



A Digital Guide for Self-Tracking Goes Online

Building an online self-tracking guide to advance the health and research potential of observations of daily living

SUMMARY

A small but growing number of people are developing and using tools to keep track of their health and health-related behaviors. These digital tools for self-tracking—chiefly spreadsheets and smartphone apps—allow individuals to measure and track their own health, wellness, fitness, habits, emotions, and symptoms.

In 2011, [Quantified Self Labs](#), of Mountain View, Calif., developed an online resource guide to self-tracking tools and services. Quantified Self is a community of individuals interested in self-tracking. It maintains online forums and resources and sponsors local meetings of self-tracking practitioners around the globe.

Quantified Self Labs enlisted paid and volunteer editors to seed the guide with editorial content and expert feedback, including ratings and reviews of self-tracking tools. It also promoted the site within the Quantified Self community and to other self-tracking and health networks to engage a large population of users.

The [Institute for the Future](#), a nonprofit research group in Palo Alto, Calif., helps organizations make informed decisions about the future. Researchers there conducted interviews with self-tracking practitioners—both pioneering developers of tools and new users—to assess the effectiveness of the guide in serving this community. It subcontracted with Quantified Self Labs to develop the guide.

Key Results

The project team reported the following results to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF):

- The project team created an online self-tracking resource guide. The [Quantified Self: Guide to Self-Tracking](#) is a database of about 500 self-tracking tools covering such topics as health, fitness, diet, finances, and mood. The list includes brief descriptions, price ranges, and links to related discussions in the site's forum. A member list profiles users and their reviews.

In a report to RWJF, Project Director Alexandra C. Carmichael noted that the guide was more a catalog of tools than a useful manual for people wanting to choose and use these tools. Despite Quantified Self Lab’s efforts to encourage contributions to the guide, it drew from its members only about half the tools and a tiny fraction of the ratings and reviews of those tools that the project team had hoped for. And, because Quantified Self relied on its members to provide content, the guide lacked a clear editorial voice, and the reviews did not offer an accurate and reliable assessment of the quality of the tools listed. The login process may also have discouraged participation, Carmichael said.

Lessons Learned

Project Director Carmichael offered the following lessons:

1. Provide users of self-tracking tools with clear instructions on how to evaluate their own needs, choose tools appropriate to those needs, and make sense of their findings. The site did not offer users a pathway for learning. It was more of a catalog than guide.
2. When building a “knowledge community,” ensure that the pathways for soliciting and transferring knowledge are clear and easy to access. The guide was predicated on the idea that pioneering users are a critical resource for beginning users, but it did not effectively connect the two groups.
3. Create a strong editorial voice and identity to enhance credibility. Advice about using tools is credible only if it comes from a person who understands the context in which a tool is used. Editorial content—for instance, real stories from real people—could provide this context and help establish the guide’s authority.
4. Provide clear measures and objective standards for users who are assessing the tools. Crowd-sourcing the task of assessment resulted in an unacceptable level of subjectivity. Offering vague ranking options (for instance, “highest rated” versus “most popular”) exacerbated the problem. Letting users tag tools by topic may have resulted in inaccurate categorizations.
5. Emphasize evaluation over quantity. The emphasis on the total number of tools at the top of the screen, as well as the prompts to write new reviews upon profile creation, encouraged additive contribution over evaluative contribution.

Funding

RWJF supported this project through a grant of \$64,000 to the Institute for the Future, which subcontracted with Quantified Self Labs for some of the work.

Afterward

According to Carmichael, the project team is considering whether to revise the guide, giving it a stronger editorial perspective with more useful guidance to new users.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

Communications or Promotions

Grantee Website

<http://quantifiedself.com/guide>. The Quantified Self Guide to Self-Tracking is a database of about 500 self-tracking tools. Mountain View, CA: Quantified Self Labs.