



Government mobile applications

Guideline

This guideline aims to help Victorian Government agencies decide when to pursue the development of public-facing mobile applications. It may also help agencies assess the readiness of their environment for mobile development.

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Introduction

Increasingly, the government's customers are using mobile devices as their preferred means to access information and services online.¹ The government's response to this demand has been to deploy both mobile-friendly websites and dedicated mobile phone applications, often to great success. This guideline focuses on the latter of those two paths by providing general advice on when to pursue the development of public-facing mobile applications. It may also help agencies assess the readiness of their environment for mobile development.

This guideline starts from the position that native mobile applications should only be pursued where the features of the platform² are genuinely critical to the idea and its implementation. From there, the guideline suggests that mobile applications should:

- be unique amongst other Victorian Government mobile applications;
- offer insight or functionality that only the Government can provide; and
- deliver significant benefits.

In addition the guideline addresses support, risks and issues, alignment with Government and agency views, and the requirement for adequate performance management.

How to use this guideline

This guideline is designed to help the reader evaluate whether a particular *idea* should be implemented as a native mobile application. To make this assessment, the guideline poses a series of questions (see *Questions to ask*, below) which the reader must answer to the best of their knowledge, using the *Key considerations* section to inform their responses. Based on the responses provided, the guideline will provide suggestions as to whether or not to proceed with developing the idea into a native mobile application.

What is meant by 'idea'?

All mobile applications start as an idea. That idea might have arisen as a result of customer feedback, for example, or it may follow on from a business transformation exercise. For this guideline to prove useful, the reader should have a reasonably well-developed idea so that it can be tested against the guideline's questions.

Note

Notwithstanding the suggestions of this guideline, agencies may place more or less emphasis on a particular question/consideration, and make their own determination on whether an idea should progress on to development. This guideline recognises that only the relevant agency will properly understand the context and environment they work in and when it is appropriate to proceed.

¹ For example, at the time of publishing, mobile devices accounted for 28% of all sessions across the monitored sites in the whole of Victorian Government website analytics account (August 2014).

² E.g. For example the Apple platform, which includes hardware and operating software.



When to use this guideline

This guideline is not mandatory. It may be used at any time but ideally it would be used at the point where agencies are discussing the merits of a particular application idea. The approach of this guideline naturally fits within a problem definition exercise, for example.

Scope

This guideline is applicable to ideas for **public-facing, native mobile applications**. All references to 'mobile application' within this document should be read as references to native mobile applications.

Please note, whilst this guideline might prove useful for internal mobile applications, it is not specifically intended to address them.

Key considerations

The following section comprises the types of things that the reader should consider before addressing the *Questions to ask*, below. The points raised within this section are not intended to be exhaustive. Each agency will be subject to its own unique circumstances that will determine the kind of analysis required.

Does the idea genuinely require execution as a native mobile application?

This guideline suggests that government agencies should deploy information and services via the web, not through mobile applications, unless one or more strong, well-justified requirements for a native application can be advanced. The reasoning behind this position lies with the particular responsibilities of the government to provide information and services to *all* customers, not just a subset of customers, such as smart phone users.

Notwithstanding this position, this guideline accepts there will be genuine exceptions that require access to the unique attributes of a mobile platform. The key, always, will be for the owner to give the platform selection process significant consideration, with users always front of mind. This consideration should occur at the initial idea stage and later, as the idea becomes clearer.

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- What does the user want? What does the user really need? Is there a clearly articulated need for a native application?
- Can user needs be met through a website or a web application implementing responsive design?
- Where the idea requires a specific feature of a mobile platform (e.g. accelerometer), is that feature crucial to executing the idea or merely a nice-to-have? Has the owner confirmed whether the feature required is available through existing web technologies (such as HTML 5)? If it is, and the owner nevertheless intends to pursue development on a mobile platform, what is the justification for this course?
- If a native application is being considered, is the owner confident that the target user will download and, if necessary, configure the application?
- If a native application is selected as the delivery platform, will the information or service it promotes be available elsewhere, e.g. through a website? If not, can it be said that the application is discriminating against users and if so how will possible complaints be resolved or mitigated?
- If a native application is selected as the desired solution, will the owner publish on all popular platforms (e.g. Apple, Android, Windows) and accommodate a reasonable range of operating system versions? If so, have the cost considerations of multi-platform delivery been properly evaluated and accounted for? Have those costs been compared against those of delivery via



the web? Further, if the application is not going to be delivered on multiple platforms, how will the owner resolve or mitigate any complaint that the information or service it promotes is only available on a limited segment of the mobile phone marketplace?

If this idea is implemented, will it be the only one of its kind?

No two Government mobile applications should serve the same purpose. To avoid this, all ideas should first be assessed against the existing Government mobile applications.³ Secondly, agencies should start an ongoing dialogue to monitor their respective efforts in mobile development. These conversations will facilitate understanding as to what has been done before, what is in development currently and where there are similarities and subsequent opportunities for reuse. They will also provide a means to exchange knowledge and skills.

The responsibility to engage with others is shared equally across all agencies, but owners of proposed applications have a particular responsibility to engage from the moment an idea forms and becomes a possible candidate for development.

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- Has the Government's digital landscape been thoroughly scanned for similar applications, including within the owner's agency? If similar applications were found, has the owner engaged with the business unit/agency behind that application/website?
- If there are similar applications, what sort of evaluation has been undertaken to determine whether the proposed idea is worth pursuing? Will the proposed idea be sufficiently different?
- If the proposed idea is similar to another application, has the owner drawn on the available intelligence from the other, similar application? For example, has the owner queried the success of that application and whether the audience type and usage was as expected?
- Even if the idea is unique, is there scope to consider opportunities for re-use or close cooperation with other agencies to benefit from their experience? Are there existing resources that can be utilised?

Does this idea offer a unique insight that only the Government can provide?

This guideline suggests that Government mobile applications should perform some unique role or offer some unique insight that only the government can offer. They should not merely present static information without more. This guideline also suggests that agencies should not create applications out of data that could instead be released and utilised/developed by third parties.⁴

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- Does the application merely provide information that could be made available through a website? If so, what is the need to develop a mobile application for that information?
- Is the information/service that will support the idea currently available through a website? If so, why is a mobile application being developed in addition to the website? Can the development of a mobile application be justified over improving the existing website offering, e.g. by implementing responsive design for the website so that all devices can access the information/service?
- If the application is merely providing a textual or visual presentation of data, could that data instead be delivered in raw format through data.vic.gov.au or via the relevant agency's

³ See e.g. www.vic.gov.au/social-media/mobile-apps.html.

⁴ Obvious exceptions to this suggestion are where the proposed application will act as the authoritative source of a particular kind of information or service (e.g. FireReady), or where the underlying information used by the application is sensitive and cannot be freely distributed or queried.



website? What is the need to present the data through a government mobile application? Is that need significant enough to require the development of a mobile application?

Does this idea deliver significant benefits?

A mobile application must provide some tangible and significant benefit for the user, the owner/agency and/or the Government. For example, the user must be able to interact or transact with the government in a measurably improved way, or the government should be able to see cost savings or some sort of productivity or efficiency gain, as a direct result of the application.

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- What meaningful benefits will this application deliver? Can they be simply stated and comprehended?
- Is this application the best way to deliver those benefits or are there other means to do so, e.g. through a website?
- Do the benefits align with the identified user need(s)? Will the application fulfil or solve the original user need or issue?
- How will the owner determine whether the benefits have been delivered?

Is the timing and environment right for this idea?

A mobile application is likely to draw on the commitment and effort of more than the immediate owner during its lifecycle. A sound governance arrangement can help manage those various parties' involvement but also ensure the application remains supported and achieves what it said it would. Where these arrangements are not in place, or where the general digital maturity of the owner's environment is not sufficiently advanced, serious thought should be given as to whether the time is right for mobile development.

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- What ongoing cooperation and/or approvals will be required for this proposed application? How easy will it be to secure the necessary cooperation and/or approvals every time?
- Will the application draw on the resources of areas other than the owner's? How many people/areas will have a connection to the application? Can these stakeholders be readily gathered and mobilised?
- Does the broader agency take a positive, neutral or negative view of the proposed application? What about mobile applications generally? If the view is neutral or negative, have steps been taken to obtain the necessary support over the immediate and longer term?
- What is the level of understanding of mobile development in the owner's business unit/agency? Is it mature enough to understand the implications and demands of mobile development?
- How sound is the underlying infrastructure that will support the proposed mobile application? Is the CIO/CTO comfortable with the application idea and its needs?
- How will the owner secure ongoing funding and resources to support the application through its lifecycle?
- Is there a group/committee (whether it is held on an ongoing or as-needed basis) that can accommodate and coordinate all necessary discussion and approvals regarding the proposed application, e.g. web management taskforce (or equivalent)? If not, how likely is it that such a group can be established?



Have any risks and issues associated with the idea been identified and can they be managed?

All mobile applications will attract some level of risk and therefore the potential to affect the agency in some way. For example, all application owners will need to account for third parties that can influence the lifecycle of the application (e.g. vendors who provided/developed the application or the owners of the underlying operating system of the mobile platform). Further unique application-specific risks and impacts might also apply, each of which must be identified and considered by the owner and their agency.

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- What are the risks that will attach to the proposed idea? How will the owner mitigate or eliminate each of those risks? For example, the idea requires ongoing intra-agency cooperation (risk) which a well-managed governance body can secure (mitigation).
- Are there existing issues that relate to or affect the proposed idea? How will the owner resolve or mitigate those issues? For example, the idea may require access to a particular data set which is currently not exposed (issue) which funding and intra-agency cooperation may be able to address (resolution).

Does the idea align with surrounding strategies and policies and the relevant legal requirements?

Government mobile applications are part of an ever-expanding government digital channel and the broader government ICT infrastructure, both of which are subject to a range of strategies and policies. Consequently, the owners of the proposed idea should ensure that their idea, and their intended execution of that idea, aligns with these strategies and policies and any other stated views of the government and their agency. Similarly, the proposed idea may require adherence to legislation or other regulatory requirements.⁵

Starting points for consideration include:

- ICT strategies (departmental and whole of Government);
- digital strategies (departmental and whole of Government);
- relevant Whole of Government policies and standards (e.g. accessibility requirements);
- whole of Government branding policy;
- agency communications plans; and
- the views of agency web management taskforces (or equivalent).

Can the objectives of the proposed idea be simply stated and its performance readily measured?

Mobile applications should not be developed without clear objectives and a plan to ensure that those objectives are met. In order to determine whether an application is meeting its objectives, mobile applications should be capable of informing the owner as to their usage, i.e. utilise inbuilt analytics. Further, where an application will deliver a service that was previously delivered through traditional channels (such as phone or counter service) baseline usage data from those channels should be recorded so as to appreciate the impact of the mobile application over time.

Questions that might be considered on this point include:

- Have the objectives of the proposed application been clearly identified?

⁵ For example, the *Information Privacy Act 2000* (Vic) and *Public Records Act 1973* (Vic). Agencies may also need to consider the legal framework relevant to their circumstances, e.g. *Health Records Act 2001* (Vic).



- For each of the objectives, what are the key performance indicators (KPIs) that will demonstrate the objective is being met? Are those KPIs clearly attributable to their respective objectives?
- What tools and types of analysis will the owner use to evaluate the application's performance against the KPIs? Will the application implement data capturing mechanisms to help the owner better understand the application's usage and inform any future development?
- What are the owner's plans to address any poor performance?
- Who will report on the performance of the proposed application and to whom will it be communicated? Will the relevant governance bodies have oversight of this reporting?



Questions to ask

Having read *Key considerations*, and with the proposed idea in mind, consider and respond to each of the following questions. Having completed the assessment, continue on to *Conclusion* for a final view.

Does the idea genuinely require execution as a native mobile application?

Yes There is a compelling reason to proceed with a native application. The idea cannot be satisfactorily executed through other means and/or the use of handset-specific or OS-specific features is required. Users who will not be able to take advantage of a mobile application are not disadvantaged and can receive the relevant information or service through other channels.

No The idea can be satisfactorily implemented through other means, e.g. the web. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

If this idea is implemented, will it be the only one of its kind?

Yes In its final form, this idea will be unique amongst all other Victorian Government mobile applications.

Not entirely If there are some similarities with another Victorian Government mobile application, exercise caution and consider approaching the relevant owners of that application to discuss any possibilities for collaboration or re-use. If, notwithstanding the similarities, the owner intends to proceed, ensure all other steps in this decision-making process are overwhelmingly in favour of continuing.

No If there is another application that is the same or very similar, engage further with the relevant owner of that application to determine whether there are opportunities to contribute or consolidate content/services. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

Does this idea offer a unique insight that only the Government can provide?

Yes The idea can only be executed by the owner and will offer previously unseen functionality and value for users.

No Consider incorporating the proposed content into a relevant website or, if the application was to use government data, consider making the data available to the public. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**



Does this idea deliver significant benefits?

Yes This idea represents an application which will deliver significant, quantifiable benefits to the government and/or its customers.

No This idea represents an application that will not deliver a significant benefit(s) to the relevant agency, the Victorian Government or the Government's customers. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

Is the timing and environment right for this idea?

Yes There is an active and supportive environment (within the relevant agency) for developing a mobile application. There is also a sound, working governance arrangement to ensure the ongoing health of any proposed mobile application.

No Take the necessary steps to create a supportive environment (e.g. educate colleagues and the agency more broadly and establish suitable governance arrangements) before re-testing the idea against this guideline. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

Have any risks and issues associated with the idea been identified and can they be managed?

Yes All known risks and issues have been identified and can be managed.

No The relevant risks and issues have not been fully explored, or those that have been are too significant or cannot be mitigated. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

Does the idea align with surrounding strategies, policies and legal requirements?

Yes The idea, and the application it represents, conforms to all relevant policies and strategies of both the Government and the idea-owner's agency.

No If possible, adjust the idea to accommodate the relevant strategies/policies before re-testing the idea against this guideline. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

Can the objectives of this proposed idea be simply stated and its performance readily measured?

Yes The objectives of the proposed application are clear and its success can be measured through directly attributable key performance indicators.



No The objectives of the proposed application cannot be adequately defined or suitable performance planning measures implemented. **Do not proceed with the development of a mobile application.**

Conclusion

This guideline asks the reader to submit their mobile application idea to a series of questions (*Questions to ask*) designed to test the validity of the idea in the Victorian Government context. At the completion of that exercise, if all questions have been answered in the affirmative, the idea may be ready to take the next step forward in its development.

What those next steps may be within a given agency will differ depending upon their governance structure and where the idea is within their internal processes. The workings and thought undertaken to respond to this guideline may be of significance in those next steps, particularly with respect to any formal business case.

Where one or more questions could not be answered in the affirmative, this guideline suggests that the idea should not proceed to development. Whilst an agency may choose not to follow this advice, it is suggested that sound reasons as to why should be made out before doing so.

Further information

For further information regarding this guideline, please contact enterprisesolutions@dpc.vic.gov.au.

Version history

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