AT&T Targets Walls Between Mobile Health Apps

Cloud-based Developer Center platform aims to bring together data from multiple apps and devices, connect them to healthcare systems.

February 15, 2012
By Ken Terry

AT&T has launched a beta version of the AT&T Developer Center ForHealth, a cloud-based platform designed to help mobile health app developers create integrated applications. Eventually, AT&T hopes, the platform also will connect these apps to the information systems of healthcare organizations and insurance companies.

Today, there are roughly 17,000 mobile health applications, but they're mostly unable to communicate with one another or with enterprise systems. Consumers can view only the data they collect on individual devices, and their ability to transmit that data to hospitals and other healthcare providers is limited.

AT&T is trying to break down these information silos by offering developers toolkits and an online environment in which to build mobile health apps that can speak to each other through imbedded API gateways and mobile clients. For example, the company has already integrated the data output from three of its own devices: Withings, a wi-fi scale that graphs weight and body mass and also includes a blood pressure monitor; FitBit, which tracks daily activity levels; and Zeo, which monitors sleep patterns.

What's the value of being able to link the data? Eleanor Chye, executive director, mobility healthcare and pharma, mobility product management, for AT&T business solutions, told*InformationWeek Healthcare* that new decision support tools could be developed to analyze the information. "Say you want to correlate sleep patterns with patterns of physical activity. You can use those two sets of data to provide additional insight: Based on your activity level, your sleep pattern is X, so you should change your activity level to achieve Y."

Although this might be more useful to care managers than to consumers, the latter will be able to view the associated data, either on their own device or smartphone or on a patient portal that AT&T plans to build on its developer platform, Chye said.

It will be a "giant challenge" to connect these mobile health apps to the proprietary back-end systems of healthcare providers, she acknowledged, "because the EMR vendors are very much closed." But AT&T is building a "data integration engine" that will enable connectivity not just to hospital systems, but also to insurance companies, which can use the mobile health data in their care management programs.

The AT&T platform is "open" in the sense that "any developer can sign on and use applications off the Developer Center today with no fee or barrier," Chye said. The developers can use all of AT&T's API consoles and development tools, she said, but they're not compelled to surrender their source codes. "The application belongs to the developer."

The integrated apps will be able to work with any kind of mobile phone or service, not just AT&T phones. "It's cross carrier, cross platform, cross language, and cross device," she said. However, she added, AT&T will continue to create its own apps and to contract with some outside developers, such as Welldoc.

Besides standalone mobile health firms, AT&T is trying to attract healthcare enterprises that want to develop mobile apps they can't find on the market. The Developer Center, Chye said, "gives a hospital or an insurance company an easier and more secure way of scaling up their mobile health strategies." Conversely, from the viewpoint of independent developers, AT&T offers the ability to connect with healthcare enterprises at a lower cost than they could on their own, she pointed out.

Although access to the platform is free, AT&T will charge developers for "additional premium services." These include not only connectivity to healthcare providers and insurers, but also data storage, application hosting, other development tools such as texting and location services, and mobile enterprise platform solutions from AT&T. The company will start selling these services later in the year.

So far, about 160 developers--most of them independent firms--have registered with the AT&T Developer Center ForHealth, according to Chye.

Healthcare providers must collect all sorts of performance data to meet emerging standards. The new Pay For Performance issue of InformationWeek Healthcare delves into the huge task ahead. Also in this issue: Why personal health records have flopped. (Free registration required.)