

Mobile Interfaces for Social Networking

Overview

We aim to explore the ways in which mobile phones can be employed as social networking tools. Social networking websites have become increasingly popular, but Internet access is limited for our target population. However, the overwhelming majority of our audience is SMS-savvy mobile phone users. Our design challenge is two-fold: 1) Can the existing functionality of social networking sites be accessed through a mobile device? and 2) Can we leverage the mobility and ubiquity of this technology to support new paradigms of social networking?

Target Users

We are targeting members of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) community in India. Specifically, our focus is on the BPO community in Gurgaon, Haryana. This tightly-knit group is 65% female and 35% male. They work long, unusual hours since they are supporting American and European customers. This, combined with the fact that they live in close proximity with their fellow BPO workers, means that most of their social ties are within their local BPO community. They have a strong sense of community because of their shared educational backgrounds, skill sets and career goals. Although many of them spend their entire day in front of a computer screen, they have very limited access to non-work related websites. For many of them, the only way to access the Internet outside of work is to go to the local cyber café.

User Interface

The online component of our user interface will at a minimum help BPO professionals create and maintain a profile of themselves for both social and professional purposes. In addition to the web component, we will design services based on text messaging (for mobile phones) that keep the social network accessible even when the users are not logged on. Some of the mobile based features we wish to build are 1) querying various parts of a user's profile, 2) buzzing a person, and 3) seeing who is available for different social activities.

Evaluation

After our system has at least 30 active members, our next step will be to evaluate this design. To evaluate the effectiveness of mobile devices for social networking in this context we will conduct both a diary study and a survey. The diary study will allow us to track if our design has had a positive social impact. Administering the survey will help us capture attitudes about social networking via a mobile phone.