Business Apps: Good reasons to start using them now.

Using modern technologies to make applications more flexible and more efficient.

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The digital transformation has been on companies' agendas for many years already. But it has taken modern solutions such as the collaboration tool Microsoft Teams to make them realize that other applications and business processes must be digitized even more - a process that is made more efficient with the right strategy, platform and adoption.

What was often discussed as a scenario for the future had to be implemented within a matter of weeks due to the COVID-19 pandemic: home office, digital workplace, flexible business processes - to name just a few. In particular, the rapid introduction of modern collaboration tools such as Microsoft Teams became a must-have for video conferences and off-site collaboration.

Now that these solutions have been in use for about six months, more companies see the growing discrepancy between modern applications and their current processes. They notice that "media breaks" are more painful than before. To continue digitizing their business processes, they require digital signatures, remote access to applications, rapid and customized reporting, mobile apps and avoiding double licenses for Microsoft 365 and legacy systems.

Strategy, platform and adoption

This results in an enormous increase in demand for modern applications. The big question is: How can IT departments cope with the growing work burden while also ensuring that these applications are rolled out quickly, securely and in a way that can be managed? To this end, companies need three building blocks:

- An application and data strategy to manage the growth of the apps and data. In this context, they must define how the

change requirements of departments are handled by the IT organization.

- A secure and integrated platform is used to develop applications and make reports available. Power Platform including Power BI, Microsoft Teams or Azure can be used for this purpose.

- Use adoption to start use of the platform and to promote co-creation between the department and IT.
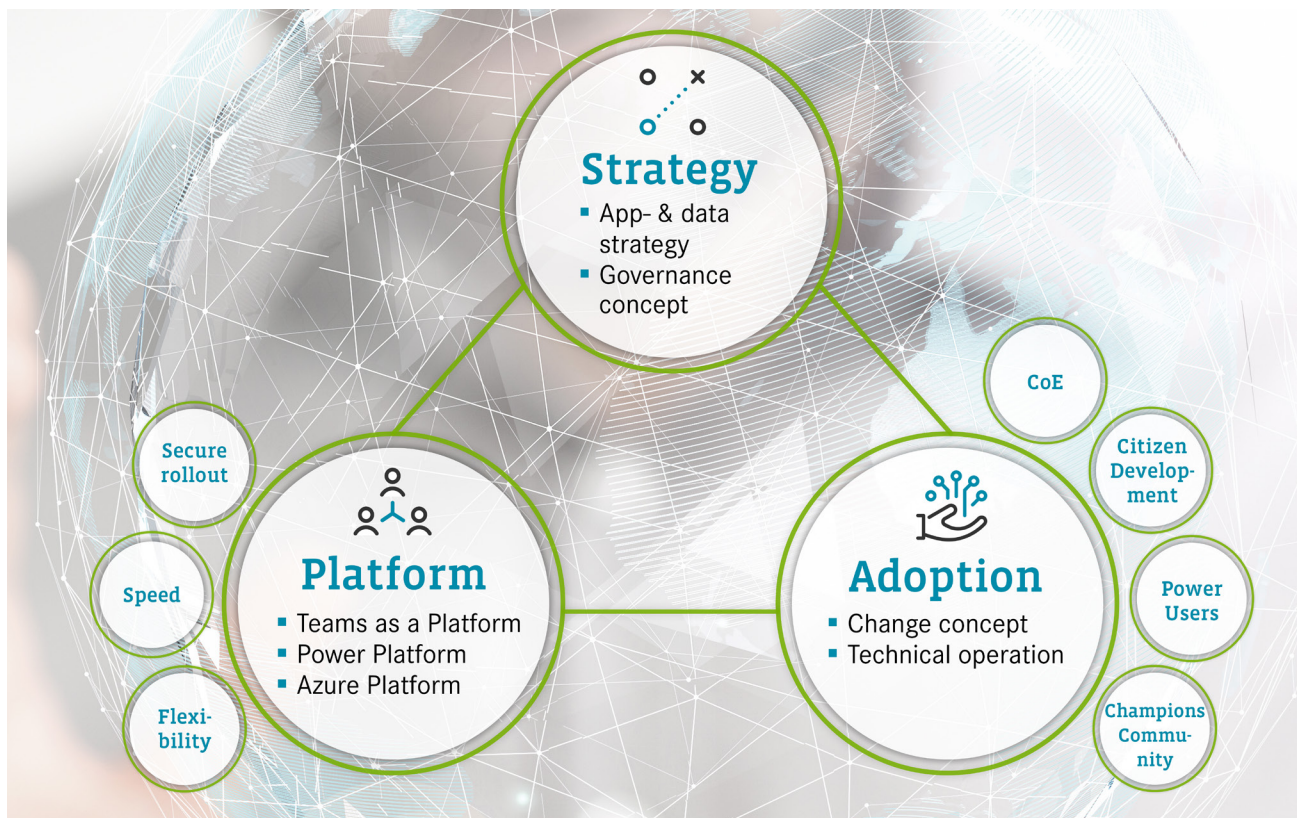
Application and data strategy:

Today, companies often use dozens of different applications. In the future, the number of apps will only increase due to digitization. Particularly in the case of Cloud solutions (SaaS), it is often not clear where the apps are operated and where the data is stored. This means that companies already need to define a strategy for their applications and data now, in order to ensure efficient management processes in the future. Among other things, they must determine which apps are used often, what the future requirements will be, and they need to define the guidelines according to which applications can be made available and used.

For example, they must determine the rights and freedoms that departments should have with regard to their own solutions and adjustments - and which changes can only be approved or implemented by the IT organization. Here, they must find the right balance between self-service and governance, and between proven and new processes.

Integrated platform:

An application and data strategy also raises the question of the right platform. While it used to be common practice to use different solutions from different providers, this approach is no longer as efficient due to the growing number of apps. Companies should decide on one single platform, which is based on

Microsoft or other providers. With Power Platform, Teams and Azure, Microsoft in particular offers three platforms for all requirements - all protected with a common Security. They can also be used in combination while avoiding extreme cost increases. In this way, companies can use the various advantages offered by on-premises and Cloud installations, as well as Microsoft 365 and Teams.

Adoption:

New platforms such as Microsoft Teams enable departments to create new apps mostly on their own. Templates and samples help users to quickly design their own customized solutions. The advantage is that users are able to address almost all of their requirements. At the same time, users are frequently unable to create apps that create added value - just because someone uses Word does not mean that they can write good text. Another disadvantage is the frequent lack of governance or uniformity of the app, multiple apps for similar application cases etc., which results in uncontrolled growth. Therefore, IT organizations and departments should work hand in hand during the development process. For example, they should stipulate which part will be the responsibility of the IT organization, and which parts will be assumed by the department and power users. Many approaches are available for this purpose, including a Center of Excellence, Power User Enablement, and App Factory or a Champions Community, which can be tailored to the company.

Creating an app world

Microsoft Teams, which is already used by many companies, offers the ideal platform for many requirements. It is easy to roll out, and it can be used as an intuitive collaboration tool. Moreover, it also has the potential to become a comprehensive platform for modern digital business apps. Since it is used in the Microsoft 365 environment and is hosted by Microsoft, it offers a secure enclave and also guarantees data protection according to the European standards, so that companies are not required to assign a lot of technical resources to this area.

The platform can be used to roll out not just the Teams app itself, but also in-house development applications. For example, users can use their collaboration applications in one interface, and they can also use tabs to jump to business apps without leaving Teams - e.g. for creating vacation requests or managing projects. And everything that runs on the PC also works in the browser or smartphone.

New solutions from Microsoft

To facilitate the conversion to an integrated app platform, Microsoft announced several new solutions at the Ignite 2020 developer conference, including:

▪ **Teams as platform:**
The expanded collaboration tool provides users with standardized access to the different applications, and a secure administrator environment for rolling out the applications. For example, the Power BI App was released in Teams and enables direct BI reporting in the tool.

▪ **Project Oakdale:**
A new low-code data platform makes it easy to maintain data for applications that are rolled in Teams. The required licenses are already covered with E3/E5 plans.

▪ **Power Virtual Agents:**
This technology for the simple and intuitive creation of chatbots was announced last year. It is now available for Teams apps free of charge.

▪ **Individual interfaces:**
Adaptable API connectors can connect any application to the business apps. While this results in considerable costs in the Power Platform, they are now available free of charge in Teams apps.

▪ **GitHub Integration:**
Effective immediately, professional code management/ filing is also available for the Power Platform. It promotes collaboration between citizen developers and the development department.

▪ **Power BI:**
Deployment pipelines and DevOps integration form the basis for the professional development of modern reports.

▪ **Azure Synapse Analytics:**
This solution for modern data warehouses makes it possible to use structured, semi-structured and unstructured data directly at the source, and transform it for further use.

▪ **CoE Starter Kit:**
Updates for the tool kit enable the rapid development of a "Center of Excellence" organizational unit for managing the flood of business applications.

At first glance, these announcements appear to be only small and inconspicuous improvements. But taken together, they promote the co-creation of business applications, and they make it easier to make them available to employees.

Possible hurdles

But even in the new app world, not everything that glitters is gold. Companies should pay attention to a few stumbling blocks. For example, the IT department must guarantee a high level of security and data governance. To this end, it can deactivate external connectors in the Power Platform as required, so that employees are not able to incorporate insecure Twitter feeds, or so that internal information or business secrets is not leaked to the outside.

The number of environments that are established for this purpose can pose another challenge. While their number can easily be limited in the Power Platform, every team in Microsoft Teams (which requires dedicated functions) receives its own independent environment. This configuration cannot be changed at this time, and it creates a lot of extra work for management and governance.

In addition, the current upper limit of 25,000 members per team in Microsoft Teams can represent a limitation for large corporation. There is no option for setting up rooms that can be used jointly by all employees, e.g. for general information or for virtual employee plenary meetings. Accordingly, it is also important to consider the scalability of the solutions for future requirements.

The most important steps at a glance

Anyone wishing to benefit from the advantages offered by an integrated platform, a comprehensive app and data strategy as well as co-creation should first conduct an analysis of the present situation. The analysis must address the following questions:

- How many / which applications require action to be taken?

- How many critical applications are currently in use?

- What is the estimated number of unknown applications in the departments?

- How can the many applications be managed efficiently?

- What measures have been implemented to prevent uncontrolled growth?

- How easy is it really to prepare apps and reports?

- What are the requirements re: integration of data (silos)?

- Who is responsible for which data?

- How are the employees included in the change process?

- What types of rights should be given to the departments and power users?

The second step involves developing the application strategy before the platform is selected. This raises the question of whether Teams, Power Platform or Azure would be the ideal platform. The options for co-creation must also be considered in this context, particularly the available and appropriate collaboration tools.

In the last step, the new solutions are introduced and the business processes are digitized. Here, companies must figure out how the conversion can be achieved as smoothly as possible. This requires a proof-of-concept at the technical level, and comprehensive change management at the organizational level.

Conclusion

The demand for business apps is growing. However, companies should resist the temptation to simply charge ahead and instead develop an application and data strategy. Then they can use modern platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Power Platform or Azure efficiently in order to create and roll out optimum applications for users using a co-creation approach. In this way, they will be able to compete in the future with rapid, flexible, competitively-priced, tailored and secure business apps.