

MOBILE9 APPLICATIONS

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Developing applications for new Internet-enabled, wireless consumer products, such as cellular phones and two-way pagers, poses an entirely new set of challenges for user interface (UI) designers and software developers. If you fall into either of these categories, and have a background in developing software for desktop computers and workstations, you may be called upon to use your skills to develop new applications and wireless services for these consumer devices. Or, your company may ask you to develop software for use on devices issued to its sales force, field service representatives, or other corporate road warriors.

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To some extent, knowledge gained by working with larger, more powerful systems is transferable. But consumer devices also bring with them special requirements that you quite possibly may never have encountered in the world of workstations and desktop computers. There are a number of key issues that center on the technology as well as the users of the technology.

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Because of limited screen size, memory, and processing power, wireless technology sets limits on what can be accomplished. Developing new applications for these devices will require ingenuity. Along with technology constraints, you must also respond to the expectations of your end users — consumers. Unlike workstation or desktop users who are accustomed to working with big screens, large amounts of memory, and relatively complex technology, consumers want devices that are simple, intuitive, and reliable. For them, rebooting a cell phone in the middle of a conversation or conducting an online stock transaction just isn't acceptable. Even corporate users who are highly computer literate have the same expectations of simplicity, reliability, and ease of use when it comes to their wireless devices.

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When a typical user sits down at the keyboard of a desktop computer or a workstation, he or she knows that despite the efforts of the manufacturers to make their systems user friendly, a certain level of technical competence will be necessary. Applications must be installed, Internet and other networking connectivity navigated, and inevitable crashes dealt with. Within an enterprise, PC users have access to nearly unlimited storage, GUIs that can accommodate multiple windows simultaneously, and keyboards and mice that make handling

data and applications fast and easy. If all else fails, technical support is only a phone call away. A person who uses a PC at work is effectively being paid to put up with the system's idiosyncrasies — it comes with the territory.

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At home it's a different story. A consumer's level of expertise is more than likely much less than that of a power user in the corporate world. Even though over 60 percent of U.S. households now have a personal computer (and that percentage is growing), compared to computers in the workplace, these home PCs are used far less often, have fewer applications, and perform far less complex activities. Outside of North America, the penetration rate of PCs in households is considerably lower — for example, 20 percent in Japan — while a higher percentage of people own wireless devices. When it comes to consumer devices, it's a whole new ball game. The level of the consumer's PC expertise does not really come into play. Metaphors and models borrowed from desktop environments usually don't work. Many consumers may not be familiar with such desktop staples as pop-up menus, scroll bars, drag and drop functionality, and a rich desktop GUI. Even computer-savvy workers who know their way around a PC have different expectations when they interact with a consumer product. Psychologically, the fact that consumers spend their own money to purchase a TV, cell phone, or new game box makes them far less tolerant of products that demand that the user adapt to its mode of operation, rather than the other way around.

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If an application asks for more abstract commands than there are available buttons, the MID Profile reference implementation, for example, uses another UI mechanism, the menu, to make the commands accessible to the user. The overflow of abstract commands is placed in a menu and the label Menu1 is mapped on to one of the programmable buttons. Other device implementations may use a menu mechanism or other method to handle the overflow of abstract commands.

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