
Tensions in the Use and Adoption of Technologies for Outreach

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Introduction

In our recent research we have investigated the practices of outreach workers from a government nutritional program (i.e., CalFresh, commonly known as Food Stamps within the US) in a southern California county. In particular, we examined how outreach workers act as service mediators by enabling the access and use of governmental services for low-income populations by creating underlying support structures for their clients to promote the successful use of e-Government systems [2].

In this piece I look at the process by which the outreach workers adopted online technologies (meant for clients) into their existing work practices, and some of the tensions introduced during the adoption. The adoption of online programs is imbricated with tensions that arise from multiple factors including the environment where the technology is used and the different stakeholders' subjective values, experiences, and goals. Other researchers have explored tensions in use [3], I take a perspective that looks at how technologies are used, disseminated, and supported by a broader ecology of stakeholders rather than just an imagined solitary "user." We can learn about how these tensions are produced during adoption, how they come to be "resolved", and what might be some of the implications of those resolutions for different parties in the network of

stakeholders. Understanding the nuance of these tensions can lead to a richer understanding of how technology operates in the context of service work.

Background on Benefits CalWin and CalFresh Outreach

Our data draws from in-depth examination of a government program focused on supporting individuals who are food insecure, defined as a lack of dependable access to nutritious food. In the United States, nutrition assistance and financial support for purchasing food is available to any household below a particular income level. In 2010, a household of four was eligible if their monthly gross income did not exceed \$2,389^{1,2}. This program is known nationally as the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps, and in California, where this research was conducted, as CalFresh.

California has the lowest rate of participation of eligible individuals in the SNAP program within the US (44% compared to the US national average of 66%) [1]. The county in which we conducted this research has one of the lowest participation rates within California. To increase participation in services and reduce food insecurity more generally, California has recently supplemented its traditional paper application process with an online application process. The county in which we conducted this study uses Benefits CalWin³ as an entry portal to multiple assistive government online programs, including CalFresh. Although an online application may mitigate some of the reasons people do not participate, the technology itself

cannot fully address each of the issues understood to be a challenge to participation.

As part of a community wide effort to increase participation rates in social services, non-profit organizations that are dedicated to fighting food insecurity often employ outreach workers. Outreach workers encourage eligible people to apply for governmental nutrition assistance programs and to support them during the application process. These outreach workers are supported and subsidized by United States Department of Agriculture grants as well as community organizations with a vested interest in food security. For example, food banks in our study reduce their own burden in providing nutritional assistance by helping to connect eligible families with government resources.

Outreach workers are tasked with finding and assisting potential beneficiaries in the process of applying for governmental food assistance. Much of this work cannot be handled by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) who administers CalFresh, because governmental employees are under pressure to be more efficient in response to massive state budget cuts. The work of identifying eligible participants and encouraging them to apply for CalFresh is particularly time intensive. Despite working alongside the CDSS, outreach workers are notably not governmental workers and do not hold official positions within the government. In this section, we have discussed the government nutrition program CalFresh, why people are not participating, and the job of outreach workers. Now we will discuss our methodology, and our study, which focused on the work practices of outreach workers.

Methods

This research is based on direct observations, shadowing, and both formal and informal interviews to understand the

¹ <http://www.ladpss.org/dpss/calfresh/eligibility.cfm>

² <http://www.sfhhsa.org/157.htm>

³ <https://www.benefitscalwin.org/>

work practices and technology use of outreach workers in one county in California. The study was conducted over four months, and included observations and interviews with all three of the organizations conducting outreach within that county, including two food banks and one religiously affiliated organization. We conducted 36 hours of observation on how outreach workers interacted with both their clients and social services as well as how technology was used in their work and relationships. We conducted 21 formal interviews with individuals working in the outreach organizations, including seven outreach workers, three outreach work supervisors, and five supporting staff within the outreach organizations (e.g., volunteer coordinators, social media experts, program managers). The focus of our interviews was on current work practices, collaborations with CDSS, technology use, interactions with clients, and experiences with the online application tool. This inquiry is a part of an ongoing project that continues to explore the role of the non-profit organizations in the dissemination and use of e-Government technologies and services for low-income populations.

Findings

In what follows, we present a subset of our findings relevant to the themes of this workshop. In particular we will discuss the work practices prior to the online application, the several identified uses for the online application by the outreach workers, and the tensions that arose during the adoption of Benefits CalWin, the online application for food stamps.

Prior Work Practices: Workshops for Paper Application

Once a potential client has decided to apply for the program, outreach workers offer information and

application support through application workshops. Workshops are necessary because clients may be unfamiliar with the application process, vernacular used on the applications, have low-literacy, or lack understand how governmental processes work in general. Outreach workers provide additional assistance by assessing an individual client's needs and by helping them through the application process. After the applications, the clients are interviewed by social workers, employees of CDSS. These application workshops are held several times a month in different parts of the county.

Identified Uses of the Online Application

Over the course of a few weeks, outreach workers discussed several different possible ways to integrate the online application into their pre-existing work practices.

The first approach discussed was to maintain existing practices, and use the online application only in cases where the online application was more convenient for clients (e.g., clients who work during the times of the workshops, clients who would bring paper work to outreach locations, and so on). The second approach was to use the online application to expand their current client base by conducting outreach in more cities and processing those clients using the online application. One of the limiting factors for workshop expansion is inter-organizational work necessary to conduct application workshops as new workshop locations require prior permission from CDSS. However, the use of the online application circumvents these barriers by eliminating the paper application and the interview process. The third possibility the outreach workers considered was using the online application to train other volunteers and staff members to use the online application and prescreen applicants to determine

eligibility, effectively expanding the network of people that could provide assistance.

In summary, the online application provides different opportunities to the outreach workers, including acting as a supplement to existing practices, expanding geographical reach of services, and compensating inter-organizational workflows through training. In the following section, we discuss the tensions that arose during the initial period of adoption.

Tensions within the Initial Appropriation Process

As outreach workers were brainstorming, practicing, and developing novel uses of the technology, they were simultaneously trying to control how the technology was going to impact their work practices. Two sets of concerns were prevalent throughout, and are relevant to the current workshop.

Efficiency and Impact on Outreach Activities

The metrics by which outreach workers are evaluated tend to heavily weigh on the number of clients they are able to assist directly with applications. Helping clients apply online can impact their ability to find and network with new clients.

“When you get down to it you realize that that this takes a lot longer [using the online application]. I just spent an hour with [client's name] and my workshops are two hours and I get 15 people knocked out [applications processed]. So it's just a matter of efficiency for me.” – Isabel⁴, Outreach Worker

Outreach workers were concerned that while the online application introduces new flexibilities into their work practices (such as promptly assisting impromptu clients during outreach activities or assisting clients in different locations) using the online application may take away from their ability to conduct their other productive activities. Particularly during their outreach activities, they have concerns that necessary activities, such as networking and trust building between potential clients and outreach workers, may get pushed aside for immediate concerns. If they continue to assist impromptu clients, they have a fear that they this might negatively impact their overall number of clients they are able to reach.

This creates a strain for outreach workers as outreach workers try to redistribute and rebalance their work back unto their clients and the CDSS workers. While outreach workers are able to assist individuals in gaining access and use of an e-Government application, they do so at the cost of being less efficient with their assistance with clients.

Fear of Creating Dependent Clients

Through training and knowledge sharing about how government processes and the CalFresh Program work, outreach workers encourage their clients to become self-advocates. However, by using the online application, clients no longer have a direct contact for social services and outreach workers are apprehensive about assuming the face of Social Services, and pressure to fulfill that role.

“I was telling a client ‘you can mail it [documents necessary for the CalFresh application], you know’ but she’s like ‘No, the lady [a CDSS worker] told me to go to you, because you did the application’.” – Maria, Outreach Worker

⁴ All names are pseudonyms

This quote highlights tensions that can arise between outreach workers, clients, and CDSS workers, when outreach workers are assisting clients with an online application, because the different stakeholders are attending to slightly different goals (e.g., CalFresh worker seeks to assist as many clients as possible, CDSS case worker to be efficient, and clients to receive high quality care). These tensions often come at the cost to outreach workers as they are placed in a position that requires them to invest more work to accomplish their goals.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have introduced a subset of our findings from a study of outreach workers working in southern California. Our data illustrate various tensions that can occur when technology is used in a distributed manor across multiple stakeholders, including clients, CDSS workers, and Outreach Workers. These tensions are produced by technology in action as the technology is situated in local contexts and used by local individuals. Multiple factors (though not all discussed here), such as regulations, relationships with various institutions (like outreach locations and CDSS), and available resources, all

contribute to how technology is adopted and used by various stakeholders. Understanding how the tensions produced during the appropriation process of community-based organizations is beneficial for designing technology that are better suited for use at the community level.

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