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Mobile Center of Excellence: Minding Your Flock of Mobile Apps

TECH SPOTLIGHT

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A mobile application can be an incredibly valuable thing. Out of all the different classes of digital technology Clientek delivers to our clients, mobile apps are probably the most user-requested and hotly anticipated. Even a simple one feels powerful and valuable if it's yours - showing your branding, running on your device, delivered by your team. The enthusiasm and instant gratification associated with these apps can be a double-edged sword, though. A new app rushed into the hands of users with an anemic or totally absent maintenance plan can quickly turn into a liability or an embarrassment and those challenges can outweigh the app's value. Equally likely is that a team can embark on the creation of a mobile app and embrace an unproven or casually chosen development platform which doesn't support their long-term goals, resulting in an eventual expensive pivot. There's a long list of potential challenges and bummers lurking here.

We advocate for the establishment of Mobile Centers of Excellence (MCoE) within organizations that plan to play in the mobile space. Because of the low barrier to entry and primarily self-service nature of mobile app publishing, it's actually very easy to release something you're not done with or haven't planned to maintain. An MCoE is a lighthouse to keep you from getting stranded in a state like that - in this article, I'll break down the central concepts of a MCoE and hopefully share some understanding of their core requirements.

Establishing Mobile App Team Expertise

- *Expertise in Mobile App Development:* The posterchild of app team expertise is the ability to effectively deliver an app that functions. Easier said than done, depending on the goals. Your MCoE should house a group of developers

who fit your organization and provide coverage for all the activities you need.

- *Expertise in Existing Apps:* I'd argue this is more valuable than superlative development capacity. If you're not an expert in the capabilities, goals, and histories of the apps you already have, you don't stand much of a chance of maintaining them or understanding them when they break. Be ruthless about closing gaps in understanding so you can close them once.
- *Expertise in Planning for Apps:* This isn't naming a specific plan you need to create; this is naming a core competency that has to be accounted for in your MCoE. Your organization needs to be able to access a consistent internal voice who can (convincingly) lay out the difference between a situation where a mobile app is a good option, and a situation where it it's a liability.

Applying Best Practices

- *Knowing Best Practices by their Price:* This means leveraging best practices and guidelines in a way that is productive and efficient for the organization's goals. Best practices should originate from your MCoE- but it will wreak havoc if these practices are chosen lightly or idealistically. Every best practice in the history of the world has come with a price tag - they take time and energy to compose, apply, and enforce. Every best practice you introduce must allow you to save energy somewhere else. If it doesn't, it's a worst practice or a just-for-fun practice.



- *Avoiding an Abundance Mindset:* An extension of the above idea, best practices for mobile are easy to think about and they feel good. The mobile space is complex, and you can probably rationalize and justify just about any practice. They can also get engineers excited. There's nothing wrong with that but spawning best practices without thinking critically about each of them will leave you dragging a wet blanket on the road to your goal. The MCoE needs to be that extremely realistic, extremely critical mediator of these practices.
- *Keep it Empirical:* There's no excuse for instituting a best practice without identifying how its impact will be measured. It's 2025, the telemetry is all there. If your apps are plagued by crashes and bad reviews, launch one or two well-chosen best practices that are totally designed to focus on those challenges.

Getting Serious about User Experience

- *Harvest what's Planted:* There's no need to found a new visual system just for the sake of a mobile app, even though sometimes it may seem that way. The MCoE shouldn't necessarily require a lot of new visual design or experience design investment - but it absolutely should take advantage of existing creative material and graphic standards from anything that isn't a mobile app in your organization.
- *Insist on Fundamentals:* After setting up basic visual standards, most if not all remaining decisions about how a mobile app should deliver a specific experience to a user should be dictated by fundamentals. The MCoE should provide a voice that says "thanks, but no" to any talk of developing a custom in-house date-picker. The MCoE instead advocates for effectively using existing ones likely already familiar to users.
- *Avoiding an Abundance Mindset (again):* Mobile apps have an exciting, tactile valence and they fly straight into the hands of users. The MCoE can put mobile app work in context for other business units, and that means sometimes pushing back on extreme investments aimed at pleasing or surprising the user. A nice picture isn't so nice when it's drawn with a waste-of-money pen.

Roadmapping and Planning for Mobile

- You have other organizational roadmaps, your MCoE should produce one for mobile. That means more than just apps. Most other roadmaps don't need to include an awareness of the release dates of new consumer electronics, this one does. The MCoE needs to make educated decisions about supporting device classes, families, and generations. They all have a cost.

- *Longevity:* Your app will have a maintenance cost for the duration of its active life. Think about how long you expect your apps to be relevant for and be realistic about the passive cost they come with.
- *Deliberate Consideration of Platforms:* One of the initial challenges of a new MCoE is making decisions about supporting device platforms. Your organization can deliver the most valuable mobile apps to the most users at the lowest cost if your MCoE can facilitate decisions about these platforms. Do you need to develop a cross-platform application? Why or why not?
- *Knowledge of Distribution Models:* Delivering a mobile app to users differs from delivering a web app. Internally distributed apps rely on (often complex) internal marketplaces that can be costly to maintain. Publicly distributed apps are distributed through gatekeepers who can pull your app down at any time, or decline to publish it in the first place. Distribution is something to think through in great detail and plan for.



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