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Developing mobile applications to improve access to mental health support

Dimitris Kolovos Department of Computer Science
dimistris.kolovos@york.ac.uk

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Currently, the vast majority of mental health support is undertaken face-to-face. This can prove problematic for clients due to a number of factors, including travel, timing, conditions, room availability and stigma. In recent times there has been a reduction in funding across local authorities, which has affected adult, child and disabled student allowances. The latter, in particular can cause disruption for individuals at a crucial point in their educational development. The manner via which individuals access support is also changing, with apps becoming increasingly popular and accessible, both in terms of ease of use and cost. Through an ESRC/UKRI funded National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF) secondment, Professor Dimitris Kolovos, in partnership with Keyfort, (who provide specialist support to individuals with brain injuries in the community) has been working to develop a purpose-built family of mobile applications and a back-end platform that supports social analytics, in order to address some of these problems and disruptions.

The research

The app provides comprehensive support that allows a user to access mental health support services from any location, granting them increased control. This reduces the likelihood of cancellation and ensures the most appropriate support is provided. The secondment with Keyfort allowed Professor Kolovos to support the development of a system that provides: general advice; self-help worksheets; online training via webinars; and video, phone and instant messenger support.

Mobile applications open up a fruitful research space for mental health professionals and social scientists to analyse data. The project also acts as a basis for future social and technical 'interaction analysis' to provide greater insight into the identification of behavioural patterns, via the capture of historical trace data.

The outcome

A pilot mobile application was developed as part of this project, offering an online appointment booking system for mental health support. Users are able to search for available slots specifying their preferred advisor and the duration of the session. Advisors can view their daily schedule and access the credentials provided by the user, as well as outlining the preferred communication method for the session (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp, etc.). Notifications are sent to users 24 hours and one hour before their scheduled appointment to minimise the number of sessions that are lost due to users not showing up. Important resources are also provided through the application (e.g. tips for tackling anxiety). Additionally, advisors are able to submit notes for the sessions through which they can recommend resources. These subsequently appear in a special tab in the user's account. Finally, quick-access buttons to emergency phone lines (e.g. the Samaritans suicide prevention line) are included in the application.



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Contact us:

Research Centre for Social Sciences
University of York, York, YO10 5DD, United Kingdom.
Tel: +44 (0)1904 321458