Zoho Creator

Build – Integrate - Analyze

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Zoho is a privately-owned technology company that was founded in 1996 as Adventnet, Inc. and has quietly evolved into an ambitious global player that serves the SMB and enterprise markets with cloud applications. The company offers a suite of more than 50 business, collaboration and productivity applications. These include applications for CRM, project management, finance, human resource management, analytics and support.

The company is headquartered in Chennai, India. It has eleven offices in India, five in the United States and has offices in Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Japan, Singapore, China, Egypt, South Africa, United Arab Emirates and the Netherlands. Offices in France and Germany are in preparation. Zoho has more than 10,000 employees as of the end of 2021. It is present in 180 countries with more than 75 million users.

Zoho is led by its co-founder and CEO Sridhar Vembu. Being a privately held company, Zoho is not obliged to, and does not publish revenue or profit numbers. However, the company indicates a track record of profitable growth that is well in the double digits.

The company manages its growth organically, i.e. without acquisitions. All applications are built by Zoho, using one single hard and software stack. They are deployed and delivered via Zoho owned data centers in the United States, Europe, India, China and Australia. Following this unique approach, the company has built a solid platform with a unified data model that allows it to grow and deliver software at high speed.

Core values of Zoho include corporate self-determination, privacy as a principle and a commitment to delivering high value.

Zoho Creator

Zoho offers nine tools that range from no code to pro code.

- DataPrep: Zoho DataPrep is a comprehensive solution to visually model, cleanse, prepare, enrich and organize large volumes of data from multiple data sources.
- Canvas: Canvas is a UI builder that enables the visual creation of record detail pages.
- Sigma: Sigma is an extension development environment that allows to build and host extensions for various Zoho applications.
- Flow: Zoho Flow is an integration platform which connects cloud applications. It enables the creation of cross application workflows by automating information exchange between the connected applications.
- Phone Bridge: Phone Bridge is a configurable connector between PBX systems and Zoho apps to enable telephony across all Zoho One apps.

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    Office Integrator: Zoho Office Integrator enables the integration of Zoho Writer, Zoho Sheet and Zoho Show with web applications and services.
- Zia Developer: Zia Developer is the environment that enables the creation of Zia skills to extend the capabilities of Zia, the Zoho Intelligent Assistant.
- Catalyst: Zoho Catalyst is a comprehensive serverless application development platform for full scale application development.
- Creator: Zoho Creator is a no-code / low-code environment that enables the creation of custom applications without prior coding or IT experience.

The vision of Zoho Creator is to empower everyone to build powerful applications easily. With a growing set of capabilities, it continuously evolved since its inception in 2006 from a simple online database development tool to a platform that is targeted at mid-market companies' IT teams. Zoho Creator covers development requirements from the customizing and extension of applications through integrating different applications to the development of new functionality across the application development lifecycle.

Zoho Creator is deeply integrated into the Zoho software stack and covers the extension and integration of Zoho applications as well as the building of own and custom capabilities.
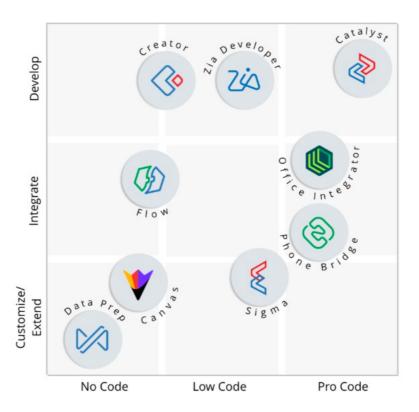

Figure 1: The Zoho development toolkits, source: Zoho

Zoho does not report numbers. However, according to Zoho, Zoho Creator shows a fast growth and a significant number of customers who do not use any other Zoho app when subscribing to Zoho Creator.

Analysis

With the advent of enterprise application platforms, development platforms have gained high importance. These platforms need to efficiently enable a variety of tasks from enabling the development of user interfaces through the easy implementation of business logic and workflows that integrate various external data sources, business applications and services. Doing this, they need to support a variety of different platforms, including web, mobile, but also chat and IoT. AR and VR will become part of the mix soon.
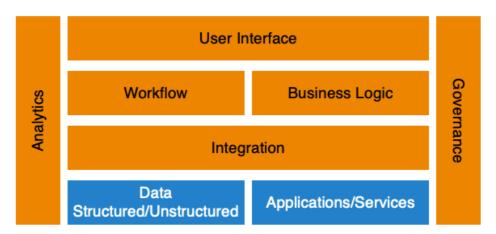

Figure 2: The scope of no-code/low-code platforms

These capabilities need to be augmented by analytics on what is being developed and available as well as governance capabilities including security, user management and application lifecycle management that starts from requirements gathering to retiring a developed solution.

In general, we see three types of development platforms. At the pro code end are professional IDEs that are extremely powerful and in turn require considerable skills to develop applications. They are targeted at professional developers and can be used to develop applications of nearly any complexity.

Second, we have no-code environments that are usually targeted at line-of-business people without programming experience as opposed to the IT department. These environments can be used to build lower complexity applications and application extensions using drag and drop capabilities.

The third category are low-code environments. These are targeted at IT savvy line-of-business people and IT departments. These environments typically require more skill than

no-code environments and regularly include the drag and drop capabilities that no-code environments offer. On top of this, they offer coding capabilities. These can cover simple scripting up to the support of full-fledged programming languages. Low-code environments can be used to implement applications and application extensions that reach from simple to fairly high complexity. Usually, they are somewhat less powerful than pro code environments.

Vendors of development environments mostly concentrate on one, maybe two of these categories.
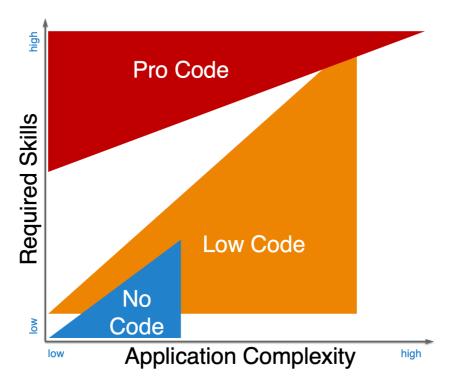

Figure 3: Required Skills vs. Application Complexity

With increasing digitalization, the demand for developers cannot be fulfilled. This along with the need for fast delivery of solutions are why no-code and low code platforms are so important.

Importantly, the distinction described above can be observed in low-code platforms, too. Some are optimized for business people who are not IT savvy, others require considerable IT skills, as they are close to professional coding environments.

Since its inception in 2006, the Zoho Creator Platform has matured for fifteen years. It is in use by more than 13,000 customers who have built around 6 million apps using it. Deployment options include the web, various mobile platforms and interestingly also on premise.

With the Zoho Creator Platform, Zoho offers a comprehensive set of development tools that support tasks that range from lightweight customizing to the development of integrated business applications. Being targeted at IT departments of mid-market companies, it offers an interesting blend of no-code and low-code capabilities. This is important as these departments are regularly spread thin and need integrated and easy to use tools to get their job done fast and efficiently. With the included set of tools, it does not only allow the speedy development and deployment of individual app extensions but of complete business solutions.

While being a low-code environment, the Zoho Creator Platform addresses all three parts of this market. It makes it easily possible for companies at any size and with various skillsets, to adapt Zoho applications, implement custom applications, and/or integrate other applications to achieve a consistent solution set. Notably, besides integrating into the 50 Zoho applications, there are more than 550 external services supported out of the box.

Additionally, Zoho having developed its complete software stack itself has enabled the company to expose all relevant application functionalities as services, which can be easily consumed in Zoho Creator.
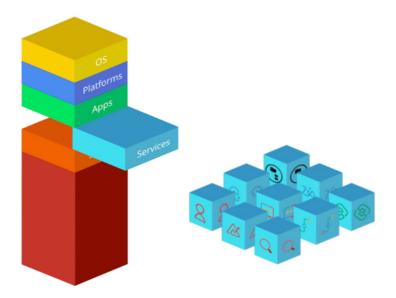

Figure 4: The Zoho stack and service layer; source: Zoho

This gives the Zoho Creator Platform direct access to the strong AI and analytics capabilities of the Zoho software stack. The platform itself could benefit from offering more analytics about what is going on or available in Zoho Creator to avoid "Lotus Notes moments".

The Zoho Creator Platform offers all these capabilities by a smart combination of visual programming with Zoho's own Deluge, a guided scripting language, which is similar to JavaScript and therefore requires only a short ramp-up period.

The Zoho Creator Platform supports governance requirements by being tightly integrated into the Zoho software stack. This way, user rights can be set with fine granularity and audit trails of application usage are offered. it also offers a differentiation between development, test and production environments to implement a viable software development life cycle. Lastly, the Zoho Creator Platform directly supports test and deployment of apps to a broad range of destinations, starting from offering a serverless infrastructure and ranging from portals, mobile and on premises. This includes the ability to test new source code using different roles in different environments as well as chat-based collaboration, as app development is increasingly a team sport.

Zoho Creator's ability to sell independently of the Zoho applications and suites clearly demonstrates that the no-code/low-code platform is competitive and by no means limited to the Zoho software stack.

SWOT

Strengths

- The Zoho Creator Platform addresses business' needs by offering environments that allow to build complex integrated applications without requiring high skills.
- The Zoho BI and Analytics platform is fully available within Zoho Creator thereby allowing to build strong analytical applications including conversational analytics
- The Zoho Creator Platform is often the only/first Zoho product that customers use and shows a strong growth.
- Being built around the Zoho stack, it offers the best possible environment for organizations that run their business on Zoho.
- Zoho's strict commitment to security and privacy is built into the platform.

Weaknesses

- At this time, there is no pre-built integration of the Zoho Creator platform into Zoho's project planning/tracking, test- or ticketing systems
- No built-in dev ops support yet

Opportunities

- Continuation on the path of integrating other Zoho development tools into Zoho Creator to offer onesingle consistent and integrated toolset

- Usage of Zoho's ZIA AI to speed up the implementation of solutions with Creator

- Analytics and dashboards relating to what is happening inside the Zoho Creator Platform

- The process builder uses symbols that might not be understood by the user instead of industry standard notations.

- A good upsell potential from other Zoho customers and vice versa. In either case significant value can be lifted.

Threats

- Zoho is a lesser-known vendor in the no-code/low-code area. This might lead to Zoho Creator being made a niche product that mainly serves Zoho's own customer base, if Zoho Creator does not have a strong enough visibility of its own right.

- Zoho Creator's deep integration into the Zoho application software stack may be used by competitors to create FUD that inhibits Zoho Creator's growth if not enough success stories outside the Zoho solution stack are presented.
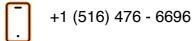
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