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Jabbar, Abdul

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Pilot study on the use of text messaging as a means of communicating with students to aid retention.

Project Lead: Abdul Jabbar

Scope of Pilot

The pilot was carried out across by the Foundation Degree, First year and 3rd Year Undergraduate students and MSc students. The academics who have taken part in the pilot are Kirsten Jones, Deborah Allcock, Eleanor Davies, Kay Smith and John English.

Introduction

The mobile phone has become an important aspect of a student's daily life. Katz and Aakhus (2002) argue that Mobile phone technology is one of the most effective methods of communication in the world today.

Research has proved that higher student satisfaction leads to improved retention. Students are often dissatisfied at classes being cancelled or the time/rooming being changed, not because of the change itself, but because of how and when it is communicated (or not) to them. Similarly students often claim not to be aware of hand-in dates for assignments, or of personal tutorial arrangements, resulting in dissatisfaction and time being wasted for both staff and students.

This study aims to address issues surrounding student satisfaction and staff time. For this study to work effectively and efficiently it is first important to obtain the permission of all the students who are on the pilot. Academics have been given an "Opt in" sheet which has been distributed during lectures and tutorials asking students for permission to contact them via their mobile phone and for their contact details. This process was quite laborious and time consuming taking three weeks to complete.

It became apparent at this early stage the discrepancies between the ASIS data and the "Opt in" sheets. The Mobile phone numbers given on the "Opt in" sheet are more accurate than the details given at enrolment/registration. This put a doubt on the validity and accuracy of the ASIS data and will need to be addressed when developing procedures for collecting student permission in the future.

This data was then imported into the JanetTXT system into separate module/tutorial groups ready for use by the academics. This will be followed up with a period of feedback and consultation which will feed into the final report and dissemination project. At the time of this report approximately 2,000 text messages have been sent over the last 4 months.

Findings

JanetTXT system has been used for a variety of purposes within the Business School. It became apparent very early on the importance of finding a balance between what can be communicated via e-mail and what can be communicated via text. The academics were conscious of the need to use the technology in a responsible manner and to not fall into the trap of accidental "spamming" this can occur when texts that are not directly relevant or information which would have been better suited to other methods of communication are sent.

The text messaging tool has been used to:

- Prompt students to check their email if important information has been sent out.
- Relay timetable information, room changes, notify students that a staff member is ill, snowed in or unavailable and the lecture has been cancelled.
- Chase up students with poor attendance
- Confirm student appointments
- Remind students to approve panel minutes

The outcomes of using the system for the purpose stated above are:

- This has allowed academics to reduce time in updating students on class change etc.
- Less time chasing students for their assignments/work
- Quicker turnaround of student paperwork e.g. student panels etc.
- Effective in enforcing retention strategy
- Time not wasted on students not attending appointments
- Less class time wastage

The feedback from the students has also been extremely positive:

The students have been very positive about the texting trial that has been undertaken by the year one tutor in collaboration with Abdul Jabbar the Learning and Technology Advisor.

BAAF/BAA SSP Year one Minutes 2008

The students have been even more positive about the texting trial that has been undertaken by the year one tutor in collaboration with Abdul Jabbar the Learning and Technology Officer. They feel it is much better than relying on Blackboard announcements or e-mail as the students can react to messages straight away.

It was suggested that it would be useful if the text receiver could have the option to reply to the sender. It would also be more helpful if messages regarding cancellations of classes were sent at the earliest opportunity rather than the recent example of being informed of the cancellation of a tutorial just 30 minutes before its start time. They all felt that this should be a key development area for communication within the University.

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Anecdotally the students have been very satisfied with the system. The feedback in general has been very positive and there is a clear demand from the students for this type of technology to be implemented. More findings will be incorporated into the report to reflect Adele Kilty's findings; her final year dissertation on this subject will be completed in May 09.

However for the success of the system to continue all academics agree that the system needs to work closely with the University records system ASIS. This will require more admin input but will provide an overall efficient service with more accurate and timely data.

The lack of a Business School Alphanag confused the students. The Alphanag is the identifier that lets the student know who sent the text. A minority did not realise that "JanetTXT" was the Alphanag for the Business School and accidentally deleted the text. The main cause for a lack of an Alphanag was due to cost. The contract with the company supplying the SMS text was prohibitive and expensive when used in conjunction with an Alphanag. Any system trialled or implemented in the future will need to have this functionality as standard.

Experiences of the JanetTXT system

The system that was trialled did have a number of flaws which makes it unsuitable for the Business School. The website performance was poor; the site had a tendency to be unavailable for periods of up to 10 days with no communication from the company and no immediate fix.

The system needs to develop a record of texts sent to students similar to the Sent Items section within an e-mail client the current functionality is not sufficient to track what has and has not been sent. In addition to this there are no printable receipts to confirm texts have been sent.

The largest hurdle associated with this current software was the inability to have one central data source which the groups could extract their data from. The disadvantage to this approach was the updating of student data at multiple locations resulting in duplication of work and compromising the integrity of student information. The model below identifies what is required for the Business School.

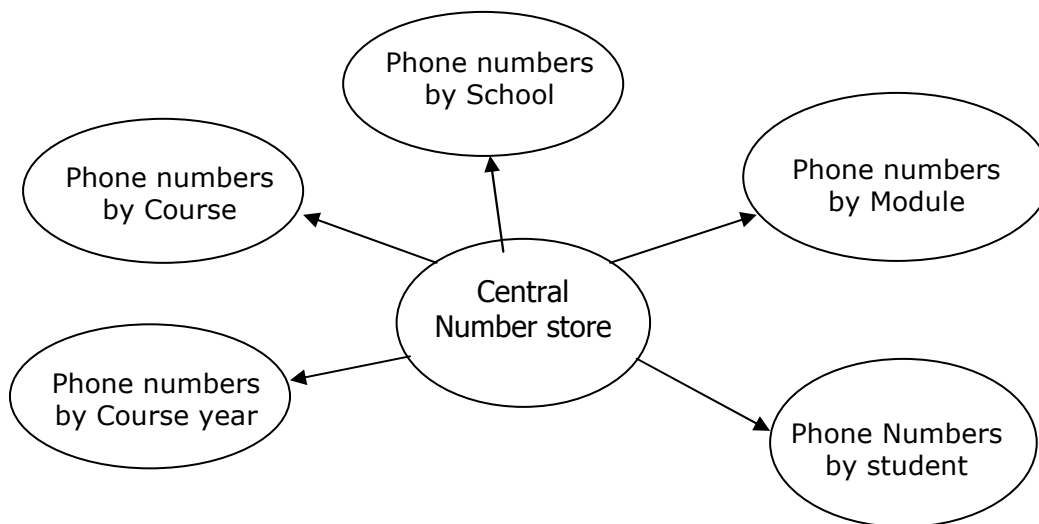


Figure 1: Business School SMS Model

Current Cost Schedule

Date	Description	Net Amount
06/05/08	Janet Messaging Service	0.00
06/05/08	One-off SMS Block Purchase	210.00
28/08/08	Poster assets	20.00
14/11/08	Handset	135.00
22/01/09	PC Supplies	26.41
	Total	391.41

Table 1.1 Costs

The project is well within the £1000 budget.

Text messaging Forecast

This budget forecast is for the academic year 09/10 based upon student and pathway data from the year 08/09. The forecast is based on a 12 month period from September to September.

For academic year 08/09 there were approximately 3,000 students in the Business School, this figure includes Barnsley and Oldham campuses. Based on current data collected over the last 6 months the Business School is sending about 400 text messages per month. If this is doubled over the 12 month period the business school can expect to send about 10,000 text messages for the academic year 09/10.

Provider	Cost per SMS	Expected texts	Alpha tag cost	Cost
Meercom	4.1 pence*	10,000	£60 per year	£470 per year
JanetTXT	4.2 Pence	10,000	£450** per year	£870 per 18 Mnths

Table 1.2 Forecasts

* The cost of the text is being negotiated and is expected to reduce.

** This is based on an 18 month contract at £25 a month

Conclusion

Operationally, the system has been successful. This study has identified a need for an effective method of clear, unambiguous and ubiquitous method of communication. The system trialled during the project may not be the technical solution but there are other bespoke technical solutions available which better meet the needs and requirements of the Business School.

The current cost for the sending of a text message with the Janet system is approximately 4 pence. Having spoken to other providers the cost of this is coming down and in the future this cost will be minimal. There are Bundles available but these may not be cost effective as they expire after a 12 month period and any texts not used are lost.

Any cost associated with this should be offset against savings for staff time and student satisfaction.

Recommendations

- Embed SMS into core business school systems for communication in 09/10
- Consider using the system for communication during the new build
- Adopt a bespoke system which integrates closely with ASIS
- Develop policies and procedure that allow the Business School to collect student data and permission at enrolment
- Encourage Admin participation by granting the necessary permissions to send texts and update student records
- Develop staff guidelines on best practice for sending texts. Things to consider include text timings and content
- Use a SMS system for High priority messages
- Unique Identifier as standard
- It is important that all academics make use of the system so that students are offered a consistent service. (Kilty 2009)