How Long Does It Really Take to Develop a Mobile App?

Every year the world becomes more reliant on mobile devices. In 2017, there were 178 billion new mobile app downloads, and by the end of 2018, that number jumped up to almost 200 billion. It's no wonder companies are spending more time and money than ever before on developing mobile apps to reach their increasingly phone-obsessed consumers. If a company doesn't have an app, they're almost guaranteed to be overlooked in favour of a competitor that does.

If you're a business that hasn't yet broken into the lucrative market of mobile apps, the first question is often "how long does it take to create and launch one?" That answer can vary wildly depending on what features you want to offer, how many platforms you want to reach, the development team behind the app, your ability to stick to a set plan, and your budget. With all of that in mind, the industry average for a successful app is generally 4-6 months. There is the possibility for variation in either direction, but a 4-6 month period tends to ensure that your app has a manageable scope and is developed by a seasoned team of professionals who have realistic expectations for the workload involved. A shorter time frame often results in a product that hasn't been fully realized or tested; it is often frustrating to use, unintuitive, full of bugs, or built by developers with little to no expertise. A longer time frame, however, can have its own problems; often resulting in an app that has no clear vision, is overbudget, bloated with unnecessary features, or doomed to crash and burn before it's ever released.

A 4-6 month period ensures your app is launched, fully realized and working, into a marketplace that hasn't already moved on from your big idea. An app that may have made a big splash in 6 months is most likely not the app customers want in a year or more, often because another company has already launched on-time with a similar idea and poached your client base.

With the overall time frame sorted, what are the stages of app development and their individual timelines?

Stage 1: A Big Idea and Research

Ask yourself: What is your one big idea? What do you want to offer your target market in order to deliver on a need that's not being met?

Whether the idea for what to offer your consumers comes immediately to mind, or you need some help brainstorming, it's paramount that you take the time to establish your target audience and research your direct competitors. What apps do your competition have on the market? How many users do they have? What features do they offer? If you have an established audience, reach out to them. Go directly to your clientele to find out what features they want in an app or what other companies are doing poorly that you can do better.

Put the effort into your research. It can take several weeks, but it lays a strong knowledge foundation for the subsequent stages of app building.

Stage 2: Planning

As with the research stage, there are two basic questions to ask yourself in the planning phase: What platform(s) do you want to release on and what features do you want to include? These two supposedly simple questions can spawn hundreds more. Will your app be Apple-exclusive, Android-exclusive, or on both? Should your app include the ability to like and comment? What about direct messaging? Will your app be text or image-heavy? How will users login? Through a username and password or through one of their social media accounts? Will you have a scrolling feed? The options can become endless if you let them.

The platforms you want to use and the features you want to offer are largely dependent on the product you want to offer and your target audience, but the one major rule is the larger your scope, the longer development will take.

If your product isn't platform exclusive (ie. if you're not developing a drawing app for Apple iPad users only), you may want to release your app on both iOS and Android to reach the largest number of consumers. However, you need to keep in mind that although developing a product for both platforms will increase your audience reach, it may not be within your budget. On average, development for Android devices can be more complex and requires more lines of coding (and thus more work) than iOS. So, if budget is a concern, you may have to decide between iOS's simpler development and their 1.4 billion active users, or Android's more complicated process and their 2.5 billion active devices.

Whatever your ultimate decisions are in the planning stage, the process takes about a month or so. It's also important to stick with your finalized plans to ensure the rest of the development process doesn't hit any bumps due to unexpected last-minute decision making.

Stage 3: Development

With the completion of the research and planning stages, it's finally time to let the professional, experienced app developers you hired do their thing! As they work, they'll be focused on a few key components of the development stage.

First is the User Interface (or UI), which refers to the appearance of your app; it includes all of the visuals a user will see and is often developed by Graphic Designers. However, a UI without any coding is unusable as anything other than a series of images, as in this initial stage, the visuals aren't tied to any part of the system.

This is partially solved with Front End development, which takes the completed UI and writes code to accommodate the visuals. It's the system that allows users to perform actions in the app, like clicking on a heart icon to "like" a picture. The Front End code is also where the main differences between platforms becomes evident, as iOS uses Swift or Objective-C, while Android uses the more complex Java script. In this form, an app becomes a functional prototype, with actions appearing on the screen, but no follow-through to the rest of the system.

This is addressed with completion of the Back End. In this final stage, developers take both the UI and the Front End enabled-actions, and connect them to the overall system. The Back End creates a complete application, which ensures the action a user takes on one side of the app ties into a result for another user on the other end of the app. For example, if someone leaves a message on a friend's picture, the system controlled by the Back End guarantees that friend will receive it on their end. Keep in mind, the Front End and Back End are often developed simultaneously.

This stage can vary depending on how many features you want to include and how experienced your hired app developers are, but it generally takes about 6 weeks.

Stage 4: Testing

With the app's coding and accompanying visuals completed, it's time to deal with the inevitable bugs.

Before an app is sent out into the wider world, it needs to be tested to ensure it's functioning. Alpha testing, which is done in a closed environment and performed by developers, uncovers any broken features or glitches users might experience while using the app and gives the team a chance to fix them. The goal is to try and "break" the app in as many malicious and innocuous ways as possible. Alpha testers want to stress the app in both the finite, fixated way you intended the app to be used, as well as the multitude of unintended ways your end-users may use the app in their daily lives. Often companies include a second stage of testing, called beta testing, with a select group of public users to help them in this phase. They're people outside of the development team who can help stress an app in similar ways to how it would be used "in the wild". Beta testing is often a great way to gauge whether your app can handle a large number of users at one time, who may be using the app in ways it was not designed for.

In general, robust testing can take anywhere from a few weeks to a month.

Stage 5: Release (and beyond)

Once the final round of testing is completed, the development team has taken any feedback from the beta testers and fixed any problems, your app is finally ready for launch.

Releasing your project to the world starts with submitting your app for approval to either Apple's App Store or Google Play (or both!). When doing so, ensure you have a catchy title and informative description for the app, as well as some great promotional images to give users an idea of what your app looks like and what it has to offer. You also need to be aware of proper App Store Optimization (similar to a website's SEO) and include the right keywords to make sure you reach the widest (and more relevant) audience as possible.

However, when you receive approval and your app is finally released to the world, that isn't the end. The world's most successful apps, like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, are in a continuous process of development. Their respective parent companies spend an incredible amount of time and money

tweaking their app for years after their supposed completion. New system features, new bug fixes, new UI, and new security features to protect users and their info are being continuously patched into their apps to attract new users and keep their existing base happy.

Maintaining an app can last years, but the exact end-date is entirely up to you, your budget, and your desire to keep improving on your product.