

 Creator

Agile application development in the holiday sector

The story of how one of the UK's largest leisure operators used agile development to build complex apps, from food allergen trackers to customized restaurant booking apps and several tailored solutions for their businesses.



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About Bourne Leisure

Bourne Leisure Holdings Limited is a British private company which owns a number of subsidiary undertakings operating in the leisure and holiday sectors in the United Kingdom, including Haven Holidays, Butlins, and Warner Leisure Hotels. As one of the UK's largest privately-owned leisure operators, Bourne Leisure has over 50 locations around the UK, welcoming millions of holidaymakers from all reaches of the public.





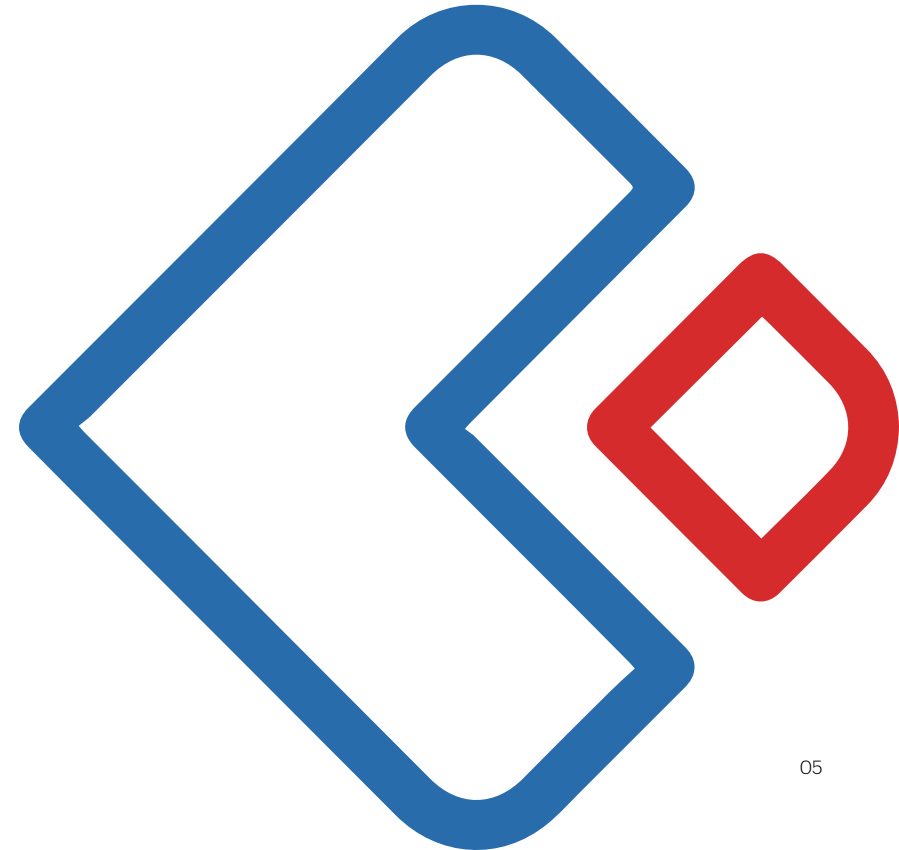
We pride ourselves on making the UK holiday very accessible and enjoyable. One of our biggest strengths is making memories for those families, which is really important, especially in these very challenging times.



-Neil Hobbs

IT Director at Bourne Leisure

**Neil Hobbs, the IT director of
Bourne Leisure, on why he calls
Zoho Creator a "Swiss army knife."**





Rediscovering **the UK holiday**

An Interview with Neil Hobbs



Holidays in the post-pandemic world

What was the holiday landscape like after the pandemic?

We had a difficult season when traveling abroad became more challenging in light of safety concerns. However, we've seen the demand for UK holidays soar over the last couple of months.

As several travelers rediscover the UK holiday, we know we're brilliantly placed to help them. So, we're very hopeful for not just the rest of this year but for the years to come.



What are the challenges you faced when reopening for business?

We have 37 caravan parks across the UK. We have over 40,000 caravans spread across those 37 parks, and we welcome millions of holidaymakers every year. We're involved in everything from holidays to retail. We operate Papa John's restaurants, Burger King, fish-n-chip shops, pubs, restaurants, supermarkets, mini markets, and launderettes.

Every one of our sites is like a small town, which means we have all the challenges involved in running a town.



We were suddenly faced with the opportunity to reopen within the government guidelines. As these guidelines were evolving every day, it wasn't easy to definitively establish what we needed to do to open. So our agility and ability to act and develop systems very quickly became more important than ever.

The right fit

What made you choose Zoho Creator for your requirements?

Everyone talks about agile development and being able to *"pivot and react"* quickly. But this has never been more true than it is with ever-changing timelines.

We aimed to reopen in a new, safer, and more secure way with our operations more streamlined than ever before.



It's not always easy to find off-the-shelf solutions to fit our requirements. We turned to Zoho as one of our go-to tools, mainly because of the speed it gave us. I experimented with Zoho Creator for six months and found it easy and reliable to whip up solutions, even for simple form-based data capture.



Rapid app development with low-code

Why did you choose low-code over packaged solutions?

Most of the hospitality industry I've come across have had to drastically change their operating model. Most of the requirements are for small operations for which the business did not use digital systems in the past. For example, whether you're a small family pub with only ten tables or a large establishment, you have to register every visitor that comes in.

In the UK, we've seen a number of apps and tools pop up almost overnight to support these types of businesses. They're of varying quality but they're nearly always developed for the mass market.



When you've got a fairly complex organization like ours and complex operations, off-the-shelf tools don't always get the job done.

I've been working with low-code technology since the early 90s and have always had an interest in low-code tech.

Low-Code is one of those technologies that you want to have in your back pocket. You don't know when you're going to need it, but it's good to have it available, and it's good to have access to the skills to be actually deliver something.



Booking systems that meet social guidelines

Which was the first full-fledged app that you built on Zoho Creator?

The pandemic was a small cultural revolution for us, in terms of social distancing in the spacing of tables, limiting capacity, and giving guests and holidaymakers the option to pre-book in advance.

I've been working with Zoho Creator for a long time and am very aware of its capabilities. When an opportunity presented itself and we needed an extensive table booking system, I started coding on the 24th of June. We thought it would be a stop-gap solution until we could either buy or build something production-ready. However, the restaurant booking system has kept us thriving for about seven years.



By the 3rd of July, we had the first version of our table booking system up and running. We're happy to say that it's holding up very well and has just processed its hundred-thousandth restaurant booking since going live in early July. It's serving over 80 different restaurants and venues across the country, managing the flow of guests, giving guests and holidaymakers the option to choose and book in advance.

Customer adoption was effortless and we will run the booking platform probably until the end of this season. We've been very pleased with it, and low-code was the right solution for the short amount of time we had.

How many applications have you built on Zoho Creator?

We've probably built over 30 applications, most of them booking systems and wide-ranging prototypes. We would also build apps for nominations to employee recognition schemes, forms for data capture, simple reports for the team, and gathering customer feedback. Using these apps made it easier than receiving hundreds of emails and then transferring them into spreadsheets.

We had another Zoho Creator app for tracking deliveries as part of the Haven business. The challenge

with having several key manufacturers is getting real-time information about the production process and delivery timetables.

I am very committed to using it in the future for whatever application I need, whether that be a prototype or production software.



Ease of adoption

Was there a steep learning curve?

The test of sound technology and good software is high adoption, low friction, and low incident rate for both your end-users and the team using it.

Many operators were skeptical about how we would develop a digital booking platform in such a short period. And there was a lot of worry that they would not have sufficient time to train on it.

While we use the low code technology, the ethos was really about low-code training.



We did put some support guides together, just for reference. But there was no formal training, as our operators found the transition from pen and paper to the platform very easy. It was very intuitive to use, as most good apps should be.



Challenges in IT

What are the pain-points that Zoho Creator addressed?

IT is probably one of the biggest challenges. But getting a prototype ready elevates the level of discussion that you can have with operators and technical people alike.

What we have done on a very regular basis is use Zoho Creator to build prototypes very quickly. When I say very quickly, I mean that pre-covid, we might have had a meeting in the office and talk about a potential solution that we need. We'll have that meeting at two o'clock in the afternoon and by four o'clock, I'd have sent the attendees a sample mock-up.

With Zoho Creator, you can have a prototype in people's hands, usually within 24 hours, to actually



start evaluating how difficult it will be to develop and how it will work.

This really gets the conversation going, and great solutions start with great conversations about why we're doing this, and how it'll work. I've found Zoho Creator invaluable in enabling those discussions to happen.

When a requirement came up, I didn't hesitate too long in reaching into my back pocket for Zoho Creator to work out whether it could fill the need. And it did, by a country mile.



Delivering food allergen information

What other solutions did Zoho Creator offer?

A very complex part of the food business is delivering food allergen information. The dish ingredients are stored in large databases and within these ingredients are a subset of 14 allergens and everything else. It can be challenging to convey to both customers and guests exactly which dishes contain what allergens.

So we took the allergen information for the dishes and presented it on an app built on Zoho Creator. After a conversation with a customer about their allergies, we would just tick some boxes and it would auto-filter what dishes were available to them. Conversely, if they picked a few dishes, warning signs would come up with allergen information in different colors, making it simple and intuitive to use. This was an invaluable step in the process of understanding customers' needs.



Zoho Creator is a Swiss Army knife

Would you call Zoho Creator versatile?

Most of our requirements were small projects, with a two-day turnaround to give the operator what they needed and quickly get results. Often, these projects were very short-term, lasting three or four weeks. It was impractical to go through our standard procurement processes and engage with a vendor for something you'd only need for a couple of weeks.

We use Zoho Creator to rapidly churn out apps and then drop them once the requirement is met. All this at almost zero cost because you've already got your subscription. I really think of Creator as my Swiss army knife that has saved me in critical situations over the past six years.



How many users use the applications?

We must have around 20,000 owners and probably about 60,000 customers, end-users and holidaymakers making bookings on the system. Also, we have about 50 or 60 of our team on site that use reports from the system to manage the flow of guests coming into the restaurants. So, I have to say it's very well-used.

How did the organization benefit from Zoho Creator?

It's one thing to be productive and efficient, but right now, the solutions and procedures that we put in place have to, first and foremost, deliver safe operations to our team and our guests.

I had absolute confidence in the reliability of Creator's back-end database. I knew that however many users were making bookings, we would see the same performance. We ensured that our team could welcome any number of guests into our restaurants and venues and know exactly who booked when and who sat where. We could fit the right number of people into a venue without going over capacity. And, in the rare event of any incidents, we'd have a full track and trace audit.

Creator also wins on the speed of deployment. Unless there's an off-the-shelf package that is, at least, an 80% fit for business, Zoho Creator is one of the only platforms that allowed us to digitally deliver a safe environment to our team and guests in this timeframe.



On Savings

How much has Zoho Creator helped you in savings?

The alternative to Zoho Creator, at the time, would have been putting in manual efforts. We would have to have more teams working per day across 36 parks, another 70 team members administering a manual booking system and more people to manage that number of bookings. This is a massive benefit to any business.



Simple and Powerful features

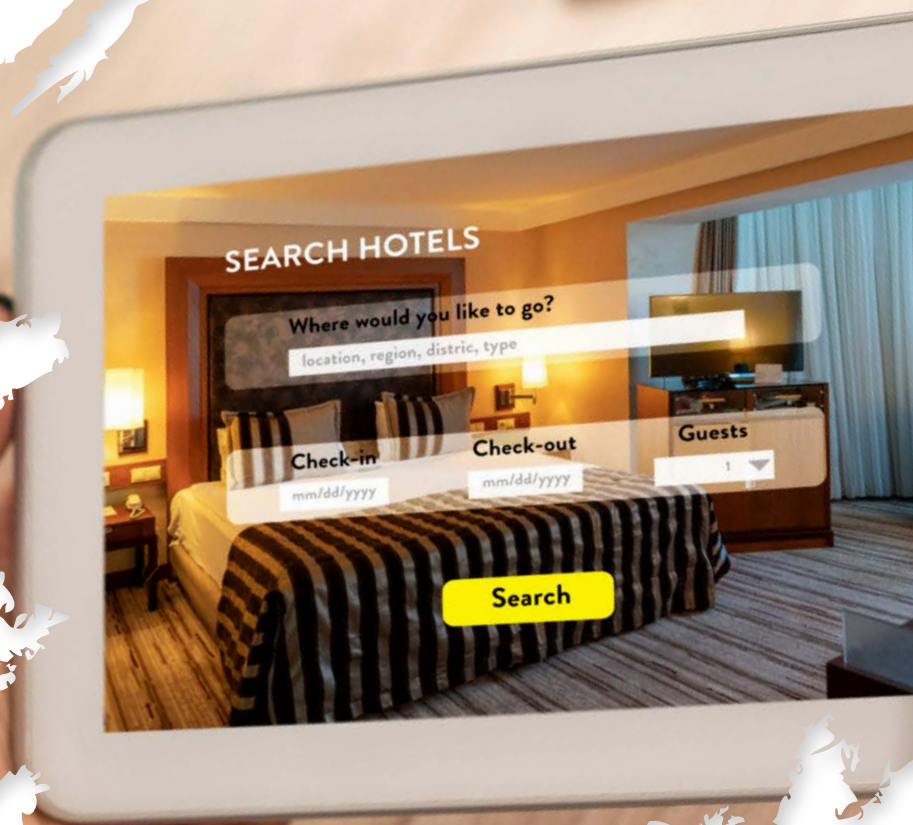
What are your favorite features of Zoho Creator?

Two of the features that I really like are at opposite ends of the spectrum. One is the absolute simplicity of the drag-and-drop form design, which is the basis of almost all Creator applications. The other is the power of Deluge scripting, which gives you complete control over every element of the application (*depending on your skill levels with code*).

The combination of these features - the simplicity of form design on top and complexity of Deluge workflows underneath, combine to create powerful applications.



The forums are also great for getting insights and seeing how other people have used Creator. I read them fairly regularly to get tips on Deluge scripting.



Support Experience

How happy are you with Creator's customer support?

I've only reached out to support once, but it was a great experience.

I was working on a booking system project at the time and was using the Professional plan. As the system scaled, it soon became apparent that I would need to either upgrade my plan or change the number of data records I would have access to.

It was a time-critical issue, and I needed more records and some other features in my plan within the next 24 hours. The support team was superb and got me sorted within 15 minutes. I got my package reconfigured to support exactly what I needed, and all over online chat.

We went live with our project in a few days later.



About Zoho Creator

Software is our craft and our passion. We believe that businesses should be able to manage their operations with innovative, custom-built software. Zoho Creator, our low-code development platform, helps you develop beautiful software to solve business problems without hours of coding.

Businesses across industries can transform their ideas into applications on the platform. You can build your own apps, or choose from our extensive range of pre-built ones. You also get our commitment to continuous refinement and to a great experience. Start building today!





www.zoho.com/creator

We'd love to talk! Reach out to us:
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