

An app to help ex-drug and alcohol abusers

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To ensure that the app content complies with users' real needs, several rounds of interviews were conducted with users at the Brygga centre. They also took part in many workshops with the researchers. Credit: SINTEF

Ex-drug and alcohol abusers who have completed their treatment need a simple support system and daily motivation. Now they are getting both – in a handy pocket format.

How are my finances, and what must I do to get a place on a study course this autumn? Who can help me get housing benefit, and have I given NAV enough information? Now there is a new app which has the answers to all these questions and more.

In fact, the idea behind what will be both a support device and motivator came originally from abusers via Brygga, a co-operative organization funded jointly by Trondheim municipality and Rusbehandling Midt Norge (the Resource Centre for Drug and Alcohol Issues in Central Norway).

Expertise in drug and alcohol abuse

A team made up of SINTEF researcher and Project Manager Nina Vanvik Hansen, interaction designers, and colleague Hanne Linander, have advanced the concept and developed an app prototype. Development has been carried out in close collaboration with participants from Brygga in Trondheim and patients attending units linked to Rusbehandling Midt Norge.

"We can safely say that both current and former drug and alcohol abusers have been key contributors to this project", says the researcher. The group at Brygga has provided content and terms of reference by means of a series of qualitative interviews and their participation in many subsequent workshops.

A complex maze of support services

The need for a simple, visual device to help people navigate their way through a complex maze of [support services](#) forms the basis for development of the system. The new app is thus designed to help its users find their way to easy and specific services which will make their

lives easier – all using one device, before, during and after their treatment. It will also help them to keep updated on the "status" of a variety of different topics, such as the job market. But it is also designed to provide motivation, and to prevent users from giving up.

"Our aim is to simplify everyday life for people who have to start from scratch and navigate their way around the various sources of assistance available", says Kristel Killie, head of department at Brygga in Trondheim.

"We can see that users often need help and support all at once in many aspects of their lives. They have completed a treatment programme to get rid of their drug or alcohol dependency, and now have to venture out into the community to start their lives all over again – find a job, a place to live, sort out their finances and establish new networks. This is a very challenging time", says Killie.

She goes on to say that many users who have led a life with drugs or alcohol have only a limited experience of everyday tasks which to the man in the street are seen as straightforward and simply a matter of course.

Killie explains that the situations participants find themselves in are very different when it comes to finances, employment, education, physical and mental health, networks and so on. However, what they all have in common is a need for help and support, often from several different administrative bodies and often at the same time, coordinated among the various bodies.. This is often experienced by both patients and employees as an overwhelming task.

"Above all else, the app is a self-help device enabling them to manage and cope with their lives", says Killie. We achieve this by creating better understanding and a simpler picture of the services and amenities

available in the community. "This is clearly a product which meets the aims and responds to the challenges set out in the Norwegian government's Coordination Reform", she adds.

Motivation and assistance

SINTEF has been responsible for meeting the many system requirements. To ensure that the app content complies with users' real needs, several rounds of interviews were conducted with users at the Brygga centre. They also took part in many workshops with the researchers.

"We opted to use a qualitative interviewing approach combined with workshops in which the user participates in the design process", says Hanne Linander at SINTEF. "This was ideal because the app must be a practical tool addressing issues on which the users really need help. In order to avoid making any false assumptions, we have kept in contact with app users at all times – and have received feedback on the things we have been working with", she explains.

The result is a prototype which, according to former drug and alcohol abusers themselves, is just the pocket helper they need.

"My own experience tells me that I lose interest if I find it too difficult to navigate a single page on the internet", says "Tore", who is one of the former alcohol and drug abusers that have contributed with their ideas and experiences, and have tested the app.

A visual guide

He emphasizes that user-friendliness and motivation have been the most important factors during the development work. One aspect with which

he is particularly satisfied is that the app functions as a guide with an in-built "traffic light" system, providing users with a visual status update on different topics.

"For example, if I have to find somewhere to live, the app will ask me whether I'm interested in the private rental market or municipal accommodation", says "Tore". "The app will tell me if I don't qualify for municipal accommodation, and then guide me to a site providing information about the private rental market", he says. "It will also help me to find my way through the process explaining whether I have the money to rent the flat I may be interested in, and whether I have an entitlement to housing benefit. And, not least, how I can apply for the benefit", he says. "Once I've been through the entire process, the app will give me a green light in the field marked "accommodation". If one or two things are missing I get an amber signal, and if they're completely messed up I'll get a red light telling me that something has to be done. The same applies to other topics covered by the app such as employment, education and social support", he says.

He says that originally the project was conducted on a regional basis, but that users were so pleased that they are now thinking of making it available to as many as possible – perhaps all over Norway.

"I think this app can provide simple and effective help to anyone experiencing the upheaval of a life crisis", says "Tore". "And not just for those with drug and alcohol problems. There are also others trying to cope with challenging situations who need what we call "multiple assistance" from different service providers", he says. "Tore" is now free of drug and alcohol problems and is studying for a Bachelor's degree in Economics.

Commercialization – the next step

The researchers have now tested the [app](#)'s content and user-friendliness for all the topics it covers. And the result is a thumbs-up from all those involved in the testing process.

"The next step is to find a business partner to commercialize the product", says SINTEF researcher Nina Vanvik. She thinks that a product of this type has great market potential, and that it will save both individuals and society as a whole a great deal of money.

The project is funded jointly by the Norwegian Directorate of Health and Innovation Norway via the InnoMed initiative.

Facts about Brygga:

- Brygga offers a service to people aged 18 or over with a previous drug or [alcohol dependency](#). Non-dependency is an essential pre-condition.
- Brygga primarily offers help and support to those who have either completed their in-patient treatment and/or intend to take up a dependency-free life in Trondheim. Brygga also offers help and support to those who have yet to complete their treatment, but who have demonstrated prolonged periods of non-dependency.
- Brygga also assists people in establishing new and supportive drug and alcohol-free networks, and offers recreational activities with substance and meaning, including outings, training, and a variety of courses and activities.
- Brygga works together with treatment centres, social services and NAV. It is run by the organizations Stavne Arbeid and Kompetanse KF.

Provided by SINTEF

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