

Low-code platforms are the flavour of the season – and they're here to stay

It will surprise no-one to learn that the pandemic has radically altered the way business works in Britain. The most notable development is wide-scale digitalisation.

Businesses small and large alike have been forced to acclimate to a new way of reaching consumers and clients. As we emerge from lockdown, this may prove to be one example of a 'new normal'.

For instance, changing consumer behaviour necessitated by the lockdowns has resulted in businesses being forced to follow the market and adapt their product offering. Statista reports that *the value of UK online retail sales* in 2020 reached £99.31B – an increase of more than 30% on the previous year's value of £76.04b.

While ecommerce had, of course, been trending upwards for years, this spike will have long term consequences that will make good digital platforms a necessity for businesses going forward.

Take also, for example, the simultaneous entrepreneurial boom we have seen over the past 12 months. Changing attitudes to work and emerging gaps in the market have galvanised aspiring entrepreneurs, leading to a vast array of new businesses being formed.

With an increasingly digital consumer market, and more competition than ever before, only one consequence is guaranteed: there will be huge increases in

demand for IT development.

Soaring demand for sleek digital experiences may pose challenges for startups and scaleups, which are typically constrained by limited budgets and user experience (UX) skills. Even before the pandemic, there was a significant crunch on skilled IT professionals in the UK labour market. This means the demand for app and web development is likely to outstrip the supply of workers with the skills to deliver it.

For this very reason, low-code and no-code tools have become the flavour of the season. The essential function of these platforms is to provide a set of ready-made core modules and 'building block' style functionality that can be tailored and, in turn, amended by even a low-skilled user base.

Ritam Gandhi, founder and director at Studio Graphene. © Studio Graphene

These tools have the obvious effect of demystifying the complex process of software development, but with the added benefit of reducing the associated costs and inefficiencies. For agile businesses looking to respond quickly to changing market conditions, these tools are worth consideration.

What are the benefits?

As we move into an era of renewed market certainty and business confidence, business leaders will look to evaluate the successes and failings of their pivot to digital, and carefully consider how they can establish a long-term transformation strategy.

This is where the fundamental benefits of low-code come in. In short, they enable non-specialist teams to prototype and assemble apps to fit modern requirements. Thereafter, business leaders can easily adjust them at short notice – all at a faster rate than if traditional hand coding methods were employed.

Increasing the speed at which an idea or solution can move from conception into practice, and the decreased cost at which it can be done, will be a huge boost to productivity and aid efforts to streamline overheads.

In the past, contracting and outsourcing has been the common practice for minimising costs in IT development staffing. Now, no-code and low-code tools provide increased flexibility in problem-solving as employees already embedded in the organisation will be able to respond quickly to changing demands.

However, the benefits won't only be felt by those with the most costs to cut:

these tools have tremendous utility for small business, too. The reduced development time and need for specialist skills will allow any budding entrepreneur with basic digital abilities to produce valuable products, whether an app or a website.

For businesses of any size, low-code and no-code tools should certainly be in their long-term thinking. However, the success of these utilities will come down to how successfully they are implemented.

How to overcome the misconceptions and integrate successfully

To determine how best to integrate low-code, a few common misconceptions must first be dispelled.

Firstly, there is a pervasive idea that these tools are best reserved for 'citizen developers,' and therefore have little utility for professional developers. In fact, they can be leveraged by all skill levels.

The greatest draw of low-code platforms is that they empower non-digital natives to build sleek applications. At the heart of it, however, they are all about improving the productivity of existing IT development resources, which means they have an important function within technical teams and large enterprises, too.

To offer an example, a non-technical business expert might utilise low-code platforms to exercise greater control over the development lifecycle of a new app. In doing so, they gain the tools they need if they wish to collaborate with developers on specific requirements and interfaces, and tweak certain aspects of the design. This partnership ensures that products are being built that meets all the business' needs for functionality and usability. At the same time, they make it easier and quicker for professional coders to create architecturally complex, enterprise-grade apps.

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It is also said that these platforms are only valuable in the case of developing simple applications, and their capacity for customisation and scale is limited. It is certainly true that functions of tremendous scale and intricacy are typically beyond the reach of low-code solutions, and that some modules will always be best left in the hands of professional developers.

With that being said, many of these tools are readily capable of the vast majority of purposes most businesses will need, and offer the ability for

software engineers to extend their functionality with code if desired. Their capacity for customisation is in fact a selling point, rather than a downside.

How should business leaders seek to integrate low-code?

A common strategy, particularly for bigger firms with existing in-house development experience, is to take a hybrid approach. In practice, they will typically use low-code tools for consumer and client facing front-end platforms, where rapid response and fast transformation will give the business a competitive edge. This might involve updating a business page to deliver a self-service customer experience: for instance by adding ecommerce functions.

The fundamental underlying structures, which on delivery are less likely to undergo regular tweaking, are usually still hand-coded by professional developers.

Small businesses and startups, which typically operate in a fail fast environment and benefit from being more agile, may also consider a hybrid approach. However, there are advantages to be found at this scale in integrating the flexibility and cost-savings of low-code throughout the entirety of their digital offering.

This could look like a full integration of their communications, commerce, marketing, and customer relations into a single platform that will improve speed-to-market. The associated freedom to tweak and overhaul products on the fly has a number of upsides, not least of which is the potential to gain an edge over larger, and slower, competitors.

A recent *report* found that it takes the majority of in-house development teams three to six months to deliver an application. In the competitive and uncertain post-COVID market, this is an eternity for businesses of any size.

The opportunity to integrate low-code and no-code solutions into part – or all – of a business' digital offering has never been so appealing. As these platforms are adopted by more and more firms at an accelerating pace, business leaders would be wise to consider how these tools can push their business forward.

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