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Chance meeting leads to pioneering app for adults with autism

Brent

Chance meetings lead to many things. Marriages. Chart-topping bands. World class businesses. Even the odd war. But for Brent Council's senior project manager Ryan Dolan, one wet afternoon in a fish market, it was something altogether more surprising.

To his colleagues at Brent, Ryan is seen very much as the go-to guy when there's an IT problem to be solved or a project to get back on track. A few weeks earlier he'd been approached by the autism outreach team from the council's John Billam adult resource centre. The team came with what seemed like a fairly simple request: **find a mobile app that could help adults with autism become more independent and lead more fulfilling lives.**

Living with autism poses a number of challenges, not least of which is the development of independent living skills. Things that non-sufferers take for granted – like preparing drinks and meals, planning a trip out or borrowing a library book – can be extremely problematic and uncomfortable. **A mobile device, with the right software app, can be a valuable life guide, diary and communications tool** to help those with autism navigate a world they find hard to understand.

The app the team had in mind would combine four things. A **pictorial calendar** to show planned activities expressed in pictures rather than words. A **picture exchange facility** to enable non-verbal communications using a series of images. A **social stories facility** to deliver graphical depictions of a situation, activity or event. And **task analysis** to break down otherwise complex tasks into smaller stages.

Brick Wall
Ryan, meanwhile, had hit a technology brick wall. Unaccountably there were **no off-the-shelf apps for dealing with adult autism**

in the way the Brent team wanted. Plenty for the childhood form of the illness but nothing aimed expressly at adults. For what was probably the first time in his career Brent's IT mister-fix-it was well and truly foxed.

Turning back to the more routine side of local authority IT, Ryan opened his Outlook calendar. In a few days he was due to attend a large technology distributor's briefing at London's Old Billingsgate fish market, once the largest in the world and now an event space. It is part of a senior local authority IT man's remit to keep up to speed with new and relevant technologies. Such events are a very time efficient way of doing that, bringing together as they do multiple vendors under one roof.

Come the day at Old Billingsgate and IT company booths stood where once the giant fish slabs had been. Ryan went from booth to booth with Brent Council's greater mobility requirements uppermost in his mind, and the continuing need for the adult autism app still niggling. Eventually he came to Apple's booth: after all if any company understands mobility and what it can do it is Apple. And Brent Council had already standardised on the Apple platform. But there was nothing in the App Store that satisfied Brent Council's requirement 100%.

Then by chance Ryan found the app developer and enterprise mobility company Globo, which had a presence in the Apple booth. Speaking with Globo's enterprise sales manager John Bavester, custom development entered the conversation. If there was no app readily available that met the Brent Council need then why not have one developed for purpose?

Workshop
Globo's plan was simple and at the same time sympathetic to Brent Council's financially constrained needs. With **no up front commitment and only a modest consultancy fee,** Globo would run an **app development workshop** with Brent's IT staff and its adult autism team. This workshop would tease out exactly what was required and how the app should look and feel in use, then Globo would return a few days later with a **fully designed proof of concept for testing and approval.**

"The reason we couldn't go with anything off the shelf was simple: most of the apps out there were all very child-like in their approach," says Ryan. "There wasn't very much suitable for adults and we needed something that brought together the four key elements of calendar, picture exchange, social stories and task analysis in a completely seamless way."

The autism outreach workers also wanted an app that allowed custom photographs to be used in place of standard images in the graphical element of the app's calendar. Such pictorial representations help enormously in building independence and are a key theme throughout the four elements of the app. At the council's John Billam centre this is achieved through personal wall areas where a variety of physical images and objects are arranged to represent a typical day. The app had to translate this into the virtual world on a device that autism sufferers could carry with them, and at the same time extend to more than just one day.

Easy Decision

"It was an easy decision," says Ryan. "Globo were prepared to go the extra mile for us. **What they were proposing was that we'd get to fully spec out the app we wanted for only a minimal cost and afterwards we'd own all the design and specification. Then it was up to us. We could take the results to any developer we chose to deliver the finished app. None of the other vendors we spoke to had offered that.**

"In our experience of bespoke apps we've dealt with well-resourced, large company development teams and with one-man bands. **With Globo you get the best of both worlds: large company resources but with an involved, one of the family feel that you get with a small developer. A personal service if you will.**"

Globo's graphical, easy to use and highly intuitive interface was also a strong point, as was its ability to provide witness of the progress made by the users of the app. Each autism sufferer at the John Billam centre has their own personal development plan to follow on the road to eventual independent living. As milestones are achieved social workers can comment and write against the plan, charting and providing evidence of progress.

Unlike the wall chart which serves the individual only, the software version also works to the benefit of social workers. "The app makes it a very significant tool not just for the individual but for the social worker too. It becomes **an evidencing tool enabling that worker to record the development goals, achievements and strategies** which they can use in a review with their colleagues and managers," says Ryan.

In the setting of the pre-development workshop, when that stage was reached in the discussion it was a light-bulb moment. "Just at that point everyone round the table got it. The developers started making other suggestions about what else they could do, and the social work team came back with other requests. Instantly the whole room became really animated and really loud. We certainly wouldn't have got that anywhere else. Had we done the big waterfall project instead that dynamic shift, that eureka moment, would have been lost."

Value For Money

Ryan believes Brent more than got its money's worth from the initial workshop exercise as more and more ideas flowed from the interactive discussion. And it was effectively risk free given that no actual coding was involved and the final design was owned 100% by the council. "There was genuine intrinsic value in the work that was done," he says. "That's ours to keep and do with as we wish. There was never any tie into Globo."

But pleased with the results of the workshop session, Ryan and his team decided to stay with Globo. The company offered a very **competitive price** to see the app through to production and a **degree of trust** between the two parties had already been established. "Everyone felt that Globo had provided real care and **attention to detail** throughout everything that was done. So it was a simple decision to continue with Globo for the development of the app itself."

With functionality, look and feel, workflow and individual screen designs all agreed the app is effectively finalised. Phase one of the build is now underway with the graphic calendar element incorporating task analysis, together with goal setting and evidencing. The project will ultimately result in a complete and fully scalable cloud-based app.

Already well ahead of the game in mobile working among London authorities, the council has more iPads deployed to staff, and had them for longer, than any of its peers. It has calculated that **for every iPad issued there is a 25 minute a day saving in productive staff time.**

Brent Council now believes it is about to notch up another first, this time not a time saving or an efficiency improvement but something with a real social purpose. And it will be in part thanks to a chance meeting in a fish market on a wet London day.

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