

Social exchange app might help turn collaboration into currency

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A focus on symmetrical activities—and smart technology—may be critical to creating applications that allow people to negotiate transactions with their time, rather than their money, according to Penn State researchers.

In a study, participants used a mobile application called WithShare to make requests for and volunteer to take part in upcoming activities that matched their interests and hobbies. This type of mobile timebanking app might help overcome some of the limitations of traditional timebanking, a service that values actions based on the time it takes to produce them, rather than based on money, according to John M. Carroll, Distinguished Professor of Information Sciences and Technology, Penn State.

"WithShare is, in a way, timebanking without the time," said Carroll. "We're streamlining interactions so that people directly and reciprocally coproduce services."

In traditional timebanking, a member can provide help—installing floor tile, for example—and earn credits that can be used to pay for other services—for instance, violin lessons—from another member. However, people in timebanking exchanges tend to be more willing to bank credits they earn helping other exchange [members](#) than to spend those credits for services.

"People tend to shy away from requesting services in timebanking," said Carroll. "WithShare emphasizes symmetric activities, in which requesting can be experienced as proposing a joint project. You're saying, 'I'm going out to lunch, does anybody want to join me?'"

The researchers, who released their findings in the current issue of *IEEE Computer*, suggest that simple and symmetric transactions better fit the timebanking model. For example, WithShare allowed students to post invites to other members of the exchange to share lunch at a certain restaurant or go along on a walk.

"The idea really aims at 'in-the-moment' types of activities with low amounts of coordination," said Benjamin V. Hanrahan, a research

associate in [information sciences](#) and technology who worked with Carroll. "The experience and the benefit to the participants is enhanced if they take part in an activity with someone else."

To emphasize that difference, WithShare avoids the provider-recipient labels and instead uses reciprocal roles.

"Instead of providers and recipients, we recast those as initiator and joiner," said Hanrahan.

WithShare also included smart technology to help members find interesting activities. The app tracks the members' location, transactions and activities. It also includes software that offers users [activity](#) recommendations based on the users' previous interactions.

Models that encourage social exchanges, such as timebanking and coproduction, offer several advantages over currency exchanges. For example, the move of many police departments to shift from foot patrols to car patrols may have been more efficient monetarily, but it had a social cost. In many cases, street safety decreased after the move to car patrols, according to the researchers.

"Police need to cooperate with the people they police—if they don't, they don't know what's really going on," said Carroll. "A lot of intelligence comes along for free if they have a coproduction relationship with the community."

Approximately 40 students took part in the study. They used the app to post activities they were planning, as well as indicate their interest in activities posted by other members. The requests timed out after 24 hours.

Future research for WithShare will include a larger rollout of the app in

the fall of 2016 and expand the number of members of the exchange.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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