



STAY TUNED

BOOSTING THE FREQUENCY OF QUALIFICATION

Solution Story // Implementation Journey Gothenburg

The team from Gothenburg, Sweden, have launched a plan to tackle school absenteeism more effectively and at a very early stage. Within a wider strategy to improve educational outcomes in the city, they have been building and piloting a new digital tool with the support of the Swedish government. Combined with leading a wider change of mindset amongst support professionals and school staff, they are driving a change in how the city approaches absenteeism – moving from a reactive to a proactive approach.



01. WHAT WAS THE STARTING POINT?

Politicians in Gothenburg set an overall aim and strategy of increasing the achievement of students in the city. The strategy to deliver this increase in results has many axes, of which reducing absenteeism in schools is one. On this theme, the team in Gothenburg devised a way to move to a new approach of tackling absenteeism in schools.

Typically, teachers dealt with absent students in a reactive way: a student is absent from a lesson and then the teacher follows this up with them at some point afterward. This immediately sets up the conversation from a 'deficit' position, with the discussion focussing on the student's transgression (not attending class). Starting from this point, the discussion can all too often become 'punitive', focussed

on a reprimand on the part of the teacher ('you are bad because you missed a lesson'). It also therefore becomes defensive on the part of the student, either trying to defend their position (leading to a confrontation) or withdrawing from the discussion entirely (to avoid the confrontation).

Neither is a positive approach that reinforces positive behaviour. Whilst it is possible to have a *more* positive conversation in a reactive position, the system is not set up to encourage this. Either way, the fact remains that dealing with the absence after the fact can never change it. The team needed a proactive approach to dealing with potential absentees, tackling the root issues *before* they lead to the disengagement of the student.

02. WHAT WERE THEY WORKING TO IMPLEMENT?

The team had the overall objectives of creating a better and more proactive way of working with students, to help them attend and engage with lessons in a better way. They noticed two aspects to their approach – there was a 'technical' part and a 'mindset' part.

The technical part was about creating a new digital tool to track and predict absenteeism. This used data analytics to provide early

warnings that certain students were likely to be absent at a certain point in the future.

The mindset part was about helping to train and support the city's teachers to approach absenteeism in a different way, being more pro-active and promoting positive behaviours among students. The team viewed this part as essential to the success of the technical system, and vice versa.

Key Policy Themes for Gothenburg:
Early Warning Systems and Systematic Interventions
Training and Development of Teachers

03. WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTATION?

The team knew that moving from a reactive way of working to a proactive way needed a change in a number of inter-related practices and that this would be a big challenge for the project.

Changing mindsets takes time. But it is essential, if the newly available data is to be used effectively. Implementing the digital tool too early, before the teachers are 'ready' to use it will mean that there would be resistance, and they wouldn't use it in the right way. But implementing it too late would mean that newly trained (and enthusiastic!) teachers would not have the right tools to support their new mindset and approach.

Another challenge was that teachers already had a digital tool to help them manage absences, but it was much more simple and only reactive. The culture around it was to register and look at it when you got around to

it. The data it included was also retrospective, so there was no incentive to use it proactively. In this way, the system reinforced the reactive approach.

The team needed teachers to view this new online tool in a different way. Only then would they use it in a different way: in a proactive way.

The other major challenge that appeared during the project was that of the complete restructure of the whole of how managed in the city of Gothenburg – moving from the services being split across 10 city districts to all being in one large organisation. Keeping a coherent project through such a major structural change was a big difficulty. When the conditions around them were not stable, it would be much more difficult to work out the best approach to implementation.

Key Implementation Challenges for Gothenburg:
Stakeholder Engagement
Maintaining an Integrated Approach

04. WHAT WAS THEIR DELIVERY APPROACH? HOW DID THEY TACKLE THE BARRIERS?

The system was developed by the government in partnership with Angered, one of the city districts and piloted in that one district first, prior to making it available more widely. This gave clear ownership of the development to the area where it was to be first tested. It also provided a test area that was of a suitable scale to encounter most of the potential

school contexts and challenges, but not too large to make the initial pilot too complicated.

Timing was crucial. So was good coordination between the two workstreams: the changes, moving to the new system and the new mindset were intertwined and could not be delivered in isolation from one another.

The tool needed to be accessible and easy to use. With the previous data system, people had generally only updated it 'when they got around to it'. Very often, this was days after the original absence, when they finally sat down in front of a PC again and with a bit of spare to catch up on logging all the relevant information.

This new tool was designed to be used on a mobile phone, making it easily accessible. Teachers can update the data almost in real time. It is now quick and easy to add new information on. So the data is much more up to date. This makes it more useful – if you know the data is accurate and current, you are more likely to use it to help with your work.

Lena explains how the app works. "Based on the data we enter about the student and their absences, we get a review about the absence the previous week, the current week, and a prediction for next week. Based on that we can face the student and say "how can we together help you come to lessons next week?"

Karin adds explains that the tool is also linked to information and guidance for teachers, "connected to the tool is a page with ideas and ways of working, so if for example, you're a new teacher you can go to that page and see 'what can I do and how would I do that, to manage to make that student come to the lessons'.

"And you also have the possibility to see what we have already been doing with this student, how many times have you booked a meeting with the parents and if they didn't turn up to the meeting, things like that."

"The idea is that it is a way of trying to avoid an absence the next week or tomorrow or something like that. To help the students think about when and why they were not coming. They often don't reflect on being away."

The combination of data and new approaches is creating a new way to bridge the gap between the student and the teacher, to help their relationship work better.

The key is the immediacy of data and getting the information about what is happening as soon as possible. Ideally in real time. But they needed to ensure they built confidence in the product as well. So teachers were involved in the development of the system, from near the beginning, testing the updated system all the time.

This approach built trust and confidence and is a common "user-led" design principle: ensure that the final users of any system are at the core of the design and the design process. They will be the ones using it; so to ensure they shape it, use it early, make sure that it works for them and that it gives them what they expect.

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Key Implementation Themes for Gothenburg:
Open Working and Stakeholder Involvement
Conditions for Implementation
Leadership of Change

05. WHAT WORKED? AND WHAT DIDN'T?

As Lena from the project team in Angered notes, “The teachers wanted to change. That was great. But it has taken longer than we expected.”

The fact that the teachers wanted to see this change meant the team could build good engagement.

But with that positive engagement came the need to manage the expectations. The difficulty was that the teachers tended to want too much from the app.

“They wanted everything!” laughs Karin, the Head of the Career Guidance service. “It’s not possible to have *everything* they want in a phone app.”

The security of data was a one challenge in this regard, and also a limiting factor. The design team had to balance usability of the app against data privacy legislation, which is more strict in Sweden.

However, having the teachers as part of the development and testing cycle meant that it was much easier to have discussions about the

desired functions and limitations as part of the testing process. This approach made it much easier for the team in Gothenburg to manage the expectations of the user stakeholders and keep them on board and positive about what the end product would deliver.

This way of working, taking time to work with stakeholders closely, at all points through a design process can mean the process takes longer; at least at the early stages. User-led design “front-loads” the design process. Many more people are involved in the early stages than if a single person was the only designer of the product or service.

However, this pays off when the product is tested and rolled out – many of the potential teething problems will already have been picked up and dealt with. Plus, the users will understand the system / process already because they have been involved in its design and testing. When done well, this tends to mean the final stages of implementation go much more smoothly and with fewer surprises late in the process.

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06. WHAT DID THEY LEARN? WHAT DID THEY CHANGE AS A RESULT?

Karin and Lena both comment that the team have discovered that changing the mindset of a large group of people needs clear objectives, good structure, and above all, good leadership.

The new system and app is a huge enabler for proactive behaviour. But it is the *behaviour* of teachers, driven by a new *mindset*, that will make the difference. The tool is only as good as the way it is used. The data alone achieves nothing.

The tool is now being tested in three schools across Angered. This is going well so far and the team hope the full implementation will be completed soon.

The new tool and approach is also now looking at the student's experience and situation as a whole and how they are progressing through the school years.

The analytics that are built into the tool will help to focus on *patterns* of behaviour. "It's all about the patterns," says Lena, "Is it just the sports lessons, or the maths lessons, just on a Monday evening or what?"

By putting that information and insight into the hands of the main teacher for any given student, it gives the teachers the tools to be able to be proactive and to see the problems early. The predictive nature of the digital tool means that it will highlight when students are *likely* to be absent in future.

It also allows teachers to see whether certain pupils are absent at the same time, indicating potential group behaviour or other peer pressure effects.

Knowing the previous patterns and highlighting what might happen tomorrow or next week means the teacher can intervene with the student *before* the absence happens. This is critical to tackling the underlying problems in a positive way.

"The thing is you can go in and talk how can we work together," say Lena. "It's always the teacher in the class who has the first responsibility to act" adds Karin. "The teachers in the class and the teachers who have the main responsibility for a pupil are the ones using the app. The App highlights the potential problems. So that relationship can develop."

This proactive approach to working with students allows the conversations to focus on 'future engagement with class' rather being about 'missing class in the past'. Teachers are able to talk to students at a point where the discussion can be about "potential" problems and what support can be offered to deal with those.

And sometimes, it just takes a conversation with their teacher about the possibility they might be absent from tomorrow's class will mean that a student will think twice about skipping it when the time comes. Being aware that their teacher knows they might miss class can change the *student's* mindset.

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07. WHAT DO THEY PLAN TO CHANGE IN THE FUTURE?

The team are positive about the new digital tool and the approach. Over the coming months they will be completed this testing, making final adjustments and then aiming to roll out the tool to the whole of Gothenburg. But Karin and Lena know that it won't be the technical aspects of deploying the digital tool

that are the big challenges to address; the mindset change across the whole city will likely be the biggest challenge. As Lena says, "it takes time, but we hope we reach that. And now we can say: we had a problem, now we have a plan!"

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