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Rene Lacerte • Aug. 01, 2010

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It's summertime, and it's hot. So it only seems appropriate to be thinking about cooling off with a dip in the pool. The problem is that I can't pull myself away from the Internet and all the applications that are now available for small businesses to run their business. All kidding aside, I'm not sure if you have noticed or not, but the Internet is swimming in applications for small businesses and stores from which to buy them.

Apple's success with its app store has spurred lots of interest from large companies in creating "stores" to connect their primary product with other applications that could bring them more customers and/or revenue. There is an additional benefit to the large company in that small developers can build many more applications than they could ever hope to. They can watch and see which ones get traction and then more deeply integrate the functionality into their product. Smaller developers get a market and access to many more customers for their products and services. Best of all, customers are closer to the holy grail of customized software for their business.

In the old days, businesses had to buy software from a big retail chain. Software companies had to pay for the shelf space. Unfortunately for businesses, consumers outnumber us and, as such, shelf space is mostly dedicated to consumers and very little is for business. This meant that the shelf space was quite expensive. Small developers focused on a niche application or a vertical market were out of luck. The only ones that got to market were the ones that commanded a high enough price

that they could afford a direct sales force. Even Intuit had to leverage its consumer

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the connectivity goals and needs that businesses have.

Businesses need data to be shared between applications. We want the sales order to turn into the invoice to turn into money. We are in the early stages of this development, and the folks at Salesforce are leading the charge.

Salesforce gets the credit for being the first major player to see the benefit to its customers of sharing the data. The company launched its AppExchange site several years before Apple's App Store. They now have more than 1,000 applications that integrate with the customer relationship manager data that Salesforce is all about. These applications make Salesforce a better product. One example is EchoSign, which turns sales orders into signed contracts over the Internet. There is no paper involved, and everything is linked to the customer record in Salesforce. And Salesforce is just the beginning of this type of integration.

Of course, there is the granddaddy of all web companies, Google. Google has 30,000 apps for the Android, but more importantly it launched its app store for businesses earlier this year. Google is integrating its business tools such as enterprise email, spreadsheets, presentations and word documents with all the apps in its marketplace. At a minimum, applications must be integrated with a single sign-on mechanism. And at best, they can be integrated seamlessly with your email, calendar or other documents. Imagine logging into Gmail one day and seeing every date-based event, from meetings to upcoming payables and receivables, listed on the same calendar with no separate logins! These are capabilities that even the largest enterprises do not have today!

Intuit has also seen the light and launched its Intuit Partner Platform last year. Given that most of your customers probably use QuickBooks, this could be the most critical for you. Intuit's strategy is to get applications that share the data on the desktop in the cloud. Obviously, this will lead to more collaboration with your clients and

better access to data remotely. Some of the apps range from sharing documents to

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possible because of the simplicity of delivering applications over the Internet using a SaaS model.

One thing I hear often is concern from accountants that all of these new, easy features will somehow diminish their value proposition to their clients. Nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, they increase your value. The availability of these applications will make it much easier to work efficiently with your clients by enabling better information sharing and paperless collaboration and allow your clients to focus on their businesses. But these apps don't do the hard work and hard thinking for them.

Small businesses look to their accountants for advice and expertise. The opportunity to consult and add value in setting up the best practices and business plans for a business is a huge opportunity. As is the ability to get deeper into a client's day-to-day operations such as paying bills and managing receivables to help them make better decisions every day, rather than every month or quarter. Maybe it's time for you to jump into the pool of apps so you can leverage them in your practice?

Happy Swimming!

Technology

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