

Low-code for pro coders? The new Zoho Creator Platform and the rise of co-coding

By Phil Wainewright

SUMMARY:

An upgrade to Zoho Creator Platform heralds the rise of co-coding as pro coders turn to low-code toolsets to collaborate with business users on app development

People often think of low-code and no-code development tools as something that IT professionals won't touch. But developers know a good thing when they see one, and if a low-code toolset can help them get the job done faster without any hidden downsides, why wouldn't they make use of it? With mounting pressure on IT teams to do more with less, there's a growing trend of pro coders turning to low-code platforms to help them quickly deliver workflow automation in collaboration with business colleagues — you could call it co-coding. A new version of Zoho Creator, which launches today, caters to this market.

Alongside its popular CRM, productivity and business software offerings, Zoho has built up a strong following over the years for Creator, which since its first appearance in 2006, has offered a low-code route for building custom apps. From those early days as an online database platform, competing with the likes of Quickbase and later Airtable,

Creator has evolved to take on many additional capabilities. This latest version now offers a fully functional low-code platform that's designed to appeal to IT pros as well as line-of-business users — more details on that in a moment.

In our conversations with Zoho customers, we often encounter Creator users, who value the flexibility to add their own custom apps alongside Zoho's ready-made portfolio. But there's also a substantial cohort of Creator-only customers. As a prelude to today's launch, I was able to speak to one of this cohort last week. Gaurav Kakkar is Systems Process Manager at Emirates Logistics India, a freight forwarding, supply chain and logistics business operating across 14 locations with around 300 employees. He says he values the flexibility and speed of the low-code platform:

“ If today somebody comes and says, ‘Okay, we should do these modifications,’ it won't take me much time. I mean, not more than a week's time to create those changes and upload it for everybody. They're also able to give me technical capabilities, plus, they give me the flexibility of doing my work my way. ”

Multiple apps built in Creator

Emirates Logistics now has multiple apps built in Creator that automate various aspects of its operations and customer interactions. One core process is freight forwarding, which by its nature includes large volumes of paperwork at every stage — “This industry works on paper,” says Kakkar. Here, one app has eliminated 60% of the documents that used to be printed out by the freight forwarding unit. Instead, they are now stored in Creator, where they are immediately accessible to other departments that need sight of them. The same application has also been used to provide live tracking to customers. Kakkar explains:

“ This involves the back office team, the operations team who are on the ground, taking the cargo in, in the ports or CFSs [Container Freight Stations]. So we have provided them with a mobile creator app. They just fill in the form, click the images right into the app itself, and it is recorded in the shipment. And whatever [documents] they record or upload are also visible to customers, in real time. ”

There are examples of Creator apps in use across virtually all functions of the business. The sales team has one that has replaced spreadsheets to provide better tracking of sales calls. The pricing department uses an app to track quotations. Finance has an app that makes sure compliance fees are paid on

time. HR has several apps, including a corporate directory, an app to record inventory purchased and issued to staff, a COVID tracker that records each employee's vaccination status, and others for recruitment and training. In essence, Creator has become the go-to platform for workflow automation at the company.

Kakkar has looked at ready-built apps in the Zoho portfolio and is now using Zoho's email marketing product, integrated with his own sales call tracking app built in Creator. But in general he says it's difficult to make a business case for buying these more sophisticated apps when it requires no new budget to build something simple enough for their needs in Creator.

More app building capabilities

The upgrade to Zoho Creator Platform is designed to appeal to IT professionals like Kakkar, who use its low-code features to help them speed development while collaborating with business users. For each project, he first sits down with users to map a flowchart of the process, along with some sample screens if it's a more complex app. Once the app design is agreed, he then develops the module and has users try it out for a week or so to find any issues. He then makes changes as needed before deploying for everyone to use.

Today's announcement brings more app building capabilities into the Creator platform, while adding more support for IT governance of the whole process. Highlights include:

- The new platform expands to incorporate blueprinting, integration and analytics directly into Creator rather than having to use separate apps for these functions
- A single dashboard gives IT a view of all three stages of the application lifecycle — development, deployment, and management. Centralized governance helps IT establish guiderails covering elements such as role-based access controls, audit trails, backup options, and personalization options including localization and branding. There are also dashboards to view and manage users and billing.
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- There's new support for data integration, with a Smart Import feature that uses AI to speed data transformation and handling. A new Unified Data Modeling feature helps automate data integration with a unified data architecture and plug-and-play connectors.
- Developers can now add high-end BI functionalities directly into Creator apps at no extra charge, bringing capabilities such as predictive analytics, data alerts, what-if analysis, data blending, and conversational analytics.
- Integrated communication and collaboration to provide on-the-fly support to users, including messaging, sending files, sharing screens, and the ability to make audio and video calls.

- Other developer capabilities include a drag-and-drop, graphical process blueprinting tool, an integration status dashboard to help detect connection errors and bottlenecks faster, and new serverless functions — the ability to write, store and execute reusable code blocks built in Deluge, Java, or Node.js.

My take

Kakkar is typical of the growing breed of IT specialists who work closely with business teams, rather than closeted behind the walls of IT. These business systems professionals are focused on unblocking process bottlenecks and helping business users achieve their goals, using whatever tools do the job best. This much more collaborative approach to application development requires a different mindset as well as new tools. As Kakkar explains:

“ My role is to understand the company’s processes and automate them. I regularly interact with all the managers, as well as the team directly who is working on a particular part. Can I try to understand if there is a way that we can help them improve their particular process and bring it online? ”

A lot of the conversation about low-code assumes that business users can just go off and build their own apps independently of IT, but I think that's not a viable approach. The clue is in the name — it's low-code, not no-code. When you're building end-to-end automation to support core business processes, some element of coding is inevitable, whether that's for data transformation, integration, custom extensions, or whatever. To my mind, a low-code toolset is one where business users can build, try out and tweak some processes for themselves, but where pro-coders can also step in and solve the harder challenges that are bound to surface.

That's why I'm promoting the term co-coding for this scenario. There needs to be close collaboration, communication and co-operation between the pro-coders and the no-coders to define the right apps and then get them working reliably and efficiently. Even if all the development work is being done by the pro-coders, as at Emirates Logistics, the toolset speeds the process so that there can be rapid feedback and testing, and it's not too intimidating for non-technical users to participate with the support of their IT colleagues.

The challenge for vendors like Zoho, therefore, is to help their customers adjust to this new more collaborative approach to application development so that they can get the best out of Creator other other low-code toolsets. This is not about putting IT professionals out of work, it's about helping them work faster and more closely with their colleagues across the organization to help achieve their business goals.