

Community Meeting (Jan 23, 2019): Ample Labs

Description

Presenters: CG Chen, Cheryl Li and Matt Wong

Ample Labs was born out of a pilot project called [HomeTO](#) and a desire to contribute to our local community here in Toronto. Their work was originally inspired by social initiatives like San Francisco's [Link-SF](#) as well as broad research showing that even when experiencing homelessness, most people rely heavily on smartphones to find vital information.

Since then, the team has grown to include a dedicated and diverse group of designers, developers, researchers, consultants, public servants, and community members—all united by a common commitment to using tech for social good.

Website: <https://www.amplelabs.co/>

Notes

Video recording

- Ample labs is a Social start-up
- ChalmersBot
 - Web app to help people find local resources
- Accelerator
- 80–90% of people experiencing homelessness are invisible, in transition or not often counted
 - 90% own phone
 - 70% own smartphone
- Started with user research
- One researcher was inclusive design grad from OCADU
- People tend to turn to Google, not services that are established. People don't know where to look or what's available to them
- What is available is not easy to use
- They created personas to capture their users more generally
- Is a chatbot something people would want to use?
- Is it easy to use?
- Use the chatbot as a means to track what people are looking for
- Initially started by partnering with Ada, but it was too rigid a tool for their needs
- Amazon (Lex, Lambda) is another solution they're currently exploring
- Getting data from
 - Homeless Help
 - 211 Toronto Data
 - Manual Entry
 - Corrections based on actual observations, etc.
 - Web scraper Tool
 - + on ChalmersBot
- Demo of ChalmersBot
 - It gets your location to show you what's nearby for meals, shelter, etc.
 - Gives you directions to get there on foot (using Google Maps)
 - Asks for feedback and suggestions of things it should suggest or offer
- Have seen about 500 unique users so far
- Implemented analytics to track usage
- Privacy concerns?
- Question: Resources change, how do they address them other than checking manually?
 - They checked with the city for their process. The city checks twice a year to make sure everything they have listed is still valid
 - Maybe ChalmersBot can ask if the service accessed is still valid and the user can report themselves (crowdsourced)
 - How do they know when the city has updated? They don't know yet
- Question: security and privacy? How do they handle the information? How is security being handled on either end?
 - Personal info: the only thing they can collect currently are their location and the thing they searched for
 - They have "eligibility" info that is collected like age, gender, sexual orientation, etc. and so they're working on that
 - They don't use the information
 - Security: not currently being worked on
 - Suggestions
 - Would be good to have a plain language terms and conditions to make it easier to use and understand
 - Hook ChalmersBot up through SMS?
 - Cost is restrictive
- Question: how do you develop your personas? Do you see any limitations?
 - Distances you from the reality of people's lives, from individuals
 - They wanted personas to frame who users of the product would be in the beginning
 - Their lead researcher is suggesting to use mental models and move away from personas
 - Giving names to the personas could add more distance from the case, "historifies" it.
- Questions from Ample
 - They work with Eloisa!
 - What are some best practices when it comes to Inclusive Design research?
 - How about design based on that research?
 - Does IDRC use personas?
 - We suggests using codesign instead, as a process
 - Personas have limitations

- Use narratives, stories, real comments from real people instead
- When you try to make a persona, you're summarizing, reducing a group of people that may not represent what they want in their life
- Going through entire stories can take time, but it's okay, it's real, just publish all of them. If not everyone goes through all the stories, it's okay
- In our practice, we would be losing richness and diversity of experience
- Are there projects where there is a need for personas instead of individual narratives?
 - Might have been helpful in a case where it was a very technical project for requirements building. Even then, it's almost a dozen personas.
 - Personas can be a useful shorthand, but they abstract away specificity
 - Once you shear off the things that don't fit in a persona, you lose that extra information and requirements
 - Useful when you do have a clear set of functional requirements that need to be satisfied
 - Putting names and titles on them may not be the most useful
 - Instead of personas, maybe create vignettes or user stories and test the application within that specific situation
- (missed a question about NLP and chatbot?)
 - Giving people the time to speak, if they speak slowly, etc
 - Going into a group, let them be the ones to make you feel comfortable rather than the other way around
 - Embedded codesign?
 - When Ample was going into the shelters, were there people from the shelters to facilitate the sessions?
 - Yes
 - Involve those groups right from the beginning. Build trust, they're part of your team, go back to them, get them to test your product, etc.
 - A codesigner's role will change from session to session
 - In certain locations, they don't want anyone from the outside to be there, so you would share materials and requirements with a person in the group and they will conduct the session themselves (e.g. teachers in a classroom)
- When people have gone through trauma, how can you have them share that experience without forcing them to relive it?
 - Make sure you collaborate with people who are part of the organization
 - Getting emotional doesn't necessarily mean you've done anything wrong
 - You let that person lead, if they want to. You may not get everything you want, but you'll get something. Don't lead their discussion
 - Defer to psychologists, therapists, etc. who have more experience with this. If a person opens something up, could make sure they close it after, practice mindfulness, try not to leave people in the state they got to during the session
- How can Ample learn more about codesign?
 - Inclusive Cities (cities.inclusivedesign.ca)
 - Useful tools and methods are available there
- Certain services are only available if you qualify for them based on age, gender, sexual orientation, etc. How do you ask for that in a respectful way?
 - Don't use services that try to determine this information based on anything like name or anything else
 - Could just present the information you have with the eligibility criteria embedded and let the user choose themselves rather than restrict what's available
 - Good not to do it if you can avoid it
 - What the chatbot is doing makes this difficult to determine
 - Maybe before beginning the chatbot session, ask the user to fill out a pre-screening survey.
 - Make sure to include options like "prefer not to say"
 - Instead of asking up front, list the searching info and then allow the user to narrow it down based on various criteria
 - Or follow up with filtering questions
 - Maybe this filter can be stored
 - Maybe it doesn't need to be stored!
 - Ask before storing it
 - Store it in a cookie which is client-side only and not on a server
 - Not storing it on a server may alleviate privacy and data security concerns
 - Make it clear what is stored where
- They meet in person at Civic Tech on Tuesday evenings and Sunday afternoons
- Amplelabs.co, they have the people they're looking for at the bottom of their website
- Would partnering with the IDRC be an option?
 - They met with Jutta to show her a beta version, still need to follow up
- Accelerator
 - Program, not a product
 - Working with a local charity
 - Through their research, found that a lot of programs don't deal with homelessness from a prevention perspective
 - There's a lot of stigma around marginalized youth
- Question: are there any plans for figuring out how organizations and charities could use this?
 - There's a feature called "Add a new resource", which is in beta
- The tool is open source and on GitHub