are using apps as part of their larger software systems for business, project and equipment management. Like the world at large, apps designed for construction now come in many different “flavors.” Many are single-task-oriented, best suited for one purpose or function. Others are integrated with larger software systems, allowing the user to access critical data or perform some software functions on mobile



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In addition to developing apps that can be used for remote payroll time entry and viewing construction documents on mobile devices, software vendors are beginning to give users the tools to design apps that streamline their own information and workflows.

devices. And some of the apps starting to appear in the market are changing the way construction software itself can function.

Task Trending

Many of the apps that exist today were designed to manage a single task rather than execute a flow of processes. In fact, this was the original intent of the app: a digital tool to effect a singular function.

It’s what most people today think of when they hear the term app.

This type of app certainly has merit for construction companies. For example, there are apps that can quickly do utility conversions on a smartphone or tablet, record jobsite incidents, take detailed measurements of rooms or materials, or perform formula-based calculations for electrical, carpentry or plumbing work.

These tools have helped speed up projects by making once-manual tasks more efficient and accurate. They have practical, albeit largely one-dimensional, applications in the field that give workers more flexibility. Yet, there is a limit in terms of their overall value. Once information is recorded or calculations are made, that data still needs to be re-entered into other, more powerful software solutions to crunch the numbers or share the information among the entire project team.

Integrated Approach

Seeing the value in apps, software developers have begun integrating them with more powerful solutions, or creating mobile apps designed to work with more complex systems. These integrated apps are still an emerging technology, but their business value cannot be denied.

Integrated apps are still generally single-task-oriented (or perhaps perform a series of small tasks). However, their functionality and usefulness is backed by more powerful systems. For instance, construction companies can now feed data and documents from project management systems directly to workers in the field on their mobile devices. Documents, plans, specs and other data can be accessed immediately with a mobile connection, eliminating paperwork in the field that can get lost or revised to the point of incomprehension. Other apps

allow field personnel to enter payroll information or equipment information, synching to the back-end accounting software to update data instantly.

These apps are playing a significant role in creating a “mobile office” where all of the project data is available to everyone that needs to see it, no matter where they are. These apps eliminate the need to wait for emails to be returned before a question can get answered or an issue can be resolved. They are making it possible to keep field data up to date without the burden and errors inherent in manual re-entry.

Like the standalone app, integrated apps save time and improve efficiency, but on a much more powerful level. They can serve as the vehicle to streamline entire projects, not just single tasks.

Changing the Game

The next step in app evolution involves putting the user in control. Software vendors are beginning to give users the tools to design apps that streamline their own information and workflows in ways that are most relevant to their business.

In some examples of this emerging trend, users can create their own custom information dashboards within their construction management software by choosing from pre-built apps. Or, they may have the ability to customize or create their own specialized apps, bringing together

information they need to see and functionality they need to have.

These developments can expand the use of construction software to everyone in a company. Through dashboards and customized apps, data relevant to specific individuals or teams can be accessed instantly without having to dive deep into a software system. When pertinent data on a project such as cash flow or revenue projections need to be communicated, or critical tasks need to be addressed such as work orders or unresolved correspondence, a contractor can deliver that information straight to the end-user’s dashboard.

With the increasing use of cloud computing and the ubiquity of mobile devices in the field, apps and dashboards can be accessed anywhere there is an Internet connection. Many also can be used offline when no connection exists and then synchronized with the company’s management software when connections are reestablished. As the recording, tracking and consumption of data shifts more to the field, look for app development usage to continue to expand, extending the value of a company’s business and operations management software and helping keep everyone working from the same digital page. 

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