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Call for smart phone apps answered in Houston

Area has pool of talent needed to make it a hub

By PURVA PATEL
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Jan. 11, 2010, 8:01AM



Eric Kayne Chronicle

Mohammad Anwar, of the Houston firm Softway Solutions, says apps demand is like Web site demand 10 years ago.

Want to count calories, diagnose car trouble or kill time fighting an imaginary war? There's a Houston-made app for that.

As sales of smart phones continue to grow, local technology advocates hope to make Houston a hotbed for developing mobile applications.

"It's where all the new innovations are happening," said Kurt Stoll, co-founder of Startup Houston, a local blog that promotes

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Houston technology, and an organizer of an upcoming **app development camp**. "Houston is not going to establish itself as the next Web 2.0 or social media hub. That boat's already sailed to several other cities."

Nationwide, developers have already produced more than 100,000 apps for Apple's iPhone and 20,000 for the Android platform.

And the market for apps is poised to grow. Research firm Gartner predicts 38 percent of all mobile phone sales will be smart phones by 2012, up from 14 percent in 2009.

Early mobile apps in the U.S. came from Silicon Valley, New York and Boston, according to Gartner.

But because Houston also has a large software development community, especially around the energy and health care industries, creating phone apps here makes sense, said William Clark, a research vice president at Gartner.

"You have that skill base, and it's a logical way to train your developers," he said.

Locally, individual entrepreneurs and established firms are banking on everything from games to health care to engineering apps.

Development costs

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Multimedia firms like Houston-based Softway Solutions also have added mobile app development to their repertoire as they see more businesses set aside marketing budgets for customized apps.

“Ten years ago, everyone had to have a Web site. Today, everyone has to have an app,” said Mohammad Anwar, president of Softway Solutions, which sells apps including a war game and a news aggregator.

Low development costs help level the playing field for Houston, said Blair Garrou, a managing director at DFJ Mercury, a local venture capital firm that's invested in several companies creating mobile apps.

Houston may not be any more unique than other cities, but its size alone should give it a large talent pool, he said, adding that many local software developers work for larger, established companies.

“It's just taking a little longer here to coax those people out of big companies,” he said.

It may become easier as developers see there's money to be made.

Paid apps will account for about one in four downloads in 2013, according to research firm Yankee Group. Revenues from apps will grow to more than \$4.2 billion in the next five years, according to the firm, as consumers grow comfortable paying more for valuable apps.

Both Apple and Google, which runs the Android Market, take a 30 percent cut of sales made through their app stores.

Locally, there's also a huge market to sell niche

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apps within the Texas Medical Center, said Ioannis Pavlidis, who teaches an iPhone app design class at the University of Houston.

Such targeted apps include the Blausen Human Atlas, which lets users access narrated animations of more than 100 common medical conditions and treatments.

The tool, developed by Houston-based Blausen Medical, is meant to help doctors quickly explain medical issues to patients. The \$19.99 app has already been downloaded more than 29,000 times, the company said.

Apps camp plans

Local techies hope an upcoming iPhone app development camp, the city's first, will help foster a sense of community. A local iPhone development group founded a year ago has 150 members.

The camp is modeled after those held in California, called iPhoneDevCamp, where developers attend sessions on creating apps for Apple's hand-held devices, the iPhone and iPod Touch. The Houston event will also include an overnight “hackathon,” a lockdown of sorts in which developers try to come up with an iPhone app, from idea to working software.

Whether Houston makes a name for itself as a development hub may not really matter, said Tyson Weihs, a Houston private equity

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investment adviser and founder of ForeFlight, which has developed seven apps for pilots.

"I'm not sure we need the affirmation outside of Houston, or Texas for that matter, to inspire people here to do really great things," he said. "Since all you need is a laptop, a couple co-collaborators, and an Internet connection to build and publish mobile apps, you can really do that from anywhere.

"I think Houston's a great place to do that from -- low cost of living, great food, great culture, great people, successful people, access to the outdoors, a direct flight to almost anywhere, and a supportive technology community."

purva.patel@chron.com

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