

Health Swap app – Project Evaluation

Summary

Technology has become an important part of everyday life. Whether it's using a computer for your job, using a self-service check out at a supermarket, using your mobile for applications or smart meters at home, technology has infiltrated every part of modern life. Whilst there are many advantages to this change, there is a danger that those who are not as adept at using technology are left behind. The Digital Inclusion Fund, launched by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DDCMS) in 2018, was set up to fund projects which were designed to support people who are less confident using technology to ensure they were not being left behind and could benefit from advances in technology.

The Down's Syndrome Association was one of the organisations to be supported by the fund. Every person with Down's syndrome will have some form of a learning disability and vision impairments, and many may have reduced dexterity, all of which can make using technology more challenging. The Health Swap project, run by the Down's Syndrome Association's DSActive team, was designed to develop a new format for apps which would be suitable for people with Down's syndrome. The decision was made to test this new format by developing a nutrition app, as many people with Down's syndrome struggle with their diet and this fitted in with the core aim of the DSActive programme, which is to help people with Down's syndrome be more active and healthy.

A focus group of individuals with Down's syndrome was formed and they supported the development of the app from start to finish, so that the app was specifically designed to meet their needs. The DSActive team worked with The Distance (app development company) and M & E Consulting (evaluation and monitoring company) on the project and were supported by Citizen Online and DDCMS throughout.

A full summary of the results of the project can be found in the 'Final Evaluation of the Down's Syndrome Association's Health Swap App' written by M & E Consulting. This brief evaluation will highlight the key learnings and will discuss the implications of this project for future policy around reducing digital exclusion.

Aims of the project

- 1) Reduce the Digital Exclusion of people with Down's syndrome
- 2) Enable people with Down's syndrome to make healthy lifestyle choices
- 3) Improve the physical and mental wellbeing of people with Down's syndrome

Budget Evaluation

The final copy of the budget is provided with the report. The project came in a mere 0.28% over budget. There was a significant overspend on the development of the app, which was covered by a significant underspend on the travel costs of the project team. We were able to work effectively remotely, including working with the App development company remotely effectively, which saved

significant cost. Upon reflection, there should have been more money dedicated to the development of the app, however, we were able to make savings on other budget lines to ensure the quality of the app was not affected.

There was overspend on marketing, publicity and postage and on personnel, the vast majority of these were covered by underspends on roadshow events, monitoring and evaluation and on office costs. The main reason for the overspend on marketing was due to the first round of roadshow events having low attendance and therefore a change in strategy to put more resources in to other marketing streams.

Key Learnings

Format of the app

One of the main aims of the project was to reduce digital exclusion within people with Down's syndrome by creating a new format for apps which suits their needs. The app was very visual, utilising pictures and symbols throughout, and icons were enlarged to help those who struggle with their dexterity. Many parents and carers commented on how this was successfully achieved, and that their child or person they support found it easy to use. Parents also felt that their relative's confidence in using technology had improved, and that their relative was better at using technology as a result of using the app. Using the app also helped users feel more confident turning on a device, using the available controls on the device, interacting with the home screen and opening the app on their device.

These results suggest that the format of the app was successful, and the features of the app could be taken and applied on other apps and devices. For example, apps could be developed which require less typing and use more icons which can be clicked on.

User led project

In order to develop an app which was truly useable by people with Down's syndrome, a focus group of individuals with Down's syndrome was formed at the start of the project and they were involved in every aspect of the development of the app. This user led style of project ensured that the end product was truly accessible to its audience. Often projects rely on user feedback after the completion and make changes subsequently. The user led style of project increases the speed with which projects can be completed, and ensures projects deliver on the actual needs of individuals rather than the perceived needs.

Research

The research conducted by the DSActive team and M & E Consulting was invaluable in the design of the app and ensured that the problem the project was trying to solve was clearly defined and operationalised before the development of the app started.

Number of downloads

Over 1200 people downloaded the application, with over 1000 of them being from the UK. Although only 523 of those went on to use the app, a retention rate of 41.1% is above the average of 32% (as suggested by www.statista.com) which suggests that the app is desirable and useful for its intended users. However, more research needs to be conducted in to how to increase this retention rate and how to motivate users to keep using the app, as only 18 people used the app more than 10 times.

Positive reinforcement

Research has shown that positively reinforcing positive choices, in particular earning stars, is particularly motivating for people with Down's syndrome. The app was designed to utilise this finding, by rewarding its users for make positive choices such as trying a new recipe or trying a new activity. This finding could be utilised by other apps and online resources to increase motivation.

Promoting independence

Many parents and carers reported that their child or person they support became more independent with their food choices whilst using the app. They could clearly see what ingredients they need to make a recipe, and the app took them through cooking the meal one step at a time. Food shopping and cooking are important skills for adults who want to become more independent, and the Health Swap app has led to increased confidence with these skills.

Time frame

In retrospect, the app could have been more successful if more time had been available for its design, development and marketing. Some of the improvements raised in the feedback, such as a small selection of recipes, would have been easily avoided if the time frame had been longer.

Developing a more personalised app

Some of the feedback received about the app was around a lack of different recipes and activities available on the app. There was a lack of recipes suitable for vegetarians, and a lack of recipes from different cultures. There were also activities missing from the list, such as walking netball and wall climbing, that users enjoyed but couldn't record. A future improvement for the app would be a wider range of recipes and activities, and the ability to personalise the app more.

Potential Benefit to other Target Groups

There are many key learnings which can be drawn from this project which can be applied to other target groups. The visual format of the app was well received, and would be useful for those with learning disabilities, not just those with Down's syndrome. The format of the app was designed for those who struggle with dexterity, so would be applicable for those who were elderly or had physical disabilities which limited their dexterity. The ability to enlarge icons could easily be built into other technologies, such as self-service check outs at supermarkets, which would support those who struggle with dexterity to remain independent for longer.

Positively reinforcing users for making good choices should be adopted by other apps and resources. Research has shown this to increase motivation and adherence. This knowledge can be applied to

other groups, such as those with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or those with low mood or mental health conditions, to name just a few.

Having a nutrition app which can be personalised to suit its users could lead to a higher retention rate. More research needs to be conducted in to how this would work logistically, and how much it would increase retention, but some of the feedback collected in the final report suggests this would be a worthwhile exercise.

Closing remarks

The Health Swap project has been a very positive experience for the DSActive team, and all should be very proud of the project. The DSActive team are indebted to the support from The Distance, M & E Consulting, DDCMS, Citizen Online, our focus group and the rest of the Down's Syndrome Association.

The Health Swap project highlighted the importance of user led projects and was successful in its attempt to find a new format for apps which would be suitable for those with a learning disability. These findings could be applied to many different areas of technology which would benefit not just those with learning disabilities, but also those who have physical disabilities or long term health conditions.

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