

# The ITaaU method for fostering collaborative multidisciplinary utilisation of IT in the digital and post-digital economy (via skype)

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The IT as a Utility Network+ has been running since the summer of 2012 under the Research Councils UK Digital Economy theme. The Network's purpose is to foster deeper understanding of new technologies and services through multidisciplinary research activities for diverse user communities. Such understanding can be gleaned through focused workshops, innovative pilot projects and cross-sector secondments.

The user communities that have engaged with the ITaaU Network to date include: user interaction designers, food security experts, technologists for emerging economies, trust and security experts, accessibility experts, librarians and other information specialists. As a result of the projects, secondments and workshops funded to date, the Network has produced a wide and rich portfolio of collaborative research from teams that might not otherwise have been able to help each other.

In addition to the research elements of these activities, we have been pleased to see the resulting innovation leading to adoption in critical situations. These have included the coordination of mountain rescue teams, government archives and potentially, for improving security in the food chain.

At the heart of these activities has been a drive to further our collective understanding of how open innovation can benefit large and small enterprises, start-ups, academic labs and government agencies in the delivery of IT utilities that best meet the needs of users.

## Wider impact and conclusions

The ten pilot projects funded so far and those anticipated in future calls have further contributed to the adoption of new technologies by user communities. The Uplands Rescue Resilience project has delivered groundbreaking integration of diverse communication systems for professional and volunteer rescue teams operating in mountainous areas where telephone and radio signals break up and present incomplete location data with respect to casualties. We have also been investigating the challenges facing the designers of smart cities, smart spaces and what Bristol Watershed calls playable cities.

Open innovation promises much for businesses, universities and the public at large in terms of creating economic and social capital. Whilst research has identified the evidence behind the benefits of breaking out of the "not invented here" mindset, achieving this requires equally innovative process for bringing researchers, managers and other decision makers together.

## URL(s) for further info

<http://www.itutility.ac.uk>

## Description of work

Having run fourteen workshops to date and having funded ten pilot projects, something of an ITaaU method has begun to emerge. Fostering open innovation is a challenging activity. It requires motivation in terms of perhaps funding for collaborative ventures but also inspiration in terms of bringing people with ideas together with others with different but equally creative ideas and nurturing the emergent sparks. As one participant after a workshop put it: "I have been pushed out of my comfort zone, but in a good way." Workshops are typically run with between ten and twenty participants, experts in a range of fields relating to the theme. Preparatory literature reviews are conducted to scope the topic and these feed into the key topics for discussion.

The topics for workshops were chosen on the basis that they encompass challenges related to user communities that stand to benefit and also contribute to the implementation of new IT utilities. These included libraries of the future, security in the food chain and smart cities/smart spaces. Libraries and librarians play an important role in the evolution of digital and information technologies. On the one hand information specialists are

in a prime position to guide the immediate future of information transformation technologies as they become more pervasive. On the other hand, libraries have been, from medieval times, sites of knowledge production. New technologies including 3D printing, sensor networks, smartphones and other collaborative devices offer new and novel mechanisms for knowledge production. We have also funded projects that are investigating and developing technologies to support public and private transport services.

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