

#### ABOUT IFTTT

IFTTT gets all your apps and devices talking to each other. Not everything on the Internet plays nice, so IFTTT sees its mission in building a more connected world. The platform was initially released in 2011. Currently, there are over 600 apps and devices including Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Twitter, BMW, Fitbit, Dropbox and Samsung available on IFTTT. The company believes that the creative control of all services in use should be intuitive and accessible to everyone.

[www.ifttt.com](http://www.ifttt.com)

#### ABOUT LINDEN TIBBETS

Linden is the CEO and co-founder of IFTTT, a service that inspires people with the confidence to control their connected world. Linden graduated from Santa Clara University, where he studied Computer Engineering. Before starting IFTTT, Linden developed his keen interest in all things design at IDEO. He is an ardent fan of radical ideas of all shapes and sizes.

<https://twitter.com/ltibbets>

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#### THE INTERVIEWERS

Professor Donna Hoffman and Professor Tom Novak conducted the interview in June 2018.

# Connecting Everything With Everything: The Sky Is the Limit

*Interview with Linden Tibbets, co-founder and CEO of IFTTT,  
San Francisco, CA, USA*

You want your shopping list to appear on your car's dashboard? Or to have your coffee brewed as soon as you get up? No problem, if you know IFTTT. IFTTT (pronounced like “gift” without the “g”) is a neutral platform that offers easy and free ways to get all your apps and devices talking to each other. Millions of users worldwide have enabled more than 75 million Applets for over 600 services that already cooperate with the platform. Linden Tibbets, co-founder and CEO of IFTTT explains how this platform works and how end users and companies can get more value from being able to connect just about everything with everything.

**DONNA:** IFTTT is a fairly young company. In the tech scene, people might know that you are a start-up that connects apps and devices, but many marketing people might not know you, yet. How would you explain IFTTT to a newbie? Why do we need IFTTT?

**LINDEN:** In a nutshell, IFTTT is a trusted, neutral platform that allows digital services of all kinds to work together on your behalf. It allows different services to access each other in ways that improve the individual end-user experience.

**DONNA:** Which type of services are we talking about? Just digital to digital or digital to physical or all of it?

**LINDEN:** We have realized that in the future, everything in the world is going to be a digital service. Every brand, every organization, every noun. You literally couldn't name anything that isn't going to be either directly connected to the internet or closely tracked by it in the future. You have things like Domino's

Pizza, a Toyota Prius, Gmail and a connected Ring doorbell and each of these services has data about you and knows who you are and what you want, but each is its own isolated island. Domino's can deliver pizza, Gmail can send an email to anybody in your address book. But as we increasingly surround ourselves with such services, the value of each is closely linked to how well it can work together with other services.

**DONNA:** Is IFTTT a service or a platform?

**LINDEN:** Both! We are a platform for services. We look at ourselves as a place in which everything you might adopt in the future, your cellphone, your cable TV, Netflix, Internet, Domino's Pizza, your Ring doorbell, your car, Honeywell, your health insurance, credit card or just anything is going to be a service. Over time, the real value of each service will be delivered through its interaction with other services, and we are a platform for these interactions and connections to happen. We bring end users and services to the same table, and they both have a say.

**DONNA:** So, for consumers, linking different services creates additional value? What's the benefit of IFTTT for those providing the individual services?

**LINDEN:** For businesses, the value proposition is slightly different. Even for the biggest players in the world – Amazon, Apple, Google – it's increasingly difficult to build a robust developer ecosystem around their own API platforms. Doing those types of integrations takes so much developer time and IFTTT provides a standard and a neutral platform to make connections between different services. When businesses work with us, they can quickly go from owning an API to turning that API into a robust and active integration and developer ecosystem that drives engagement and creates opportunities for their users to use that service in new and exciting ways. Over time, we will drive revenue for a business either directly from its users or because they can connect their APIs with other businesses that are willing to pay for some of these connections.

**DONNA:** That sounds incredibly ambitious. Are you the only company doing that?

**LINDEN:** Funny enough, I believe that we are one of the only businesses in the world that truly sees these opportunities. Integration as a whole is a massive problem, and the sheer volume of specialized services that need to be adopted justifies a lot of business. In the past, services have not been architected to work with others and as everything is becoming a service online we have a massive problem. Even within a large enterprise, there is a microcosm of hundreds or thousands of discrete services that need to work together for the company to function. So, there are other start-ups who are tackling adjacent opportunities, especially within the enterprise space, in marketing automation and in enabling non-technical persons to make these connections.

**TOM:** In what way does your approach differ from other companies that connect services?

**LINDEN:** Within this space we are tackling an exciting opportunity: We are working with businesses and their customers rather than businesses and their employees. It's a real winner-take-all- opportunity, similar to credit cards or other types of two sided markets. We see the incredible opportunity to be a dominant player and that's why we think our business opportunity is so massive.

**TOM:** What does it mean to be a neutral platform and why is this important?

**LINDEN:** It's incredibly important. We do something that truly has the best interest of both end users and businesses in mind. This is difficult to do when you offer your own services. Imagine: if we had our own cloud storage, connected doorbells or AI assistants, we would immediately scare off Google Drive, Amazon Alexa and Ring doorbell. They would fear that we pushed our own services over others. And with all the service diversification within the big consumer technology company umbrellas, there is a massive problem. It is hard to imagine a scenario in which you order something from Amazon with a Google Assistant. Alexa isn't really made for deep integration with Gmail or Google Calendar.

**TOM:** Isn't it sufficient that services work together within one specific large ecosystem?

**LINDEN:** Not being able to connect across the umbrella of technology companies is not in the best interest of the end users and, frankly, not in the long-term interest of each of these companies either. Short term, it might make sense to solve the compatibility problem within one specific ecosystem in which, of course, the services work well together. But as more and more products will become services, we will come to a tipping point where this will be harder and harder to do. Just look around your home; you might soon have a lot of smart furniture and home appliances and will have to work with different brands that maybe came out years after you have adopted one service or another. Some brands may not even have knowledge of the other's existence. For sure, this will be difficult, and I think the winner will be the one who can solve the necessary integration in the most neutral way possible.

**DONNA:** How is IFTTT fitting into the Internet of Things?

**LINDEN:** The IoT is an awesome trend and we often get identified as an IoT company. This is fine, but we never talk about ourselves as an IoT company. Only about 40% of the services we have currently integrated in our platform are IoT devices. Mostly they are on the consumer side, from vehicles to doorbells, your voice assistants to thermostats. We are excited about the Internet of Things, but this is only a subset of the larger trend that everything will be a service. A lot of the connections that are happening within IFTTT are between IoT services and non-IoT services like your calendar, your email, the weather forecast, Domino's Pizza deliveries and so on.

**DONNA:** Is the hype around IoT justified?

**LINDEN:** The IoT is coming – the world has picked up on this. When it became clear two or three years ago that this was going to happen, that eventually everything with electricity would be connected to the internet, there was a real hype. We expected to have a sort of “iPhone adoption movement” immediately, that everything would be replaced quickly. But you don’t replace things like a dishwasher every two years. So adoption will never be quite on par with the expectations of the hype. Nevertheless, we see that this wave is coming and that it is growing in big numbers and we want to be part of it.

**DONNA:** The IoT buzz and hype is a bit replaced by AI, currently. You see more AI than IoT in the media now. What role do AI and ML [machine learning] play in your company?

**LINDEN:** I think about AI and machine learning a little bit differently than the general public. Typically, if you think about AI, you immediately jump to the interface and think of a human-like assistant. I think of it more as the technique that will help make sense of the massive amount of information and data from all our devices and services. Hopefully making sense means creating value for the end user. AI might be a voice assistant interface, but also a system or just a better way to recommend a movie or a restaurant.

**DONNA:** Can you tell us a little bit more about who is using IFTTT. What are they excited about?

**LINDEN:** The early days of IFTTT were about building something for power-users, somebody who understands how these services work and who has the patience and know-how to work them together. As the platform has grown and more and more people have begun to surround themselves with more services – from the internet to email to Facebook, now Instagram and connected lightbulbs and doorbells, the IFTTT user base began to shift and is now more representative of the general population. Gender-wise, back in 2012 we started with 80% or even more male users; now we are getting much closer to 50/50. We have tried to make our services simpler and more approachable, but we have also added a lot of services that more and more people use just as people have gotten more technically sophisticated.

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**DONNA:** Does usage vary by country or gender?

**LINDEN:** We have been international from day one and anybody can find IFTTT from anywhere. Only 50% of our audience today is here in the US. Other large countries are the UK, Germany, France, but also China and Japan use IFTTT. The interface is in English only, but this will change with time. Obviously, there is a real need everywhere for people to get their things to work together. The variation in use is less by country or gender but depends on the services someone has and what their problems are. For instance, is someone just moving in a new home? What type of connected devices will they decide to adapt? Will they have a smart speaker? In general, if you are an active user of a service and that service can be found on IFTTT in an app, it is very likely you find value in IFTTT.

**TOM:** How do you connect to potential users? If someone wants to control their lightbulbs, for instance, how do they get the idea that they could use IFTTT?

**LINDEN:** There is a difference between the early adopter and someone who just wants their stuff to work when they already use several services. Early adopters are solving the problem for themselves. They know their problem. They want their services to work together, they know IFTTT and they are turning to the platform to solve this by themselves. Those power-users are an important aspect of the IFTTT ecosystem because they publish the solutions to their problems for the rest of the community. The other users do not know exactly what problem they have, but they have a pool of Applets and get recommendations and then make the decision to use that Applet or not. And the future for everyone else in the world, the real big opportunity for all services is to begin thinking about how those options can be presented to the end users.

**DONNA:** How will this work? Will I get a message that suggests a service and where would I see that?

**LINDEN:** Could be anywhere, on a car dashboard or an email a service sends to you or it could also happen within IFTTT. We are building the ability for services to integrate. So, it doesn't really matter how the contact is made. If you are getting a new BMW it might know that you have a connected webcam or home-security system and immediately present a valuable reason why you should allow the services to integrate. By doing so, you might immediately know when someone breaks in, or when there is motion at a strange time. So, they could present the value in different stories and then you are given a choice to say, "That's good, I'll do it" or "No, I am not convinced yet."

**TOM:** So, AI will help people decide what they should connect?

**LINDEN:** AI will be important to help people understand what they can connect and IFTTT has the ability to build an assistant that does a better job of recommending what people should connect. IFTTT could also help other companies that are using AI to make similar recommendations on their own platforms. Airlines, as an example, have a very rich media library for flights nowadays and there is no reason why we couldn't help airlines to power an algorithm, just like Netflix has, to make recommendations based on what people have watched on all the other services they use. This is a problem that we are not solving today, but could solve in the future.

**DONNA:** So there is really no limit to what IFTTT can connect?

**LINDEN:** That's correct. Today we have over 600 very diverse services. All of those have found some way to make useful integrations. There is such a massive long tail of ways in which services can work together and it would be impossible for any one service to even get a handful, let alone all of them themselves.

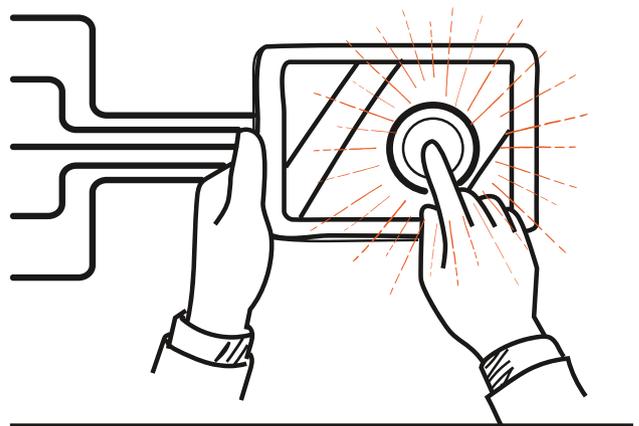
**DONNA:** We have talked about ways to approach end users. How does it work with the companies on your platform? Who approaches whom? How do you integrate them?

**LINDEN:** Firms approach us. We have a very powerful platform, and they need a web API they can integrate with IFTTT. The integration process is fairly lightweight and a matter of days and weeks, not a huge lift relative to building a native app. The only other hard requirement besides the web API is that you allow users to authenticate as themselves on our platform using OAuth 2.0, which is an industry standard. We work with companies to identify where to start, on what the right data is, how to format the data and how to get that data to the platform.

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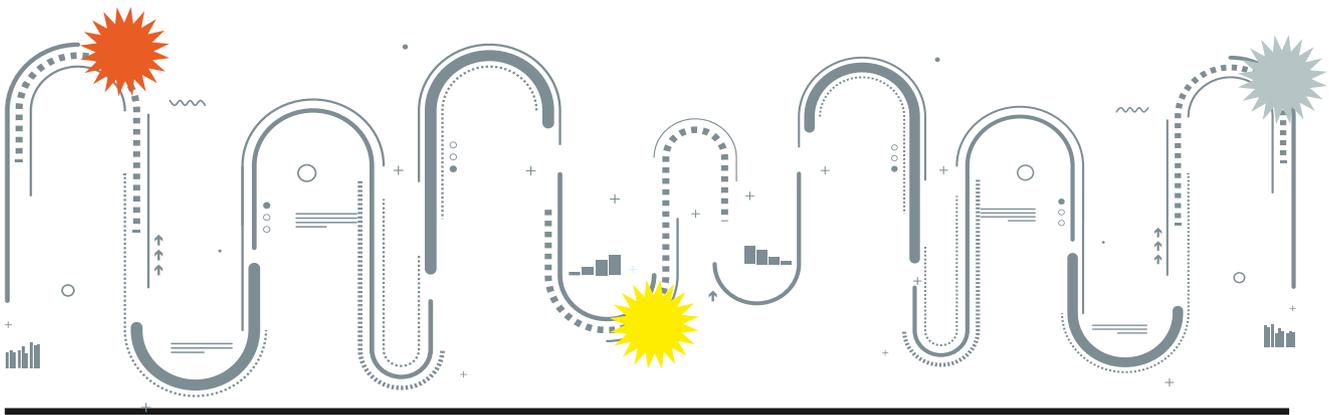
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**TOM:** Is the company doing the integration work, is IFTTT doing it or is it a joint effort?

**LINDEN:** The company has to do some light work, but it is about the same amount of work as if you would integrate with only one other service directly using your API. With IFTTT you get access to over 600 other services for the same effort plus an active, growing ecosystem. You could build the world's best API into the best platform or portal for external consumption. It might be perfect, but still a ghost town in terms of adoption and ecosystem. IFTTT already has an active ecosystem and this is one of the exciting reasons why companies love to work with IFTTT.

**TOM:** What are the revenue opportunities for IFTTT in the system?

**LINDEN:** Our customers are the services themselves and we help them solve the developer ecosystem problem for a fraction of the cost compared to spending millions on their own systems that often fail. Over time, we will also drive new revenue streams, especially in the IoT field where companies need to transition from selling hardware to selling services to survive. We help them build a services business model.

**DONNA:** Let's wrap up with the challenges you are facing. Are they unique to you?

**LINDEN:** Our challenge will be unique compared to those companies that offer their services to single companies only, yet similar to any type of platform business. We have to create value on both sides of the platform – for the businesses and the users. Consistently, we will have to protect the quality of our ecosystem and balance growth with driving real value for customers. But this makes it worth it in the end. Frankly, I wouldn't like to work in anything but a platform business, and I am convinced that we will have incredible opportunities. And really – the sky is the limit!

**DONNA AND TOM:** Thanks so much for your time. It was great talking to you about your emerging platform and all the amazing services you offer. We wish you all the best for your project and will be happy to support you with any academic research on consumer motives and ways to leverage data to create real value.

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