



Process Solutions

Tom Bellinson

President
UnaPage

tom@unapage.com

Goin' Mobile

Out in the woods
Or in the city
It's all the same to me
When I'm drivin' free, the world's my
Home
When I'm mobile

■ Pete Townsend (The Who)

In 1971 these were prophetic words by a philosopher/musician. While we're at it, let's quote Joel Walsh five years later (he had no idea how fast things could get):

Life in the fast lane
Surely make you lose your mind
Life in the fast lane, everything all the time

In a [May 2, 2012 NY Times article](#), the executive director of the Global Business Travel Association reported that in 2011 business people took 447 million trips. That is a lot of moving around. That figure does not take into consideration local travel, telecommuting or employees working between remote offices. What is clear is that business folks are on the move.

What is also clear is that we can no longer take a traditional view of business process automation. Certainly, there are pockets of process stakeholders that are less mobile: production line employees, customer service representatives and clerical people. However, managers, salespeople, quality management and even engineering folks are more mobile than ever.

Recognizing this, most software vendors have moved their user interfaces increasingly to a web based environment. Browser based environments initially seemed like the ultimate answer. Those of us in the software design business quickly learned otherwise. At one point, almost every business user could be counted on to have Microsoft's Internet Explorer browser. As long as your software worked with IE, you were good to go.

Eventually, Mozilla Firefox caught on. Then, Google introduced Chrome. Now, Apple's Safari browser has seen resurgence. While all of these browsers are supposed to support common standards, they don't all get it quite right. As a result, software that works in one environment may not work the same using a different browser.

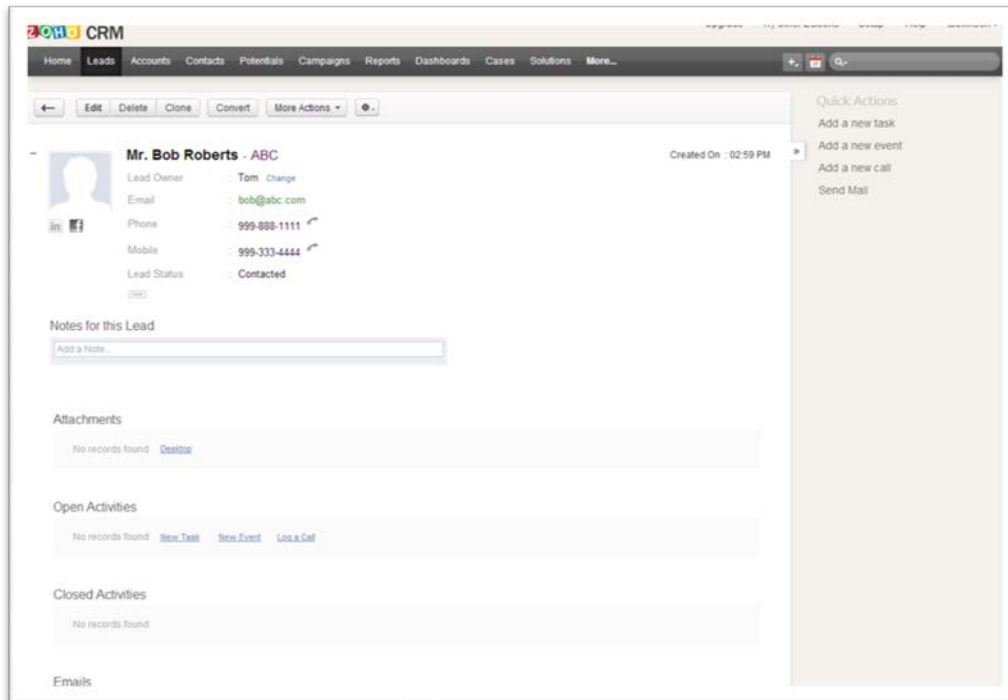
When people are sitting in their offices on your computer, this isn't such a big problem. But, when you have people using home computers, hotel computers, and computers in customer and vendor locations, you can't dictate their browser so easily. This problem might be surmountable if everyone was using a PC, but that isn't even a trustworthy assumption. Increasingly, business

people are relying on smartphones and tablets as their computing engines. These devices have scaled down browsers that behave differently.

Furthermore, smartphones and tablets have come to rely much less on browser based content and have moved to an “app” environment. Applications on these devices are often no more than a modified presentation layer of a web based application. Apps allow developers to package the interface to take advantage of specific features of the device and manage the limited screen real estate that is so often available, especially with on-screen keyboards.

What it looks like

Let’s take a look at what this means. Since my last BPTrends Column was about CRM, we will stay with that theme for a moment. Here’s a typical PC screen; this one brought to you by Zoho, a popular web based CRM system.

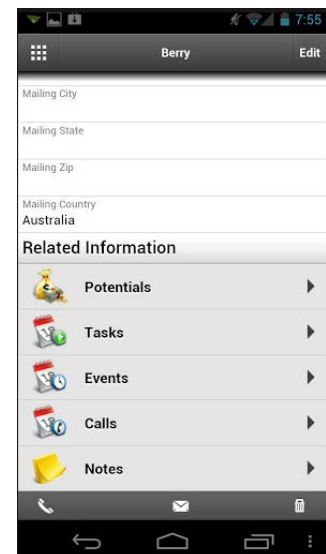


Naturally, this format will not be effective on a smartphone. The good folks at Zoho realized this so they built a special interface just for smartphones. It looks like this.

The menu across the top has been replaced with a vertical menu. This format is far more usable on a small screen. Of course the challenge for software developers is that this Android app won’t work on an iPhone or a Blackberry or a Microsoft Windows 8 phone. Further, some firms have developed separate interfaces for tablets even though the smartphone interfaces will often work on them.

The world has definitely gotten more challenging for software developers. This translates to a more complex buying decision when you look to automate your processes. Should you expect apps for all the mobile devices in use within your organization? Can you settle for browser based interfaces that have mobile formats?

There are tools such as Microsoft SharePoint that are great for



automating processes. While there are third party applications to reformat data for smartphones, Microsoft provides the ability to define alternate screen layouts for mobile devices. The designer fills out a simple form:

Mobile
Adjust mobile settings for this view.

Enable this view for mobile access
(Applies to public views only)

Make this view the default view for mobile access
(Applies to public views only)

Number of items to display in list view web part for this view:
3

Field to display in mobile list simple view:
Announcement Title (linked to item with edit menu)

Web address for this mobile view:
http://dev.unapage.com:8000/_layouts/mobile/view.aspx?
List=6df486a1%2D1d68%2D4da4%2Db417%
2D171c56a4ca25&View=b90768b0%2Dfddb%2D493a%2Dab6d%
2D07a8c431a2bc

And, SharePoint does the rest automatically. The results aren't always great, but it is certainly functional most of the time.

With a growing number of suites in the business process management system (BPMS) space, there are bound to be additional players offering native mobile solutions. Appian, one of the better known BPMS products recently release application interfaces for Apple's IOS, Google's Android and the RIM Blackberry environments. This should be a major factor in your decision to purchase a BPMS system. For the mobile user, there's just nothing like a good "app."

Security on the Open Road

After getting your process automation application deployed to all these mobile devices, maybe the biggest challenge of all is managing security amidst a world full of disparate devices. Phones and tablets are rarely protected from intruders. If the company issues these devices, there are options for managing them, but a new term has emerged: BYOD (bring your own device) and more employees are choosing to do so (or expected to do so).

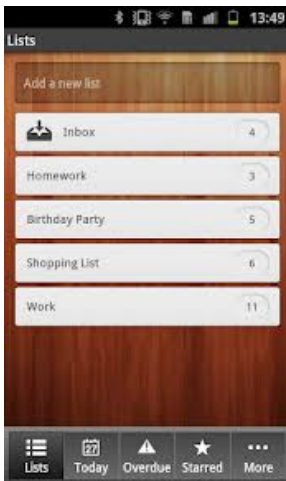
Google has offered a solution for their devices that allows a remote wipe in case of a loss. Apple's IOS devices have a feature called "Find My Phone," which can perform the same function. Even if your firm mandates the use of these features, there is no way to police it (although, if you use Google's business application services, you can manage Android devices centrally).

It is likely that every PC and laptop in your environment has some sort of virus protection. What about mobile devices? In [a February 8, 2011 article in the U.K.'s Telegraph](#), Christopher Williams reports that in 2010, mobile viruses were up 45%. There is no reason to believe this trend will abate. As these devices proliferate and become more integrated into everyone's life, malicious hackers will find them a more enticing target. Most of the major virus protection software companies offer mobile versions of their products, but they are still not widely deployed.

Distractions and Liabilities

Finally, you need to look at the functionality of the process automation tools on smartphones in particular. How tempting is it to pull up the latest sales figure spreadsheet while you're stuck in traffic? Maybe that's an extreme example, but the reality is people use their smartphones in places and at times where being distracted can be rude or even dangerous.

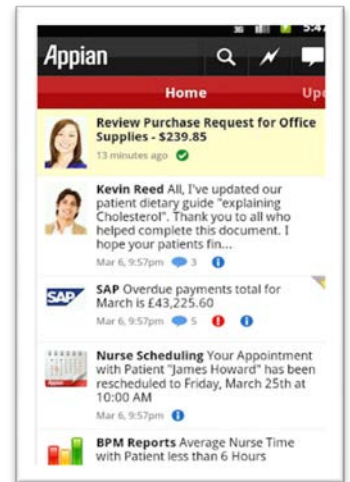
One way to mitigate the risk of disaster is to make sure that users can take care of business at a glance and with a few touches. Obviously, you will want to encourage safe operating practices, but some people will not listen to "suggestions." Would you want to be reading the screen on the right while driving down the expressway?



Something like the image on the left might be a bit more suitable. Unfortunately, this is just a personal task manager called Wunderlist. Most BPMS software has not yet figured out how to simplify the interface for mobile users. This is development that should be encouraged if you are already using a BPMS.

As far as I'm aware, nobody has tested the legal waters regarding liability of having mandatory distracting business applications on mobile devices; probably because no attorney has thought of it just yet. In our litigious society, it is only a matter of time. Regardless of that eventuality, it is a service to your employees to ensure tools that are optimized for the environment in which they are likely to find themselves.

Like the hippy gypsies of the 60's, today's mobile warriors must travel light and be on their toes. Lightness is not just about the devices, but also the applications on them. The field is a dangerous place filled with strangers and hostile environments. It is up to the decision makers to ensure that the tools used in the field are not just warmed over versions of the desktop tools used back at the office.



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