

This Week's Stories

Google Looking for a Few Good Mobile-app Developers

January 30, 2011

Google is recruiting developers to work in-house on mobile apps for its Android operating system, a report says, as the tech giant continues its challenge to Apple's iOS and the popular devices that run on it.

Benjamin Ling, a Google product-management director, has been supervising an attempt to coax software engineers, user-interface specialists, and product managers into the Google fold, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing unnamed sources.

The Journal added that some current Google workers have shifted their positions at the company to join the app project, which will be spread across Google's global offices and cover everything from Angry Birds-like games to Foursquare-like check-in apps. The resulting apps will probably be free, with ads included to generate revenue, the Journal said.

The mobile battle has been heating up for Google and cross-Valley rival Apple. Google has been breathing down Apple's neck in the smartphone market, and some say tablets such as Motorola's Xoom, which run on Google's "Honeycomb" OS for tablets, might well give the wildly popular iPad a run for the money.

Apple, meanwhile, is finally offering up the iPhone on Verizon, and has a healthy lead when it comes to apps. More than 350,000 paid and free iPhone and iPad apps are available in Apple's App Store, and more than 10 billion have already been downloaded since the store's launch in July 2008. It's a general industry rule of thumb that the more apps available for a given device, the more potential buyers that device can attract.

Google's Android Market currently features less than 130,000 apps, but its stable of offerings reportedly grew more than 500 percent last year, compared with Apple's App Store, which saw offerings rise by about 110 percent. Developers, it seems, are warming up to Android.

And apart from company rivalries and struggles between devices, the market for mobile apps is nothing to sneeze at. Gartner recently predicted that such apps will generate \$15 billion in revenue this year, with downloads more than doubling, to 17.2 billion from 2010's 8.2 billion.

news.cnet.com

Some High-flying Fans Can Watch the Super Bowl

January 31, 2011

Flying during the Super Bowl no longer means waiting for the pilot to announce the latest score.

But if you're hoping to watch the Packers-Steelers matchup at 30,000 feet next Sunday, plan carefully: Not every airline with TV will be showing the game and not all digital alternatives work once regular-season football ends.

JetBlue Airways pioneered satellite TV on commercial airplanes in 2000 and four other U.S. airlines now have it. On airlines without TV, a Wi-Fi Internet connection is the next best thing because it allows you to watch shows live on laptops, iPhones and other devices.

"Today, pilots are more likely to walk into the cabin and see if they can find somebody who has the score," says Rick Seaney, CEO of airfare search site FareCompare.com.

Here's everything you need to know if you're flying next Sunday and don't want to miss Super Bowl XLV:

— JetBlue, Frontier and most Continental planes will carry the game on DirecTV. JetBlue's service is free; Continental and Frontier charge \$6.

— Virgin America and Delta Air Lines have free TV. But they carry the DISH Network, which, on planes, doesn't have Fox — the channel broadcasting the game.

— On planes with Wi-Fi, there's only one option: Slingbox, a \$180 piece of hardware that connects to a home TV and allows users to watch programing on their laptop, iPad and some smartphones.

Fliers can watch regular-season football via Wi-Fi using DirecTV's NFL Sunday Ticket To-Go, which streams games to laptops and some smartphones. But the playoffs and the Super Bowl aren't part of the package.

Airlines that have Wi-Fi include: American, Delta, Southwest, United, US Airways and Virgin. Prices range from \$4.95 to \$12.95, depending on the length of the flight. Only Delta, US Airways, United and Virgin tell passengers whether Wi-Fi is available on specific flights before booking.

A couple of caveats about Wi-Fi: connections on planes are slow, and the service can't be used when the plane is flying below 10,000 feet.

Jay Cox, 40, chose Frontier for his two-hour flight from Milwaukee to New York on Sunday knowing that he'd be able to tune-in to the game.

If Frontier had been booked, Cox says, "I would have found another airline with TV or taken an earlier flight to be on the ground during the game."

Not everybody is so lucky. Caitlin McNamara, 26, will be flying while the game is on, from Boston to San Diego — an eight-hour trip, with a stop in Denver. But when she booked the flight on United two weeks ago, she didn't realize it was Super Bowl Sunday. JetBlue's flight was about \$75 more, a difference McNamara now says she gladly would have paid.

"I didn't think about it at the time, which I now regret," she says.

Even though beer is served on planes, the atmosphere is typically less boisterous than a friend's house or the corner bar — unless the flight's heading to a team's home town. JetBlue flight attendant Eric Spar recalls strangers high-fiving each other and pilots calling back for recaps after each big cheer, during the Jets playoff victory against the Patriots.

Once the game is over, "everybody goes back to reading their Kindles. It's business as normal," says John Rieter, 40, a frequent traveler who watched his first airborne football game on Continental the other week.

The number of fans watching the Super Bowl midflight will be small. Only 45,000 or so fliers will have access to Sunday's game on live TV. That's less than half the 93,000 fans who will be inside Cowboys Stadium.

Still, how many of them will have the option of a window seat?

www.wirelessweek.com

Vodafone: We Were Forced to Send Pro-Mubarak texts

January 30, 2011

The Egyptian government of President Hosni Mubarak forced Vodafone to send out prescribed, propagandistic text messages during the country's recent unrest, the carrier said today in a statement on its Web site.

A text message by someone identified as "Vodafone" was sent to an Associated Press reporter in Egypt on Sunday appealing to the country's "honest and loyal men to confront the traitors and criminals and protect our people and honor," according to an AP report.

But Vodafone said the Egyptian government can use its emergency powers under the country's Telecommunications Act to force Vodafone and fellow carriers Mobinil and Etisalat to send messages to the people of Egypt--and that Vodafone did not write any such messages or have the ability to respond to the authorities about their content.

"Vodafone Group has protested to the authorities that the current situation regarding these messages is unacceptable," the statement says. "We have made clear that all messages should be transparent and clearly attributable to the originator."

According to the AP, Vodafone said the texts had been sent "since the start of the protests."

Mass protests broke out in Egypt last week over the decades-long rule of Mubarak. At first the situation was relatively calm, with the president announcing that he would not seek re-election this September. But things turned violent yesterday when Mubarak supporters began attacking protesters, who are calling for Mubarak's immediate resignation. At least five people were killed and many hundreds injured yesterday, according to reports.

Vodafone was one of the carriers that shut down voice services within Egypt on Friday after an order from Egyptian authorities. But in another statement on its Web site, the company says it had little choice in this matter since the Egyptian government has the ability to block such services on its own, and if the government had done so, those services would have taken much longer to get back up and running.

Voice services were quickly restored Saturday. As a type of public apology over the communications blackout, Vodafone is offering credits for service to its customers, proclaiming that "this offer continues until the crisis is over" and security and stability is re-established "in our beloved Egypt."

Internet access, which was also blocked in Egypt late last week, was finally restored yesterday.

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Verizon Loses Early Skirmish in Net Neutrality Litigation

February 3, 2011

A federal appellate court ruled yesterday against Verizon in its first-out-of-the-gate lawsuit challenging the Federal Communications Commission's Open Internet Order--the so-called Net neutrality rules.

But the decision turned on a minor procedural issue and gives no indication of how the court will ultimately decide. The ruling was only one sentence.

"Request for Comcast panel of judges denied," the court said.

After filing its appeal on January 20, Verizon asked that its case be heard by the same panel of three judges that decided against the FCC in an April 2010 case involving Comcast's alleged throttling of BitTorrent traffic.

In that case, the agency tried to sanction Comcast for failing to adhere to the FCC's earlier Net neutrality policy statements. But the D.C. Circuit ruled that the agency had not been given authority by Congress to regulate the network management practices of broadband Internet providers. The sanctions were dismissed.

Yesterday's ruling denied Verizon's request to have its appeal heard by the same three judges. Verizon had argued that the Comcast panel had relevant expertise, given the similarity between the two cases.

The request was a long shot, and the decision to deny Verizon's motion wasn't surprising. In federal courts, the panel of three judges that hear an appeal is usually assigned randomly. However, when an appellate court returns a case to a lower court for further proceedings, subsequent appeals in the same case are often returned to the original panel in the interests of "judicial efficiency."

But despite the similarities between the Comcast case and Verizon's appeal of the new rule, the cases are not part of the same docket. Comcast's appeal was from sanctions issued under the former policy statements, while Verizon is challenging the new rules on their face.

Which court? The answer matters. Verizon had much to gain and nothing to lose by asking for the Comcast panel. The denial has no bearing on any other aspect of the case. But getting its appeal before the same judges would have given Verizon a stronger hand in its effort to get the new rules nullified.

That's because in approving the Net neutrality rules in December, a bare majority of FCC Commissioners relied on nearly identical legal arguments to those rejected by the court in the Comcast case. The judges who decided Comcast may have seen the FCC's December rulemaking as thumbing the agency's nose at their April 2010 decision.

Verizon has other bows in its quiver. Indeed, the company's appeal was unusual in many respects, signaling a clever--perhaps too clever--strategy by the company's lawyers.

For one thing, Verizon didn't even wait for the new rules to be published, arguing that its interests became impaired the day the order was released and that it had only 30 days under the law to challenge them.

The FCC has already moved to dismiss Verizon's appeal, as well as a similar case filed later by MetroPCS. The agency argues that the appeals came too early and must be refiled once the final rules are published in the Federal Register.

Verizon has said it will refile its appeal once the rules are published, but it may be maneuvering to be first to the courthouse. Filing the first case could mean Verizon will be able to control important procedural aspects of the litigation, which is likely to take a year or more to reach a resolution.

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Products & Services

New security Flaw Discovered in the Android Operating System

January 30, 2011

A computer scientist has discovered a new security flaw in the latest version of Google's Android mobile operating system that can be exploited to reveal sensitive user information.

The data-stealing vulnerability in Android version 2.3 (dubbed Gingerbread) allows potential attackers to view and upload photos, voicemail and other data stored on a mobile handset's SD memory card said Xuxian Jiang, assistant professor in North Carolina State University's department of computer science.

The security hole, which is exploited when a user clicks on a booby-trapped link, also allows attackers to upload phone apps to a remote server and without the user knowing anything about it.

He said proof-of-concept code successfully carries out the attack on a standard Nexus S phone, which comes with Gingerbread already installed. It's not clear if the attack works on other brands that also run the latest operating system, however.

"We've already incorporated a patch for a security issue in the Android browser on a limited number of devices that could, under certain circumstances, allow for accessing application and other types of data stored on the phone," a Google spokesman wrote in an email. "We're in constant communication with all our partners."

The security patch will ship in an upcoming 2.3 maintenance release, Google said.

The information-disclosure threat is similar to one disclosed in November in Android 2.2 by researcher Thomas Cannon. Both security vulnerabilities disclose data only when an attacker knows the precise name and path of a file stored on an SD card.

But the exploit can't break out of the security sandbox, so system data and email, SMS messages and files stored on the phone itself remain off limits, at least for now.

Work arounds until a permanent patch is available include disabling Javascript in the Android browser, using an alternate browser or removing the SD card altogether.

The new but very serious security vulnerability discovered in November could allow hackers and Internet attackers to access private data from SD cards in Google smartphones and MIDs (mobile Internet devices).

Thomas Cannon discovered the JavaScript-related security vulnerability outside his normal job as a corporate security officer. The flaw would allow malicious websites to grab the contents of any file stored on the SD card of an Android smartphone, provided the name and directory path of a targeted file is known beforehand.

Additionally, it would also be possible to retrieve a limited range of other private information and specific files stored on the Android phone using this vulnerability.

The Android security vulnerability arises because of a combination of various factors that mean that when a file from a wireless content provider is opened, the built-in Android browser will run JavaScript without prompting the user. It should prompt the user first, Internet security experts say.

JavaScript running in the context of a content provider can use the xml http protocol (ie AJAX) requests to sniff the contents of files and other data, whether it is of sensitive nature or not.

Redirects can then be used to post the data back to a malicious website.

Cannon has gone public ahead of a update to the Android OS he says will be necessary to fix the problem in order to warn other users of the security risk. He was very keen to stress he has no anti-Android axe to grind, going so far as to praise Google for its handling of the issue this far.

www.internet-security.ca

Verizon iPhone Preorders are Smooth Sailing for Most

February 3, 2011

Verizon Wireless got off to a relatively smooth start today as it began the preorder process for the long-awaited Verizon iPhone.

The company started taking preorders from existing Verizon Wireless customers for the device at 3 a.m. EST. It will begin selling the device to all consumers online and in retail locations starting next Thursday, February 10.

As many iPhone fans will recall, in June of last year AT&T's Web site was overwhelmed by customers trying to preorder the iPhone 4. Orders couldn't be processed through AT&T, and many customers simply gave up after their purchase attempts timed-out and failed.

Though some customers experienced slow page loading on the Verizon Wireless Web site Thursday, most were able to complete their orders.

"I set the alarm for 2:45 a.m. and didn't expect to be able to get right online," said Kelly Muhlberger of Medford, N.J. "But I did and I was able to order two phones at the same time with two different browsers open. It took about 15 minutes."

Muhlberger, who has been a longtime Verizon Wireless customer using the LG Dare for the past couple of years, said she had been waiting a long time for the Verizon iPhone and didn't want to miss the opportunity. But she said when she checked the Verizon Web site later on Thursday, she said things still seemed to be working well.

"I guess I really didn't have to get up that early," she said.

Lee Evans of Manahawkin, N.J., said he got up at 3 a.m. to preorder the Verizon iPhone because he was afraid Verizon would run out of the devices.

"The only reason I got up early and preordered it was because when the Droid X and HTC Incredible came out last year, I heard there was a seven-month waiting list for the phones, and that was even for people who preordered the phones. So I figured I'd jump on and get one right away."

Evans said he didn't have trouble ordering his new phone either.

But there have been some complaints.

Kate Johnson of Garrison, N.Y., who got up at 2:55 a.m. EST Thursday, said she spent 45 minutes on Verizon Wireless's Web site trying to order her iPhone. Finally, she gave up and went to the Apple Web site, where it took 5 minutes to complete the order.

Brenda Raney, a spokeswoman for Verizon Wireless, said that "most customers have been able to get their orders placed." But she acknowledged that some customers have had a difficult time.

"In instances where customers have experience problems, we have found that the issues tend to be account specific, not system driven," she said in an e-mail. "In all cases, when we are made aware of an issue with a specific customer, we have been working with those customers directly."

Analysts are expecting the iPhone on Verizon Wireless to be very popular. Verizon said during its fourth-quarter conference call last month that it's expecting to sell about 11 million iPhones in 2011, which is the average estimate from financial analysts.

Verizon vs. AT&T

Initial reviews of the iPhone on Verizon's network have been good. CNET Reviews editors Kent German and Jessica Dolcourt gave the device on Verizon's network high marks compared with AT&T when tested in various parts of San Francisco.

The full CNET review, published today, says the Verizon iPhone consistently outperformed the AT&T iPhone in all but two tests. That said, German and Dolcourt warn potential iPhone customers that results may vary depending on a user's exact location.

But in San Francisco, where the AT&T iPhone often suffers from poor network performance and dropped

calls, the Verizon iPhone performed very well. For the most part, Verizon blazed through AT&T's upload and download speeds, according to the Root Metrics tool that the reviewers used.

"But more important than the results of a diagnostic tool are the real-world upload and download speeds we conducted using Facebook and Giantbomb.com, and in these tests AT&T's iPhone fell less behind," the reviewers said.

CNET's review of the Verizon iPhone was comparable to other reviews. Walt Mossberg of The Wall Street Journal noted that the Verizon iPhone had fewer dropped calls than an AT&T iPhone but said the Web surfing was slower on Verizon than on AT&T. David Pogue of The New York Times was happy to note that he could actually make calls while in his house using the Verizon iPhone, something he couldn't do with the AT&T iPhone. And he also noted that while he was on a 30-minute drive around San Francisco, his AT&T iPhone dropped a call four times, while the Verizon iPhone remained connected.

But there are some limitations to the Verizon iPhone. CNET's Dolcourt pointed out "7 things the Verizon iPhone doesn't have." For example, there's no SIM card, no international roaming on GSM networks, and no browsing the Web while on a phone call. Check out her story for more details and comparisons between the AT&T version of the iPhone 4 and the Verizon Wireless version.

Update at 8:20 p.m. PT: Verizon reports it has sold out of pre-orders.

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Industry Reports

Study: U.S. Wireless Subscribers Overpay on Service

February 3, 2011

The average U.S. wireless subscriber is overpaying on his or her cell phone bill by \$336 a year, according to a study by BillShrink, a search engine designed to help people find the best service deals to meet their needs.

About 80 percent of U.S. wireless subscribers miscalculate how many anytime voice minutes, text messages, and megabytes of data they need, BillShrink found. As a result, consumers are purchasing wireless plans that don't fit their needs and are actually costing them more money. Collectively, this results in the wireless industry pulling

in an extra \$79 million for services consumers don't actually need or use.

"It's interesting to see what people estimate their usage to be and what they actually use," said Schwark Satyavolu, co-founder and CEO of BillShrink. "Despite the best efforts from the FCC and the carriers to create transparency in wireless fees, we've found that people are becoming even more confused about how to right-size their cell phone plans."

BillShrink offers a tool on its Web site that analyzes people's cell phone bills to find the best plan to fit each customer's needs. Satyavolu says that while new tiered service offerings give consumers more choice, finding the plan that fits individual usage patterns can be tricky.

The company analyzed data from more than 230,000 individual bills that had been submitted through its service from December 2009 to December 2010. BillShrink compared actual wireless usage from these cell phone bills versus people's estimated cell phone use to reveal some key findings.

First, when it comes to voice minutes and text messaging, consumers tend to overestimate how much they need. Satyavolu said the average consumer thinks he or she needs about 711 voice minutes per month but in reality uses only about 651 minutes. The average consumer also estimates he or she needs about 2,566 text messages but actually sends only about 1,555 messages per month.

Right-sizing a voice plan is especially tricky, since anytime voice minutes don't mean the same thing to every carrier. For example, some carriers don't count calls made to other cell phone users on their same network, or they may allow subscribers to designate certain friends' or family members' numbers part of a special calling circle, which also may not count against anytime minutes. And still, many carriers don't start their free nights and weekends at the same times.

"You can't just buy the same number of minutes and text messages on one carrier and expect to have the same usage on another carrier," Satyavolu said. "They all count the anytime minutes differently."

Meanwhile, consumers tend to underestimate how much mobile data they use. The average consumer thinks he or she uses about 54MB of data per month but actually uses about 81MB of data. Even though consumers are underestimating how much data they use, they're still using far less than what they're paying for.

Today, three of the four major U.S. wireless operators offer tiered data plans. Verizon Wireless started offering a promotional data plan in October that includes 150MB of data for \$15 a month. It ended the promotion last month. And now only offers smartphone customers the option of a \$30 unlimited data plan.

AT&T offers a 200MB plan for \$15 a month. And T-Mobile USA just recently introduced a 200MB plan for \$10 a month.

Even though data usage among U.S. wireless consumers has increased by about 94 percent from December 2009 to December 2010, according to BillShrink, the average wireless subscriber in the U.S. is still far below the cap offered in the lowest tier of cell phone service. What's ironic is that many consumers still believe they need an unlimited data plan.

"I'd say that 150MB to 200MB of data per month is plenty more than most wireless consumers actually need," Satyavolu said. "But if you read the blogs, you'd think the move toward tiered data plans is the end of the world. The reality is that it's a small fraction of people who really benefit from unlimited plans."

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