

Apps now key to small-business savings

August 21 2012, By Edward C. Baig

Theater design consultant Joshua Allen doesn't routinely travel the country with a laptop for work anymore. The Apple iPad has become Allen's go-to traveling companion. "At first I was hesitant," he said. But then, "My bag got so much lighter ... and my chiropractor bill went down."

What made lightening the load possible for Allen and his colleagues at Raleigh, N.C.-based Theatre Consultants Collaborative are the numerous apps designed for the iPad to help folks operating smaller enterprises conduct business. Allen relies on at least a half-dozen apps that help him take notes, consult architectural drawings and even see behind walls.

Indeed, for all the attention that the iPad gets as a play device that lets you browse the Web, read books, watch movies and knock down a few pigs with "Angry Birds," more and more people at the wheel of small companies are turning to Apple's popular tablet for productive purposes, while potentially saving the business time and money.

Yankee Group analyst Carl Howe says 72 percent of businesses that have tablets are using the iPad. And the iPad boasts by far the largest number of productivity apps for tablets, leaving Microsoft, [Google's](#) Android operating system, and [Research In Motion's](#) BlackBerry to play catch-up.

Apple has been pushing the iPad's business virtues and along the way trying to woo the small-business crowd with some of its own apps. Most notably, there's the optional iWork suite consisting of iPad versions of the Numbers spreadsheet, Pages word processor and Keynote

presentation program, each \$9.99.

But small businesses are increasingly summoning apps from outside developers that turn the iPad into an all-purpose hub for telephony, communications and e-commerce, and a gateway to the PC at the office - or to all the files stored in the cloud, through such services as Box, [Dropbox](#) and SugarSync.

The scope of business apps for the iPad is as broad as the companies and entrepreneurs that take advantage of them. A company might bill a customer through the iPad using an app such as Invoice2go, scan business cards and receipts through Pixoft's TurboScan and keep tabs on customers through FileMaker's recently redesigned Bento 4 database.

Most people don't think of the iPad as a phone. But several apps can let it function as one. Donnie Clapp, communications manager at MercuryCSC, an outdoors-oriented communications and public relations firm in Bozeman, Mont., says the company got rid of its traditional - and pricey - land-line PBX phone system and is now using the Line2 app from Toktumi on iPads, the iPhone and on desktop PCs. It lets iPad owners place calls over Wi-Fi or cellular networks. There are free and pay-as-you-go plans, and businesses can hold conference calls for up to 20 people. "A lot of us carry iPads around to meetings, and it's nice to have our phones with us," Clapp said.

Some apps are meant to appeal to both businesses and consumers. As it is on other devices, the Skype app for the iPad is as much an inexpensive way for folks to keep in touch with relatives and friends who may be living or traveling overseas, as it is for businesses who want to stay in touch with commercial contacts in foreign countries, all in full-screen video.

Jennifer Plotnek, a lead behavior coach at Retrofit Weight Loss in

Chicago, said, "I use my iPad all the time to Skype, as do my clients. I have had clients use their iPad to meet with me in airports, cabs, cars and offices."

But some apps spell business all the way. The free Roambi Analytics Visualizer from MeLLmo, for example, lets companies produce trend and sales performance charts in a handsome visual dashboard.

Companies such as Square, Intuit and PayPal produce apps and mobile credit card readers that plug into the audio jack on the iPad and let merchants swipe customer credit cards. Square charges 2.75 percent per swipe for American Express, Discover, MasterCard and Visa cards, or \$275 a month under a new flat pricing plan that eliminates per-swipe fees for small businesses that process up to \$250,000 a year.

Of course, it's still pretty rare for businesses to ditch the longstanding tools of the trade altogether in favor of a slate, even one as versatile as the iPad. So the iPad more often than not complements desktop PCs, laptops and smartphones rather than totally replacing those devices. Indeed, while most of the business people USA Today talked to showered high praise on the iPad, the lack of a physical keyboard is still an impediment in some instances.

"The biggest change is the app stores on post-PC devices," said Sarah Rotman Epps, an analyst at Forrester. "Small-business workers can buy apps directly from the developers through the app stores, so they have access to a wider variety of tools (at lower prices) than they had in the PC era, all optimized for mobile devices."

A slew of rival tablet makers are hoping to loosen Apple's dominant grip on the market. The Windows 8-based RT Surface tablet that Microsoft unveiled in June, and is expected to start selling in the fall, is targeted at the mobile professional. Samsung's new Galaxy Note 10.1 tablet comes

with an "S Pen" that business people can use to draw or take notes. And Lenovo sells the business-oriented ThinkPad Tablet, an Android device with a digitizer pen.

A Forrester survey of 10,000 information workers in 17 countries, conducted at the end of 2011, found that 24 percent of workers at small businesses, defined as 20 to 99 employees, use a touch-screen tablet for work.

And Forrester found that numerous productivity apps are equally as popular if not more so on tablets as on PCs, including note-taking apps, social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn), team document-sharing sites (SharePoint, eRoom, Lotus Quickr) and Web meeting or Web conferencing (Cisco WebEx Meetings, GoToMeeting).

According to a recent Yankee Group survey, email, database, corporate instant messaging and Web conferencing are the most common types of apps used on tablets by businesses of 50 people or fewer, though the overall percentage use of any given app category is modest. For example, just 14 percent of the businesses use tablet apps for email, and 8 percent use them for databases.

But Howe sees those percentages growing quickly. "Tablets are fundamentally reinventing business software and, in that process, business itself. We sometimes forget we're only two years into the tablet revolution - the equivalent of 1980 in the PC era - and yet the tablet is already the center of new software development."

Other ways that apps are helping businesses to operate more efficiently.

-Task management. Baltimore wedding photographer Cayne Zimmerman and his wife, Christine, employ Bento 4 for the iPad to help manage his client database and stay on top of contracts, invoices and

notes. Zimmerman says he investigated Web-based alternatives but found they weren't as conducive. Zimmerman is also high on OmniFocus for iPad, which he describes as "bread-and-butter task-manager software that's intertwined into my daily activities." Among other features, the \$19.99 app from The Omni Group lets him organize tasks into projects and folders and conduct location-aware task lists that can remind him of something he needs to do when he's at a specific location.

-Time savings. In Austin, real estate brokerage owner Krisstina Wise is partial to DocuSign, a popular app that lets customers sign contracts digitally. It has become a common practice in her field. Wise still encounters situations - certain short-sale transactions or foreclosures come to mind - where banks want people to sign on actual paper with an actual pen.

But "it's rare that we need an ink signature anymore," she said.

"DocuSign has become a verb in our (15-person sales) office. 'OK, we're DocuSigning it.' We pretty much run our business on the iPad." Given the nature of her business, Wise also uses such real estate search apps as the Realtor.com app from Move Inc. and Zillow Real Estate, both free.

Allen's firm is hired by architects seeking help designing performing arts facilities. Among his favorite apps is Notesshelf, a \$5.99 handwriting note-taker from Ramki, that he says is terrific for "sketching things up. I set up a notebook for each project."

Allen also doesn't think he could live without GoodReader and Evernote. The former lets Allen read and mark up the many PDF documents that he comes across on the job - the app costs \$4.99 and is from Good.iWare. Allen relies on the free Evernote app in part to capture voice notes at meetings that he can then sync back to his computer. "We use Evernote religiously," he says.

AutoCAD WS is also in Allen's rotation, as a free app to share AutoCAD computer-aided design drawings.

Still another [app](#) he puts to work from time-to-time is Duplicam for iPad from DanCreek Design. Used in conjunction with the iPhone, Duplicam lets Allen wirelessly view and control the camera on the iPhone from the tablet. That way if he's involved in a construction project and sees a hole in a wall, he can stick his hand inside the cavity with the phone and turn on a flashlight. He can then see on the iPad what the iPhone is seeing inside, capturing video or photos along the way. It's helpful to check out wiring behind walls, he says, that would not otherwise be easily visible.

It's feats like those that make it evident to Allen - and numerous other people working at small and modest-size companies - that tablets mean business.

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