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Mobilize My Library: Evaluation of a Mobile Application at The Seattle Public Library

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**Mobilize My Library: Evaluation of a Mobile Application at The Seattle Public Library**

Mobile computing is a growing trend in today's society. The earliest Web-enabled cell phones came out on the market just a few years ago and now there are countless devices available for purchase, ranging from the iPhone and BlackBerry to various devices running on the Android and Windows platforms. One does not have to travel far to see the mobile computing trend in action, as everyone from high school and college students to middle-aged professionals to retirees have embraced mobile technology and all the computing possibilities that it affords. It is no surprise, then, that libraries are now entering into the mobile computing environment with their own mobile applications.

One such library is The Seattle Public Library (SPL) in Seattle, Washington. In March 2010, as part of its "Mobilize My Library" initiative, SPL introduced a mobile application called "SPL Mobile." The application, developed by an outside company called Boopsie, can be used on smart phones and mobile devices including iPhone, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Mobile, Palm, Symbian, and J2ME (SPL, 2010). SPL Mobile offers a variety of features and functions, including holds maintenance, renewals, catalog searching, library locations and hours, a calendar of events, and reference services.

In order to evaluate the success of the app and identify areas in need of improvement, SPL has convened a Mobile App Evaluation Work Group made up of individuals from SPL's Information Technology, Reference Services, Youth Services, Outreach Services, and Borrower Services departments. The group is charged with collecting and analyzing data related to usage of the SPL Mobile app and producing a report with findings, conclusions and recommendations. This proposal outlines a basic blueprint for how the group will carry out its charge.

**Purpose and significance of the service evaluation**

The work of SPL's Mobile App Evaluation Work Group is important for several reasons. First, it will provide insight into which populations are using and being served by the app and which aren't. In order to provide the highest quality service to all current and potential users of SPL, which is a key component of SPL's stated mission, it is necessary to know which current services are being utilized and by whom. The group's research will provide important data in this area, allowing enhancements and modifications of the mobile app and shedding light on areas where new services may need to be developed in order to serve all demographic groups equally well.

Another reason the work group's research is important is because it will provide insight into how the mobile app is being used. The app provides access to a variety of functions and features, and through data analysis, it will be possible to discover which of these features account for the highest and lowest usage. With this information, the work group will be able to provide recommendations for how low-usage features may be improved or eliminated. Examination of usage patterns will also help to identify any existing usability problems, which will allow the group to identify possible design solutions. Moreover, these findings will be useful to the wider library community. As more and more libraries design and launch their own mobile apps, they will benefit from knowledge of the successes and failures of those who have gone before them.

Finally, the research of the Mobile App Evaluation Work Group will allow the library board and administration to understand the extent to which the mobile app is meeting the information needs and desires of SPL's user population. By surveying current and potential users, the work group will be able to gather valuable feedback, opinions, and suggestions. The information gained from this research will help SPL to build and strengthen relationships and to gather support for the library in the community. By cultivating strong relationships in the

community, SPL will be able to maintain itself as a vital and relevant institution with strong support from those it serves.

### **Literature review**

Since mobile computing has become widespread only within recent years and is just beginning to be embraced by libraries, the literature on the topic is just beginning to emerge. As recently as 2008, the question, “what is the mobile Web?” was being seriously posed in the LIS literature (e.g. Kroski, 2008). Case studies such as Wilson and McCarthy’s (2010) describe libraries embracing mobile technology in order to expand services and foster partnerships with other groups. Other commentators, such as Fox (2009), argue that technological developments necessitate a paradigm shift for libraries away from the notion of the library as a place to the notion of the library as “a collection of valuable services that can be accessed from anywhere” (p. 8).

One of the most important documents on the topic of mobile technology in libraries is a June 2010 policy brief published by the American Library Association’s Office for Information Technology Policy entitled “There’s an App for That! Libraries and Mobile Technology: An Introduction to Public Policy Considerations.” The policy brief, authored by consultant Timothy Vollmer, summarizes the key issues around mobile technology in libraries, highlighting both the benefits and the drawbacks, and makes several recommendations for how libraries should make use of mobile technology. The key benefit for libraries in embracing mobile technology, according to Vollmer, is the ability to expand services to users. Some of the concerns for libraries include privacy issues, the need for staff to master new forms of interaction, challenges in providing access to digital content, the need to maintain adequate resources to support the technology, and accessibility issues. Vollmer suggests that innovation, compromise, and

education will enable libraries to meet the challenges of mobile technology and use it to its full potential.

### **Timeline for evaluation project**

March 2010 – December 2010: Mobile app implementation and usage data collection

January 2011 – March 2011: Surveys, data analysis and mobile app evaluation

April 2011: Publication of Mobile App Evaluation Report

### **Service evaluation: questions and methods**

The Mobile App Evaluation Work Group will consider the following questions in its evaluation:

- How does the user population of the mobile app compare to the general user population of the library?
- Are there library users who use mobile devices but do not use the library's mobile app? If so, why aren't they using the app?
- Are there any features that are missing or need to be added to the mobile app?
- Are there any significant usability or accessibility issues?
- Does the mobile app affect usage of library services and resources? If so, how?
- Is the ongoing cost of data hosting, functionality, support and maintenance of the mobile app justified by the usage data?

The work group will collect and analyze a variety of data, both quantitative and qualitative, in conducting its evaluation. Boopsie, the company that developed the app, provides monthly usage statistics, including the number of app downloads per device platform, number of queries per device platform, number of users per channel, and number of queries per channel.

The work group will analyze nine months of usage statistics, representing the period of April 1 through December 31, 2010. The work group will also consider usage data for the library's Web site and TeleCirc system, which will produce findings related to the mobile app's impact on usage of those services. Review of the project budget and actual costs will yield data to be analyzed using a cost-benefit analysis.

In early January 2011, the work group will partner with a consulting firm specializing in user survey design. Together, they will design a survey which will capture demographic information and provide qualitative data in the form of user feedback, opinions, and suggestions. The survey will be administered for the two-week period from January 31 through February 13, 2011. The survey will be available for completion in three formats: on a mobile device through a link within the mobile app itself, on a computer through a link on the library's Web site, and on paper for library visitors who request to complete it in that format. The survey will be translated into Spanish, Russian, and Chinese by staff in the library's Outreach Services department and made available in those languages in the computer and paper versions; Outreach Services staff will also assist the work group in interpreting the foreign language survey responses. In order to attract non-users of SPL to complete the survey, it will be promoted using social media such as Facebook and Twitter and in local news media.

In addition to the data provided through usage statistics and surveys, the work group will consider data generated through feedback forms on the library's Web site and online catalog and through its QuestionPoint online reference service. Front-line library staff will be encouraged to report feedback obtained from users on paper comment forms or through a virtual comment form on the library's intranet.

Analysis of usage data and general feedback will be performed from early January through mid-March 2011. After the survey's completion in mid-February, survey data will be collected and analyzed. The full evaluation report will be drafted in late March 2011 and will include an overview of the evaluation project, a description of the methodology, a sampling of raw data, analysis of the data, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. One or more appendices in the form of usage statistics, survey data, or recommended readings may be

included at the discretion of the work group. An executive summary will also be produced for the City Librarian and Library Leadership Team. The work group will complete final revisions in the first week of April and will present the report to the Library Leadership Team on April 15, 2011. The final report is scheduled to be published on April 25, 2011. The report will be published electronically in PDF format and made available on the library's Web site and will be available from within the mobile app in ePub format, allowing it to be accessed on mobile devices. Its publication will also be announced on the library's adult and teen blogs, Facebook, and Twitter, and the report will be submitted to local and national library associations and other library interest groups.

### **Outcomes**

Based on its research and data analysis, SPL's Mobile App Evaluation Work Group will make recommendations to the Library Leadership Team. These recommendations may include proposed changes to the app, which would have to be submitted to and approved by Boopsie before they could be implemented. Other recommendations could include increased marketing of the app to targeted populations or discontinuing the service altogether. If the work group recommends continuing the service, ongoing research will most likely be necessary to understand its continued usability and effectiveness in the context of constant technological change.

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