Mobile Money Snapshot: English In Action

USAID promotes increased access to and usage of mobile financial services in order to deepen financial inclusion, accelerate broad-based economic growth, and instill transparency into funding flows. These snapshots describe the experiences of USAID- and non-USAID-funded organizations that have begun to replace cash with digital payments so that others can apply their lessons learned to their own transition to digital payments.

Overview: English in Action (EIA) is an initiative funded by the UK's Department for International Development in partnership with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, the Ministry of Education, and other local and international partners in Bangladesh. It is employing mobile phones, the internet, print materials, television, and peer-to-peer learning to help 25 million Bangladeshis improve their English as a pathway into work and out of poverty. The nine year program began in 2008, and will run until 2017.

Target group: Of the 25 million people targeted by English in Action, 15 million are school children and 10 million are adults. In addition, they are also aiming to reach 90,000 teachers by the end of the program.

Primary activities: One of EIA's main initiatives focuses on providing technical training to Bangladeshi school teachers. This is a huge intervention, which involves maintaining groups of teachers in different regions of the country who have to undergo a series of eight trainings within sixteen months' time.

Types of Transactions Being Made

EIA provides training allowances (starting from BDT 300 per training) and hotel reimbursement for teachers to participate at trainings they hold in their target areas throughout the country. They also pay allowances to Upazilla education officers every month for visiting schools to provide support to teachers.

English in Action's Transition from Cash to Mobile Money

When EIA began its teacher training program in 2008, it was disbursing cash payments to 750 teachers. The payments were made through regional offices, and the accounts officer of each regional office delivered the payments in person at each training venue. As the project scaled up between 2008 and 2012 they conducted a total of 4,500 teachers' trainings, which made their original cash disbursement method more costly, in terms of travel and cash handling costs, but also in lost staff productivity since time that accounts officers spent traveling to deliver payments was time they could not spend on other tasks. In addition, the risk of theft, hijacking and other potential loss were significant when using cash, particularly as the amount of cash carried for each training was usually quite high (at around BDT 200,000 or USD $2,500 per training).

Recognizing this was not a sustainable solution, in late 2012 they decided to introduce mobile payments through bKash. Under the new process, the regional offices collect the mobile numbers of all teachers into an Excel spreadsheet during their selection and registration. When they want to make payments, field coordinators send payment requests in another Excel spreadsheet to the head office through email. The head office's authorized person then submits the spreadsheet to bKash, which sends the money to the bKash accounts of the teachers or education officers.

> *"I am now relaxed even though I have to arrange more trainings (i.e. twice or thrice more than previously) with the same number of staff. This is because there is now less financial management burden due to our adoption of mobile money payments for our trainee teachers"*
> Mr. Uttam Chandra Sadhu, Field Coordinator, EIA

Challenges Faced by English in Action with Mobile Money

Since their transition to using mobile payment, EIA has experienced a number of challenges, the bulk of which are related to user adoption. For starters, some of the teachers either did not have a mobile phone number or were not interested in opening a bKash account (also called a mobile wallet). In some of those cases, teachers had the funds sent to their nearest bKash agent's personal account (not their official agent account).

Among those individuals that do have their own accounts, about 20% of them were inactivated during the sixteen month training period because the individuals had not used their accounts for three consecutive months. EIA also reports that teachers and Upazilla education officers sometimes forget their PIN codes due to limited usage, which if they input the incorrect PIN too many times can lead to their accounts being locked. This challenge is exacerbated by the fact that queues for bKash customer support agents are often long, meaning that they cannot get their problems addressed immediately and in some cases may give up. EIA has also found that their system of maintaining mobile numbers in an Excel spreadsheet can also result in typos, which leads to erroneous transactions.

Benefits of Mobile Money for English in Action

With the switch to using mobile payments, EIA is now able to arrange up to 30 trainings per region with the same number of staff, which is up from about 10 trainings per region before when they were using cash. This will help them to achieve their goal of 70,000 teachers trained by 2015. In addition, since regional office staff no longer need to attend every training, they can focus more on monitoring and evaluation, and other programmatic activities.

Key Takeaways from English in Action's Experience

English in Action's experience highlights a few important lessons. First, the introduction of any new technology or product can require significant awareness building, training, and behavior change among target users. Since the concept of a mobile wallet is new to many of the teachers and education officers that EIA works with, they have run into several challenges around user uptake. In some cases mobile financial service providers may offer resources and trainings for customers on how to use their product, so check with your provider to find out what they may have. Otherwise, you should plan for a sufficient degree of outreach and training with the individuals who will be receiving money from you just as you would for any other type of behavior change campaign. Related to that, the mobile financial service provider may not have adequate customer service support, so you may need to be prepared to offer limited technical support to your payment recipients as well.

Last, if you are inputting recipient names, mobile numbers, and transfer amounts manually, it is important that you institute a process for error checking as you would with any financial system. This could involve having one person input and another person review the original documents to confirm your database or spreadsheets are accurate. Inaccurate information can result in delays in processing or the depositing of funds into the wrong accounts or in the wrong amounts.

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