

Chapter 78

Face-to-Face Matters: Inspirations from the Human Library

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ABSTRACT

This study describes new features for a mobile application designed to initiate face-to-face communication. While many mobile applications are designed to facilitate digitally mediated relationships (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) between previously known parties, systems focused on initiating face-to-face communication are less popular. The authors' mobile application takes inspiration from a Human Library event where participants come together to share stories with previously unknown persons. Through survey and interviews the authors describe new features of a mobile application to mediate face-to-face meetups. In the next phase of research the authors plan to implement those features and conduct additional user studies on our mobile application with the goal of increasing adoption.

INTRODUCTION

As a result of the growth in websites supporting web 2.0 protocols, the speed and volume at which information is diffused, has increased. For example, on websites like Facebook and Twitter allow geographically distributed members to connect and share information on the web with seeming effort. As a result face-to-face sharing has suffered and as Giffords (2013) points out

the activities formed digitally are comparable to face-to-face groups highlighting the efficacy of digitally mediated information sharing. With the pervasiveness of mobile devices and exponential growth in mobile applications, digitally mediated information sharing will continue to grow. A similar shift was experienced in traditional organizational settings with the introduction of the computer, which prompted studies around the efficacy, and productivity of geographically

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distributed work teams. Olson & Olson (2000) focused on identifying the socio-technical features necessary to facilitate productive remote collaborations and found common ground; work coupling, collaboration readiness, and collaboration technology are important factors for successful remote collaborations.

In the context of traditional organizations face-to-face communication still matters. Difficulties in preserving and the diffusion of organizational knowledge still persist and is the focus of much research in organizational science. Organizations struggle to get employees to use knowledge sharing systems and struggle to implement strategies to get employees to share information. This problem is exacerbated when many employees view their knowledge as social capital within the organization. Additionally, Salis & Williams (2010) identified associations between productivity and face-to-face communications. Sharing does come at a cost to employees. Cabrera & (2002) found sharing information with co-workers often comes with a cost to the employees' and suggests strategies aimed at increasing bonds between co-workers to encourage greater information sharing.

While the context of organizations is not the primary focus of the paper, we can still benefit from considering examples of how face-to-face communication is supported in the organization. For example, in research on workplace configurations Stryker & Santoro (2012), found shifting employees' offices spaces from closed to open does not necessarily improve face-to-face communication, rather the level of communication is dependent on the overall configuration of workspaces within the space and opportunities to support collaboration amongst employees. Ardichvili et al., (2003) found that when knowledge is viewed as a public good of the organization do employees freely share knowledge.

Few mobile applications are designed to initiate face-to-face information sharing. Typically mobile applications, which do support meet ups are those for matchmaking or building professional connec-

tions and are initiated, based on commonalities between two users. For example, the popular professional networking website LinkedIn suggests connections with others based on user attributes like shared connections, location, workplace, etc. The matchmaking app Tinder uses geo-location search to identify other members who might share similar connections. In each case, the system connects previously unknown people based on matching characteristics. The lacuna we address arises from the generality in matching mechanism between persons. Where LinkedIn and Tinder seek to initiate connections between persons for professional and romantic purposes, our research goal is to initiate connections between people to share knowledge (i.e., a tacit, explicit, lived experiences, stories, etc.). Much like distance mattering in Olson & Olson (2000), face-to-face matters in the context of information sharing. We specifically ask:

How might the design of a novel mobile application initiate serendipitous face-to-face knowledge sharing?

The Human Library (HL) is a face-to-face event, enabling conversations between people with different backgrounds and experiences. In an HL, human books volunteer to share their experiences and general knowledge. Our research team collaborated with several libraries involved in planning a series of HL events to design and develop a mobile application to promote and manage participation in the events. While we have ideas about what features might be important in facilitating meet ups (both for formal events like HL and individual conversations), we seek to extend our knowledge by gathering additional requirements, which might increase adoption and use of our system. We developed a mobile application that hosted information about resources available during the human library events. After one HL event, organizers collected feedback on the event from participants, which helped us un-

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