

Windows Phone Users Get New Data Access Options

A new application manages XML-based data access forms created in Microsoft Office and wirelessly distributes them to any Windows-based enterprise smartphone.

John Cox, Network World

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A software startup has launched an application that manages XML-based data access forms created in Microsoft Office and wirelessly distributes them to any Windows-based enterprise smartphone or other handheld.

FormoPublish, from Formotus, is available either as a Web-based service, or as an enterprise application. The software lets mobile enterprise users access and update any enterprise application -- from CRM to inventory to order entry systems -- that has a Web services interface. And it does so without the IT programming resources, delays, and maintenance burdens of conventional client/server applications.

The forms themselves are created on a PC, using Microsoft InfoPath, the XML forms tool bundled with Microsoft Office. Office users can create, for example, a form to track their start and ending times on a field service call, accessing data exposed via a Web service on a backend ERP system. InfoPath binds the form to specific Web services, by which the form can extract information from a backend application or upload new data.

A forms approach makes sense for mobile users, says Jack Gold, principle analyst with J. Gold Associates, a technology research and consulting firm in Northborough, Mass. "Mobile workers are often just filling in forms [with data]," he says. FormoPublish's main strength is potentially, for some customers, it's main weakness, Gold says. "Essentially they're a Microsoft shop," he says. Customers have to be either using or be willing to use InfoPath, and to run InfoPath forms on Windows-based handhelds.

The InfoPath forms can become quite sophisticated, says Adriana Neagu, co-founder of Bellevue, Wash.-based [Formotus](#), and a former Microsoft programmer who worked to create InfoPath. "On the form itself you can add a lot more [business] logic," she says. "If a field needs a date, you can add a 'date picker' so people can add this easily, or to ensure it's entered in a specific format, for example with a start date."

An XML form lets business users select and filter just the information they want to see on their mobile device.

The forms are then uploaded as templates to the FormoPublish server. The server application converts these XML files into a format that can be manipulated to display correctly, via the downloaded Formotus runtime environment, on any of the handheld devices, including smartphones, that run a Windows operating system.

The Formotus runtime gives the handset an extended set of features compared to a conventional InfoPath form, according to Neagu. "We've extended the functionality of the desktop runtime so that you can do things like send data as a SMS [short message service] text message. Also, we can integrate with a built-in digital camera: you take a picture and we can include it in the XML stream. We can also include GPS [Global Positioning System] data."

Forms work automatically with [Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007](#), which is the centerpiece of Microsoft's document sharing and collaboration strategy.

To publish the forms stored on the FormoPublish server, users register their phone or mobile device with the Formotus service, which then wirelessly downloads the installer file, including runtime, to the device. Users can be notified automatically when a new form is available for them. The server tracks and reports on who has and has not installed new forms or new versions of forms.

The server only stores, distributes and manages the forms. Once a form is downloaded it connects directly to the users corporate data using whatever enterprise protections have been implemented. No data is ever stored on the Formotus server. The forms can use HTTP or HTTP/S to secure the data transfer.

A somewhat similar approach, says Gold, is offered by Canada-based TrueContext which released its Pronto application, also as a software service, this past February (the same service has been available in Canada for some time as Rogers mForms). TrueContext offers a set of specific forms, such as order entry, expense reports and claims adjustment, or will work with a client to create custom forms, which it then hosts and distributes to mobile users.

The online and enterprise editions of FormoPublish are available now, priced at US\$35 per device per month, for unlimited applications.

Formotus' other co-founder and CEO is Joe Verschueren, who also co-founded in 1995 ImageX, which via its Internet-based software acted as a printing broker, allowing customers to create and store stationary and business forms online and then farm out the actual printing to ImageX partners. Like many dot-com darlings, it soared high, raising about \$162 million in private equity and public stock. But, like the others, it fell hard when the Internet bubble burst in the early 2000s, before being acquired by Kinko's in 2003 for about \$5 million.

The company's advisory board includes Roger Bamford, who's been Oracle's chief database architect since 1989, and Gordon Bell, who create the legendary VAX minicomputer and VMS operating system and is now a chief researcher with Microsoft.

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