Android's Move to Adaptive Layouts

A Tapadoo Briefing Paper for Product Owners

Executive summary

Google is changing how Android apps are expected to behave when screen size or orientation changes. From Android 16 onwards, apps will increasingly be required to adapt their layouts dynamically, rather than assuming a fixed portrait screen.

For many existing apps, this represents a **behavioural change**, not a new feature. Apps that have historically locked themselves to portrait mode will no longer be able to rely on that constraint in the long term.

While this change is driven by Google's platform requirements, **compliance alone is not the real challenge**; the impact is on user experience, brand perception, and future readiness.

What's changing?

Historically, many Android apps were built to work in a single orientation (usually portrait). When users rotated their device, the app simply ignored the change. This approach has been acceptable because most usage historically occurred on phones held upright.

That assumption is no longer valid.

Android is now used across:

- phones and tablets
- foldable devices
- Chromebooks and larger screens
- in-car and TV environments

To support this diversity, Google is enforcing a shift towards **adaptive layouts**. In simple terms, apps are expected to respond sensibly when the available screen size or shape changes.

When does this matter?

Google enforces platform changes gradually, but with firm deadlines.

- **From August 2026**, apps submitted to the Play Store will need to target Android 16. At this point, Android will no longer reliably respect orientation locks, even if an app explicitly requests them.
- **From August 2027**, targeting Android 17 makes this behaviour unavoidable. Any remaining opt-outs will be ignored by the operating system.

What this means in practice:

- Apps that have not been designed to adapt may still function, but their layout may look awkward, unfinished, or broken when the screen changes.
- In worse cases, important content may be obscured or controls may overlap.

Note that Android 16 offers a one-year opt-out; we do not recommend using this as a default strategy. Opting out simply pushes the problem down the road, shortening the timeframe available to design, implement, and validate adaptive layouts before Android 17 makes this behaviour unavoidable.

Why is Google doing this?

This change is not arbitrary.

The Android ecosystem is expanding beyond the traditional phone form factor, with **foldable devices** being a key driver. These devices can change shape while an app is running, something orientation locks were never designed to handle.

From Google's perspective:

- Poorly adapting apps damage the perception of new device categories
- Consistent, flexible UI behaviour improves platform adoption
- Apps need to support a far wider range of screen sizes and device types

As a result, Google is effectively forcing a baseline standard for layout adaptability.

What this means for your product

This is not just a technical upgrade. It's a **product decision**.

Key implications:

- Existing screens may need redesign, not just resizing
- Some user flows may work better when presented differently on larger or wider screens
- Ignoring the change risks visible UI issues that users will interpret as poor quality or lack of investment

This is comparable to the shift the web made years ago towards responsive design. Interfaces shouldn't simply stretch; they should **reorganise** to make better use of space.

What good looks like

An adaptive app:

- uses additional screen space to improve clarity, not just add whitespace
- rethinks layouts where portrait constraints previously limited usability
- behaves consistently across phones, tablets, and foldables
- feels intentional, not accidental, on larger screens

Importantly, this doesn't mean redesigning everything at once. It does mean **reviewing each screen** and deciding how it should behave as space changes.

How to approach this sensibly

For most products, the right approach is:

1. **Audit** the current app to identify screens most at risk
2. **Prioritise** based on user value and visibility
3. **Phase** changes alongside planned Android updates
4. **Design with intent**, rather than relying on the operating system's automatic behaviour

This can be done incrementally, but it does require planning.

What happens if we do nothing?

If no action is taken, on future versions of Android:

- Your app will re-layout on larger screens and rotations, whether it was designed to or not
- Some screens may appear awkward, unfinished, or inconsistent with your brand
- Users on tablets and foldables will receive a noticeably poorer experience
- Layout issues may only surface late in testing or after release, increasing cost and risk
- What begins as a platform change becomes a visible and user-facing product quality issue

Is this Android Only?

Google has explicitly called this out, and have made it a compliance issue [1].
Apple have been signalling a similar direction, and their SwiftUI layout system already strongly encourages adaptability beyond the iPhone. On iOS, as of Today, apps can be designated as 'iPhone only', but we wouldn't be surprised if Apple follows suit and insists on adaptive layouts. Their adaptive layout mechanism allows for iOS apps to run on iPhone, iPad, Apple TV and VisionOS. It would not be surprising if similar expectations become mandatory over time. There are rumours of foldable iPhones coming as early as September 2026.

We would stress that high-level layout decisions on one platform will largely translate to the other; however each operating system does have its own capabilities in stock UI elements which handle adaptability in a platform-specific manner.

In summary

- Android is moving away from fixed-orientation assumptions
- This change becomes unavoidable over the next 12–24 months due to platform enforcement
- The risk is not "the app won't work", but "the app won't look or feel right"
- Treating this as a product and design concern, not just a technical one, will lead to better outcomes

Resources

[1] - Google's announcement of changes to Android 16 is called "The future is adaptive: Changes to orientation and resizability APIs in Android 16".
Google have a comprehensive guide all about adaptive apps called "Build Adaptive Apps"