Simplicity is not simple

Memrica creates technology that works like memory to help people who are anxious about forgetting. We've just released the first version of our Prompt app on the App Store following months of testing and iteration. The core concept, to create mini histories of people and places, link them to photos and embed them in reminders, came from research and co design with people living with dementia and other conditions affecting memory, their families and clinical staff. While the concept hasn't changed the design has.

We started by designing an interface that tapped into common behaviour for people worried about forgetting – writing little notes to themselves. Our thinking was that this was something people already did and we could make that persistent and portable as well as adding context. We offered a space for people to write a sentence about what they wanted to remember, we extracted the names of people and places and used the information to collate background about them. The early technology was reasonably robust and we set about testing it.

In face to face testing, volunteers recruited from Alzheimer's Cafes, community support groups and Headway, the brain injury charity, went through the app confidently and enjoyed the experience. Happy days! However, in remote testing we could see from analytics that people were floundering. Either they were not adding anything at all or they were adding one activity and not mentioning people, places, times or dates. When we asked about their experiences we heard comments like, 'I didn't know what to write' or 'I just saw this blank page and felt overwhelmed' or 'It didn't work for me'. We did have a guided tutorial in place and there were little hints in text boxes to guide users, so the difference between the face to face testing and remote results was initially surprising.

As a cash strapped two-person start up, I carried out the face to face testing personally. Unconsciously, I think I guided people when testing, so volunteers were likely to be more persistent and successful. Also, even though I didn't identify myself as the business owner, British reserve and the desire to please probably influenced feedback. Whereas in remote testing, where the tester was completely alone with the app, which replicated real life more accurately, we saw people having more difficulty.

Two key things came from this experience; people needed much more help in navigating through new experiences than we anticipated – even when we thought it was in place. And our idea of simplicity didn't chime with users who were mostly 50+ and had some cognitive difficulties. Although they were all app users and motivated to find solutions to support themselves, they needed familiar interfaces and experiences.

The new version takes users through step by step what they need to do and, since we released it, we've received great feedback for the simplicity of the user experience. Like any start up founder, I'm not 100% happy with this first version and improvements and updates are on their way, but I'm not compromising on simplicity!