5.1 How to find a programmer

This unit explains how to find a programmer for your app project. If you're lucky enough to have a background in coding yourself, with the expertise –not to mention time – to program a mobile app yourself, then you can skip this unit. Most designers, however, do not have a coding background. In some ways, this lack of coding experience is an advantage. You are likely to have a clearer perspective over the project as a whole and you'll be less likely to become over-invested in a piece of code that took a long time to write. Instead, you're more likely to become invested in the end result: How well the app actually functions in the real world for real users.

Before you pick a programmer for your app design idea, it's advisable to familiarise yourself with basic ideas in computer programming. This will not only make it easier for you to communicate with the programmer, but also help you get a sense of the possibilities open to modern app developers. Much of it may seem overly-complex for your purposes, but it is worth having a quick look through the Apple SDK manual here: https://developer.apple.com/devcenter/ios/index.action and the Google Android documentation here: http://developer.android.com/guide/index.html. Don't worry if you find yourself confused by some of the sections, just get to grips with what you can do functionally with the devices and ignore the dense code examples. Speaking – or at least recognising – some of this language will help you understand your programmer better and also put you in a good position when it comes to negotiating a rate.

5.2 Understanding the cost of indie programmers vs agencies.

There are two ways to structure a typical mobile app programming project. You can either hire an app development agency, such as ustwo in London, or hire your own progammer(s) and run the project yourself.

If you choose to go with an agency, you pay an entire team to design, build and manage your app.

With sufficient funds, you can walk into an agency with sketches and tell them your idea, then return a few weeks later and pick up your app. The results of this method tend to be excellent: You end up with a professionally-designed, thoroughly-tested app created by experts. Hopefully. The downside is the cost: the agency route can cost as much as ten times more than going it alone with your own programmer(s). With an agency you're paying for the convenience and expertise of an established development team which includes senior-managers, overheads, electricity etc. And if you were in a position to do that we suspect you probably wouldn't have bought this course.

The alternative, therefore, is to hire in your own programmers. In an ideal situation, you may already know a programmer, or have a friend who can make a recommendation. Generally, we suggest you find a programmer via word-of-mouth rather than hiring blindly. Mobile application development can be an extremely complex process and hiring an unskilled, inexperienced and untrusted (by you) programmer is likely to end in failure via a lot of pain. A professional programmer based in London, for example, can cost around £150-£200 ($200-$300) an hour, while a programmer based overseas, sourced through a site such as eLance, can cost as little as £11 ($18) an hour. To the untrained eye, it may appear that the overseas programmer is the obvious choice and, in some cases, they may be very good.

The problem with going for those guys is twofold: One, the overseas programmer may be more difficult to communicate with, both in terms of language and time-zone. Two, the overseas programmer, especially at this low price, may not have the skills or expertise to demand a high market price: They will take longer to finish the project and may not be able to create the vision you are after. Often, though not always, it is cheaper to pay an expensive, expert programmer for five hours' work than it is to hire in a cheap inexperienced programmer who takes weeks and fails to deliver a polished result. But a high fee is no guarantee of quality. The best you can do with unknowns is ask for and verify work they've done. Talk to them on Skype (see section 5.3) and get a feel for whether they know their stuff, or not.

These are obviously generalisations, but it is very important to be aware of potential pitfalls. Most people find communicating with their programmer the most frustrating part of app design. How well you can describe what you want to a programmer, and how well they understand and execute your ideas are the two most significant

determinants of whether you end up with a neat app or an emotionally exhausting mess.

5.3 Managing international programming operations

The greatest gift to the modern app designer is Skype. Use it as much as you can to communicate with programmers overseas. Unlike an email, the programmer will get a sense of your emotional input via Skype. They'll sense how you want your app to feel to the user. You will also build a sense of camaraderie with your programmer – this makes it more likely that they will prioritise your project and go the extra mile if the app design runs into problems. Face-to-face contact can't be overvalued – opt for it over email every time. Especially when it's free.

5.4 Interacting with the mobile app programming community

Your most valuable source of information, when designing apps, is the internet. There is a wealth of valuable information, most of it free, available to an aspiring app designer. If you're thinking of doing something new with a mobile platform and want advice on whether it's possible, or if you are stuck with a coding problem, there are thousands of other developers on forums around the world eager to offer their advice. We provide a list of these and other useful links at the end of Unit 18.

5.5 Trust and NDAs

An NDA or Non Disclosure Agreement, is a contract between you and another party, in our case, the programmer(s), which states that they will not share your app idea with anyone else. Once an NDA is signed, you have a quasi-legal understanding that the project is confidential.

In practise, an NDA is more a contract of honour. Although you could, in theory, take legal action against a violation of the NDA, in practice this would be so expensive and time consuming that it would completely eclipse the time and resources you could spend developing an app. Unless you are armed to the teeth with lawyers, consider an NDA a firm handshake between parties, with integrity. This is another reason your due-diligence with respect to programmers (and indeed anyone else you add to your team) is so important.

Despite the expense of actually enforcing an NDA, it is advisable to get your programmer to sign one. Firstly: because everyone else in the industry is doing this and it will look strange and unprofessional not to. Secondly: Because it reminds the programmer(s) that you expect confidentiality from them. You can find free examples of NDAs here: http://www.ndasforfree.com/