

GOVERNMENT HEALTH IT

Android gains ground as mobile health platform

By John Moore

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Phones using Google's Android operating system—and applications built for that environment—are gaining ground among healthcare workers, proving that Apple's iPhone and iPad aren't the only mobile platforms seeing action in the health IT marketplace.

Physicians, massive users of smartphones, are adopting Android, which offers them a choice of networks and devices. Spyglass Consulting Group rates Blackberry and iPad as the top choices among doctors, but notes that Android devices have acquired a following among early technology adopters.

In the US market overall, market watcher comScore Inc. ranked Android fourth in smartphone marketshare (13 percent), trailing Research In Motion's Blackberry (41.7 percent), Apple (24.4 percent) and Microsoft (13.2 percent). Those numbers reflect a three-month period ending in May.

Software makers, meanwhile, are creating a range of healthcare-related Android applications, some of which have become popular downloads. One such app helps users locate federally qualified health centers around the country. General-purpose applications for Android provide medical references, physician collaboration tools and remote access to clinical data. Vendors view Android as a solid, though not perfect, development environment.

Alex Ginzburg, vice president of engineering at PatientKeeper, which develops mobile clinical applications, said physician interest in mobile platforms over the past couple of year has been mainly around Blackberry and iPhone. But lately he said he has observed increasing interest among physicians in Android.

"What is appealing is the choice of carriers," Ginzburg said. "The advantage is the ability, for example, to get Verizon—arguably the best coverage in major metros. There are many areas in the country where AT&T is present but doesn't necessarily have reliable coverage." AT&T is the sole carrier for iPhones.

Ginzburg said PatientKeeper is readying browser-based and native applications for Android. The company previously released mobile clinical applications for iPad, iPhone and iPod touch.

Healthagen, a healthcare software developer, released an Android version of its iTriage application earlier this year. Google in June promoted the iTriage app in its Android market.

“We are seeing great update,” said Dr. Peter Hudson, an emergency room physician and CEO at Healthagen.

The iTriage app provides information on symptoms and diseases and includes a nationwide directory of hospitals and other health facilities. The Community Health Data Initiative, headed by the Department of Human Services and the Institute of Medicine, invited Healthagen to demonstrate its technology at a recent forum in Washington, DC. The initiative aims to promote applications that make use of public health data.

At the forum, Healthagen demonstrated the ability to integrate previously locked government data into iTriage, enabling mobile users to locate federally qualified health centers around the nation, Hudson said.

Dr. Tom Giannulli, chief medical information officer at Epocrates, said he has seen rapid early adoption of Android. The company offers a free Android beta of its Epocrates Rx drug reference software. Epocrates drug and medical references previously arrived on the iPhone, Palm, Blackberry and Windows Mobile platforms.

Giannulli said in some respects Android adoption has been more aggressive compared to what he has seen in the past. “It is a solid platform that seems to be doing well,” Giannulli added.

While physicians may like the choice of networks and phones, developers approve of Android as a development environment.

Ramesh Chaturvedi, chief strategy officer at Damaka Inc., said Android is more developer-friendly than iPhone. Damaka makes unified communications and collaboration applications for Android, iPhone and other mobile platforms.

“Unlike the iPhone environment, Android provides more accessibility to APIs for third-party developers—like Damaka—to build real-time two-way video calling and collaboration features,” Chaturvedi said. “iPhone does not provide public APIs for developers to develop video calling features on the device.”

Android has its disadvantages for developers, though. Ginzburg cited Android’s fragmentation as a drawback. Different versions of the operating system and carrier modifications make it difficult for vendors to ensure their apps can run on every platform and across multiple carriers, he said.