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Use of Personal Digital Assistants for Extension Program Record Keeping

Abstract
This article describes the use of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) in Extension program record keeping, focusing on the recent deployment of handheld computers by University of Florida IFAS county Extension faculty. The project aimed to reduce the excessive workload on county Extension agents due to reporting requirements. A pilot to assess effectiveness in the use of handheld computers by Extension faculty was initiated in the fall of 2000. Adoption rate had reached 87% penetration by 2002.

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Introduction

Information Technology (IT) is a strategic asset in the successful completion of the enterprise's mission. Recent advances in technology have led to substantial computing power in small portable devices, making them very useful tools both inside and outside of the classroom (Dominick, 2002). PDAs have been used in Extension for work in agricultural production (Zazueta, Vergot, Beck, & Xin, 2002). This article discusses the use of Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) in Extension program record keeping, focusing on the recent deployment of handheld computers by University of Florida IFAS county Extension faculty.

The project aimed to reduce the excessive workload on county Extension agents due to reporting requirements. A pilot to assess effectiveness in the use of handheld computers by Extension faculty was initiated in the fall of 2000.

Methodology

The PocketPC-FAS software allows the collection of accountability related data in the field. These data include items such as educational contacts, mass media, volunteers, and materials used by county Extension faculty. Information entered into the PocketPC is synchronized with the desktop and transmitted using the Internet to a central object database. Reports are generated from the database to satisfy reporting requirements at individual, organizational, county, state, and federal levels. The project was carried out in the following stages.

Selection of a Working Platform

A review of available devices in multiple platforms was conducted. Pocket PC devices were selected as the primary platform due to:

1. The small learning curve required for individuals already familiar with MS Windows, MS Explorer, and MS Outlook,
2. Easy integration with MS Windows platform, which is the enterprise level system used by University of Florida IFAS
3. The high quality of the interface at the time, particularly the color display, and
4. System performance at the time.

The specific hardware chosen was Compaq's Pocket PC.

Selection and Training of Participants

A group of 15 County Extension Directors in the Northwest Extension District agreed to be part of a pilot on the use of PocketPC devices in Extension programming and record keeping. The pilot included extensive training and participation in a software development program. The main application used was a PocketPC version of the Faculty Accomplishments System, (FAS).

Software Development/Deployment

The pilot group was part of the PocketPC-FAS software development team, participating in software requirement specification and beta testing.

Results

PDA's were readily adopted by county Extension faculty. Most frequent uses of the Pocket PCs are e-mail, tasks, contacts, notes, and calendar. These were followed in frequency of use by word processing and spreadsheet applications. Other applications included recording clientele contacts of individuals, groups, mass media, volunteers, and materials developed for posting to FAS and downloading and storing Extension publications.

Problems most often mentioned by Extension faculty in the use of Pocket PCs are:

1. Short battery life of the devices,
2. Synchronization problems with the desktop,
3. Limited Internet access (lack of wireless service and modem problems), and
4. Memory limitations found in some of the early models of the Pocket PC.

Adoption

Personal information management software with custom software developed to address county Extension agent needs resulted in a rapid adoption rate. After the early adopter group that piloted the use of the devices in fall of 2000, rapid adoption took place from May through September of 2001, reaching a penetration of 80% of the county Faculty in the University of Florida/IFAS Northwest Extension District. Thereafter, the adoption rate slowed and reached 87% penetration in August 2002.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The success of this project was most likely due to the following:

1. Training was given a very high priority,
2. Technical support was readily available,
3. Users participated in the decision of what software applications to develop (identifying what is useful) and participated in the software development, and
4. Administration gave strong support.

In the immediate future, other software applications are to be developed following the same model of having the county Extension faculty decide on the application to be developed and participate directly in software specifications and beta testing.

Costs and Resources Needed

PDAs were purchased for each of the 15 County Extension Directors at a cost of $550 each.

The IFAS IT office developed the PocketPC-FAS software for the project. Over the course of the project, a graduate student assistant was hired as a programmer under the supervision of a faculty member in IFAS-IT. Training was conducted by the District Director, IFAS-IT faculty, and some of the very early adopters. One technical staff member was equipped with the device to provide support. In addition, the IFAS Help Desk was provided with devices and training.

References

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