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Mark W. Smith: Scarcity of smartphone app developers stifles a growing industry in Michigan

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Kyle Hilla of Grand Rapids had to go out of state to get the coding done for his CollabraCam app. / REGINA H. BOONE/Detroit Free Press

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BY MARK W. SMITH
DETROIT FREE PRESS
TECHNOLOGY COLUMNIST

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GRAND RAPIDS -- Kyle Hilla understood the power he had at his fingertips.

Creating smartphone apps was making some developers millions. He wanted in.

"There's so much more that these things can do," he says of smartphones. "It's just not a camera anymore. It's not just a phone."

Hilla, 36, of Grand Rapids, created CollabraCam, an app for the Apple iPhone, iPad and iPod Touch that allows four of those devices to record video simultaneously, sending the live feeds back to a fifth Apple device that acts as a director. The director can switch from camera to camera, creating a multi-camera video

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Online help

App developers have turned to online tools to learn the process. Here are some of the top tools.

Lynda.com

Lynda.com is a tutorial site that has lessons in building iOS apps for the Apple platform. It also has lessons for other multimedia programs, such as Adobe Photoshop. Membership costs \$25 a month.

PhoneGap.com

PhoneGap lets Web designers use the tools they already know, HTML and JavaScript, to create apps for all the popular mobile platforms, including Apple, Android and BlackBerry.

iOS Dev Center

Apple's developer Web site, developer.apple.com, contains videos and support documents for iOS developers. Membership costs \$99 a year.

production in real time.

The app (\$5.99) has been featured heavily in Apple's App Store and was a nominee for this year's Webby Awards for Best Use of Mobile Video, losing out to MLB.com.

Hilla, who has a degree in film and video from Grand Valley State University, didn't know how to write the code for the app himself. He contracted a firm in Indiana to create the app at a cost of \$50,000.

As more people like Hilla get ideas for smartphone and tablet apps, Michigan stands ill-prepared to help them realize their visions, according to interviews with developers, mobile firms and trade groups here.

The problem: A lack of developers here who know how to create apps, as many app developers have settled in traditional technology hotspots like Silicon Valley and New York City.

Help wanted

Itai Ben-Gal, chief executive of Detroit-based iRule, has two unfilled positions for mobile developers. But there are so few in Michigan that they can command astronomical rates.

"We're tapping into resources that are very scarce right now," says Ben-Gal, a former automotive engineer. "Good programmers who have experience are already working."

Ben-Gal's app, also called iRule, lets users create customized touch-screen remotes for their home theaters.

Ben-Gal's experience is not uncommon, says Linda Daichendt, executive director of the Mobile Technology Association of Michigan, a trade group set up to help build the mobile industry here.

The skills necessary for mobile app development are so new that universities and technical schools are still fleshing out curricula for mobile programs.

"The industry has moved so fast that the schools are having a hard time staying

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Itai Ben-Gal: iRule CEO

caught up," Daichendt says.

Henry Balanon, co-founder and director of mobile at app development firm Detroit Labs, has been able to have his pick of clients, often having to choose to turn down work from smaller companies.

"We've been able to command high rates and get long-term projects with large companies," Balanon says.

Web sites, including Lynda.com and PhoneGap.com, have popped up to help Web developers transition those skills to mobile app building. Apple's Web site also has resources to help teach developers.

Crucial for small businesses

The stakes for Michigan are high.

For each job created in the mobile technology industry in Michigan, 3.9 jobs are created in supporting industries, according to a study this year from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation. That figure is second only to manufacturing, the MEDC says.

The developer shortage has frustrated businessmen like Zac Ball, managing partner and multimedia director of Pleasant Ridge-based ad firm Gravy Network.

The developer community here

"desperately, desperately needs help," he says.

"If we could find a reasonably paid mobile developer in the area, we would hire them in a second," he says. Small businesses are increasingly looking to mobile devices to spread their message and sell their wares, creating a need for developers.

Ball's firm will launch an app called MOBIBO at this weekend's Arts, Beats and Eats festival in Royal Oak. The app turns a user's smartphone into a mobile billboard. Businesses can send messages or coupons to the phone as the customer walks or drives by. Just for viewing the ad, the user is paid 25 cents.

MOBIBO has already signed up businesses including Dunkin' Donuts and Belle Tire for the location-aware ad service.

Services like that are becoming an increasingly important part of the marketing mix for small businesses in Michigan, says Cynthia Grubbs, small business liaison at MEDC.

"If you are not accessible on a mobile device, your business is just

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going to be left behind," Grubbs says.

Do it yourself

Even if Michigan app developers are able to get apps built and on the market, the path to profitability is unsure.

Hilla has sold more than 4,000 copies of CollabraCam since its February launch. That has been enough to sustain the development needs for the app, but has not been enough to support him.

"We have not yet met ramen profitability," Hilla says, a term used to describe when a start-up can support the bare necessities.

Revenue just from games on the Apple and Android mobile platforms is expected to surpass \$1 billion this year, according to mobile tracking firm Flurry.

Chasing a piece of that has kept Hilla focused on his company's app offerings. He plans to launch another video-centric app this fall. An Android version of CollabraCam is planned for early 2012.

And in the meantime, he has found a developer to work with in Grand Rapids, but he's also working through books and Web sites to learn how to develop apps himself.

"I need to figure out how to do all this myself," he says. "I can't always depend on others to do the code."

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