Adoption of tablet computers within businesses has been rapid. One such device that has received a great deal of attention among businesses is Apple’s iPad® tablet. Anticipating this development, SIM Advanced Practices Council (APC) members enlisted Leyland Pitt of Simon Fraser University to research business adoption of the iPad: what apps have been deployed, the business value achieved, and how to best structure the identification of innovative apps that truly create value for the enterprise. Leyland Pitt delivered his findings to APC members (“Realizing Business Value from Tablets”) in January 2011, and at the May 2011 meeting, members shared some of their own successful apps.

Pitt’s research confirmed rapid adoption in businesses—in some cases simply as a “cool” replacement for laptop computers, but in others as a way to deliver unique applications that enhance both internal and external practices. But even in the latter cases, the majority of app development has been serendipitous and unstructured. Therefore, he presented a more structured approach to app development, which APC members found useful.

At the most recent APC meeting in May, members shared some of their iPad apps, applying a framework introduced by Pitt which focuses on the context in which the app is used. In such cases where an iPad app is simply a replacement for an app on a laptop computer, which is heavier and not as “cool,” the context in which the app is used is no different from the context in which the laptop would be used. However, when features of the iPad are leveraged, such as very portable, always on, very long battery life, ease of use, accelerometer, GPS and gyroscope, apps can take full advantage of the context of interactions to add much more value. Consider, for example, a map that can be used on a laptop or iPad. The map is simply a database. Leveraging the iPad’s features, most especially GPS in this case, users can find out where they are located at a particular moment (e.g., on the corner of 42nd Street and Broadway), gaining useful information about the context in which they find themselves. Pitt describes this latter situation as contextive (i.e., having information about the current context). Now consider an iPad app that provides suggestions for nearby restaurants that meet users’ specifications (e.g., Asian food and not too expensive). Pitt describes this capability of providing additional information specifically for that context as contextual.

Trapster® is another iPad app that leverages both information about the context (contextive) and information for the context (contextual). This app integrates maps, GPS and user-input reports of police incidents and speed traps to identify what speed traps are currently in the area in which the user is driving. It also allows the driver to alert the system to previously unidentified speed traps, thereby providing information for other users.

1 This is the next in a series of columns from the SIM Advanced Practices Council, an exclusive forum for senior IT executives who value directing and applying pragmatic research; exploring emerging IT issues in depth; and learning different, global perspectives from colleagues in other industries.
A large number of the iPad business apps that APC members shared fit into the first category of replacing laptop computers and not yet taking full advantage of the iPad’s unique features. Some member firms use eDocs, a web-based document repository tool, to facilitate search and access to manuals and documents on demand regardless of user location. Other members use Documents To Go® Desktop application, which creates a remote desktop by providing two-way file synchronization for selected Word, Excel, PowerPoint, PDF, pictures & other files using a Wi-Fi connection.

A number of members have given iPads to corporate board members so they can review electronic versions of board documents before meetings. Acceptance has been remarkably fast and fervent. To many directors, who find laptops unnecessarily complicated, the iPad’s more minimalist approach holds enormous appeal. For those who find reading conventional computer screens a chore, the iPad has been a game changer. And unlike Microsoft Windows, the iPad has no time-consuming boot sequences or laptop fold-up screens. Especially with the BoardVantage app, starting and use is simple. The iPad’s built-in WiFi allows directors to flip pages and jump between modules very quickly. And needless to say, iPads weigh much less and are less bulky than the previous stacks of paper directors were used to taking on trips to meetings. One APC member reported that board meetings now take significantly less time because directors are better prepared in advance. And we cannot ignore the “cool” factor.

Moving beyond the “cool” factor and leveraging more features unique to the iPad brings greater business value. One APC member’s organization uses TripCase™, a travel app for aggregating and organizing the maze of travel information that goes along with a trip, getting real-time flight alerts and critical travel updates before and during the trip, sharing travel information with designated people. The IT organization has connected the app to corporate travel information, thereby providing even greater value to this organization’s staff, which travels extensively. This is an example of leveraging the contextive (information about the context) and contextual (information for the context) capabilities of the iPad.

Several APC member firms use iPad apps for empowering sales reps with information about the customers on whom they are making sales calls (contextive) as well as other potential customers they might call upon, given their location, if time permits (contextual). Results have been better customer interaction and greater productivity.

An APC member firm in the automobile industry cited two iPad apps that leverage contextive and contextual information. The firm has equipped its service reps with iPads to access service history about cars being dropped off for servicing as well as inventory of additional items that can be offered to the customer (both services and products, such as new tires). That same firm has equipped automobile showrooms with iPads, one per automobile in the showroom, in which a customer can design a car with his or her specifications, mixing and matching car colors, wheel options, and interior options while standing in front of models in the showroom. Salespeople can use the app the view vehicle information, such as the pricing associated with each feature. Throughout the process, customers have the option of viewing the car from the outside or inside. When viewing the exterior, customers can rotate the vehicle to view it from different angles and can even change the background to see what the car will look like when parked in the driveway compared to when driving on a road with mountains in the distance. The benefits to the dealer include reduced required floor space and a quick and easy method for demonstrating possible combinations of features to customers – most especially those combinations already available at the dealership.

APC members were excited about the possibilities that have only begun to be tapped for adding business value through iPads by leveraging the device’s unique capabilities. They found Pitt’s framework for exploring the context in which the interaction will take place useful for envisioning ways to provide customers with superior service while greatly enhancing productivity and revenue.