

‘Social mobile’ applications: The missing book

Ken Banks, IDG News

If you were thinking of designing or building a website, you’d be in luck. If you were thinking of writing a suite of financial management software, you’d be in luck. If you were even thinking of creating the next big video game, you’d be in luck. Visit any good bookstore and the selection of self-help books and “how-to” guides leave you spoilt for choice. People have been working on these things for ages, and good and bad practice in website, financial software or games development – among many others – is well established. The biggest challenge you’d likely face is deciding which book to choose. If you’re anything like me you’ll leave the store with at least a couple.

Unlike the plethora of self-help guides on the more established topics, if you were looking to do something with mobile phones you’d likely have mixed results. There are plenty of books available extolling the virtues of Java, Python, Ruby, Ruby on Rails, C++, Symbian, Android and just about any other development environment or platform out there. Combine that with the growing field of mobile UI (user interface) design and you’d think that pretty much everything was covered. But there is one thing missing, although you’d probably only notice if you’re one of a growing number of developers turning their attention to the developing world.

Over the past few months I’ve started to see something very interesting happening. Conferences which traditionally focus on “design for the developing world” are beginning to see the challenges of mobile applications development in the same light as those faced by people building more tangible products such as solar charges or water pumps. This is something of a sea change in thinking, and a critical one at that. Building a good appropriate technology – say, a water irrigation system for a rural Ugandan village – will on the surface present a very different set of challenges than those faced if you were trying to build a mobile health application for the same people.

Or would it?

Approach and best practice are cornerstones of “design for the developing world” as a discipline, and that’s where the similarities lie. Books like Paul Polak’s “Out of Poverty” can – and should – be adapted to fill the growing literature gap in the so-called “social mobile” space. If, as a developer, I can get hold of infinite numbers of books on the intricacies of mobile programming languages or user interface design, why is it so hard to find similar sources of information on how to build applications that have the best possible chance of being successfully deployed and adopted in the developing world?

Part of the reason is that many people are still trying to figure this out. Mobiles do present the ICT4D community with a huge opportunity to help some of the poorest and marginalised members of society, but the “mobiles for development” sub-discipline is still a relatively new one, and people at

all levels are still trying to figure out what this new mobile opportunity really means. For all the talk of shared learning and for all the conferences and workshops, to the man on the street – or the developer in the bookshop – there is strikingly little to show for it.

There's enough knowledge residing in a growing community of developers – many of whom are successfully deploying mobile applications in the developing world – to produce quite a compelling “how-to” guide. Beyond the few success stories, true progress in the “social mobile” space will come only when we start to openly discuss best practices in the thinking and design of mobile projects and applications, rather than obsessing over the end products or projects themselves.

This topic, I believe, is the missing book. The “design for the developing world” community has cottoned on to this, and now it's the turn of the ICT4D community, and the mobile practitioners within it, to do the same. After several years of largely independent learning, it's time to pool knowledge and resources and ensure that developers of the future make best use of what we know succeeds, and what we know fails.

[This](#) might be a start.

Ken Banks, founder of kiwanja.net, devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and is currently working on a number of mobile projects funded by the Hewlett Foundation. Ken was awarded a Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship in 2006, and named a Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellow in 2008. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at www.kiwanja.net