

From self-serving to self-improvement: How digital technologies are making us better citizens



By [Sue Tabbitt](#)

Digital empowerment isn't just about letting people complete tasks conveniently. New mobile innovation is also helping to boost community engagement and personal growth, with instant feedback, social support and the chance to earn rewards for good behavior.

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Digital technology has done a great job of empowering people to serve themselves in a multitude of different ways. But its power to change behavior is potentially even more exciting. In the best-case scenarios, digital technology is helping to make us more accountable and engaged citizens at a time when many societies are at risk of breaking down.

UK smartcard technology firm [Novacrost](#) has made this its mission. It is about to trial new technology (a smartcard, app and sophisticated back-office system) to encourage positive citizen behavior, via links with charities, workplaces, local governments and retailers. The system, UCando-it, will allow individuals to log and earn credits each time they contribute positively to their local community – for example by recycling, going to the gym or taking public transport.

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Employers and other organizations buying into the system will be able to target and influence specific groups of people, through a system of linked rewards sponsored by commercial backers – such as discount vouchers for use with retailers or brands. For the companies involved, it's a way of increasing their social responsibility credentials and driving particular actions. For consumers, it's a prompt to dig deeper and do more, for their own sense of wellbeing and for the greater good.

"There is an innate willingness to do better in everyone," says Debra Charles, Novacroft's founder and CEO. "If we can unleash, recognize and reward that, it will benefit communities and the national economy." In the health sector, for example, there are tremendous numbers of volunteers who support the paid professionals, she notes. "Wouldn't it be great if that could be formally acknowledged? That's our goal – to encourage organizations to reward people for their contributions."

[See also: Cisco's Executive Food Sort packs food for the hungry](#)

Brands and retailers supporting the schemes can expect to increase footfall in their stores – so everyone wins. Rewards could take numerous forms though – from spending vouchers for hospital volunteers, to cheaper travel for job seekers. Whatever the behavior organizations want to introduce, there could be a smartcard-enabled incentive.

If charities and public authorities become involved, it could save them money in the long run – as campaigns gather their own momentum, word spreads, and the pressure is relieved on local services because communities are doing more to help themselves.

Novacroft is already working with charities such the Royal British Legion, and is in talks with a number of high-profile brands as it looks to bring out its first trial next year.

One large employer which will pilot UCando-it will use the incentive-based system to tackle specific business issues. "They want to lower absenteeism and attrition, and improve morale and the company's reputation," Charles explains. The program will link back into the employer's HR and learning systems, where activities can be set up to encourage staff to be more active, improve their skills, and volunteer – depending on the area an employee needs to work on.

What's special about Novacroft's smartcard technology is that it can be applied in a range of different ways – the intelligent cards can act as travel tickets, payment cards, loyalty cards, vouchers, gym passes, concert tickets and so on. Novacroft is also developing a 'remote loader' - a mobile machine which reads the cards and logs activity in different locations.

A social element to the UCando-it app will enable participants to see, support and be inspired by what their friends are doing. Novacroft will track the wider impact of the reward schemes, including participants' happiness, satisfaction and sense of purpose.

In Germany, global technology consultancy [DataArt](#) has also introduced software to influence positive behavior, in its case using wearable devices. One of its developments recently won a Hackathon for being the first fitness app to enable people to earn rewards by running.

Designed for use on smartwatches and smartphones, Puls'ation tracks calories burnt during exercise and converts this number directly into voucher points or discounts. The app, developed at 'Burda Hackday: Future of Finance' in Munich, Germany in June, [won the organize.me special prize](#) at the event.

Steve Pscheid, vice-president of DataArt Germany, puts the apps' appeal down to the extra motivation and tangible reward it offers to users on top of the intrinsic value of exercise. It's an indication of how wearables could influence people's lifestyles.

DataArt previously won an award another Hack event, for 'Doo'nation', an app that tracks what happens to the money when people donate to charity. The company is now looking at how it might combine the two apps, so that getting fit earns direct donations to charity.

Elsewhere, digital technology is helping to engage more young people in the political process. In the UK, just months before the much-anticipated 2015 General Election, over 1 million people were found to be missing from the electoral register, including many students and other young people eligible to vote for the first time.

To help challenge the 'disaffected youth' stereotype, digital technology company bITjAM created a [political engagement app](#) targeted at young people in the UK.

It was commissioned by UK youth leadership development organization, [UpRising](#), for a major National Youth Debate (<http://www.uprising.org.uk/highlight/announcing-our-national-youth-debate-event-26-march-2015>) in the run-up to the election. This would take place across 11 cities, where panels of local politicians could be quizzed by young people.

"The aim was to challenge the perception that young people don't care about what's going on, and show them that they are heard and that their opinions matter," explains Carl Plant, bITjAM's CEO.

The survey app invited their input via a series of questions during the live debates, engaging them fully in the sessions and collating and displaying the results in real time so that these added to the proceedings.

At the end of the process, the app prompted participants to register to vote - and notify friends and family via social media so that they, too, would hopefully do the same. "If you want to people to get involved and act, the quicker you can close the circle the better the engagement," Plant notes.

Some 1279 young people participated in the National Youth Debate, and 800 young people participated in the online voting platform. As a result of this combined activity, 5000 people clicked through to 'register to vote'.

Analysis played an important part too. In addition to demographic data built into the survey, bITjAM used Google Analytics to find out more about who had engaged and the devices they were using – information that could be used to hone future initiatives.

The app was shortlisted for a NextGen Digital Challenge Award for Digital Inclusion and Skills.

On the role of technology in engaging and influencing the behavior of citizens, Plant says, “In the case of young people, while they may not engage directly in debates about society, I am a firm believer that they can be reached and inspired through a variety of other media.

“It isn’t that they don’t want to be involved, but that we may need to be more creative in using digital technology to reach them and find out what’s important to them.”

When people are asked to give feedback they feel important and valued, boosting their morale and their motivation to get involved or ‘pay it forward’ - especially if contributors get to see the results of their efforts. Digital technology offers a powerful facilitator for all of this.

Something we may see in the future are new manifestations of Citizen Science (see for example [Zooniverse](#) and [National Geographic](#)), which invite the general public to help crack scientific puzzles or gather local data and evidence. An expert from the Institute for Compensation Studies at Cornell University discusses the phenomenon[here](#).

Similar approaches could be taken to local community projects – perhaps building on existing schemes that invite the public to report vandalism, potholes or overflowing garbage cans. Sometimes all it takes is the initial idea and someone to run with it. Digital connections pave the way for the rest.

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