

Using *TriggerThat* Instant Messaging to Improve Stakeholder Communications

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case describes the key issues when an instant messaging prototype called TriggerThat was piloted and reviewed in a university environment. Short Messaging Service (SMS) was a popular technology amongst students and had previously been used in the university sector to push information to students (McCrindle 2006). This prototype and pilot conducted provided a more flexible use of SMS technology, enabling two-way push-pull SMS information transfer between academics and students. The push facility was used by academics to send assessment reminders, marks and alerts to their classes. Students were given the option of registering into TriggerThat to enable receipt of SMS reminders for information available on the university intranet. Surveys and focus groups were used to provide a comprehensive description of student uptake and usage of the technology. Review data and project documentation was used to create models to predict uptake and usage costs. Through the use of role plays in focus groups, which included all stakeholders, upgrades to system features, such as trigger words, were recommended. This case describes the experience of piloting SMS in the university setting and includes the functionality and tested trigger words used.

Keywords: Academic Administration IS, Emerging Information Technologies, Information Technology Adoption, Innovative Technology, Prototyping, Wireless Technologies

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Australian Technology University (ATU) that provides the setting for this case serves 60,000 students per year through more than 950 vocational education and training programs. Study programs are delivered online by distance education and at partner institutions throughout the world. The innovative global University delivers work-relevant education and conducts high quality research in the city of Melbourne, regional Victoria and South East Asia. Academic staff and students also partner with industry and government to deliver innovations to the community. The University vision promotes a 'global passport' for all students and an urban and

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edgy orientation. Underpinned by innovative use of technology, it supports learning outside the traditional classroom boundaries.

The University's strategic plan required the development of Web infrastructure to provide a single point of access for student support services, learning resources, discussion with peers and program/student administration, regardless of geographic location. Projects that tested technology innovations aimed at improving communication between the University and students in the Web 2.0 environment were financially supported. The University's Information Technology Services (ITS) group responded to the strategic plan with a massive communications integration project. *TriggerThat* was strategically aligned with the technological innovations identified as crucial in the strategic plan.

As the University had a vested interest in using new technologies, a competitive research fund was established to enable operational staff in all campuses to propose innovations and conduct pilots. This case describes a funded project, led by an academic in Information Systems. The project investigated the willingness of stakeholders to adopt SMS and the reasons students would prefer the use of SMS over email or the Web. It was acknowledged at the beginning of the project that predictions of usage of new technologies were a major challenge to managing the tight budget. It was for this reason that a small controlled pilot was run, during which academic and student use of *TriggerThat* was closely monitored.

SETTING THE STAGE

Students at the University regularly blamed the difficulty in finding information on the Web for their use of direct contact with academics via email and phone messages. Academics complained that they had sometimes spent entire work days answering or ignoring trivial email and could not locate simple information, such as timetables, on the Web. The organization of information on the Web was not the only issue raised; the need for an internet connection to access information was problematic for a large number of students whose access was restricted to the heavily utilized University provided workstations. A separate project was underway to streamline administrative service information available to students on the Web. This student e-portal development team included representation from the *TriggerThat* project and was considering embedding SMS functionality.

Students placing phone calls to academics was also problematic as both parties had to be available and free to talk at the same time, otherwise messages had to be left, which often resulted in return voicemail messages rather than a personal conversation. Academics did send messages to groups of students using the University's group email functionality and the announcement feature of the DLS. The DLS enabled student access to learning resources provided by academics online. However this required students' to access the Internet. For students to have any-time, any-place Internet access to these messages they needed mobile computers or phones. SMS messages suggested a way of addressing these inefficiencies. Communication from academics using a Web interface to students' phones appeared to be a suitable alternative to student-to-phone or teacher-to-phone or DLS-to-student or email-to-phone-or-computer. Messages not immediately received are stored. Mobile phone ownership amongst the student population was high and they are a cheap ubiquitous technology. Student ownership of the mobile phone meant that SMS reminders and assessment feedback were private and fast (Stone, 2004). Both staff and students could expect messages to be transmitted and responded to without the necessity for a face-to-face interaction. The ability of mobile services to free people from committing to

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