

Mobilfalt – car pooling application as a complement to public transport

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Mobilfalt is a project of the public transport companies in the Federal State of Hesse. The project has a limited profit-making ambition. In its statutes, it is underlined that it will re-invest any profits in rural development and that the main objective is to contribute to stronger (and more attractive) rural regions.

Preconditions, inspiration, nurture

Mobilfalt started in 2013 as a project implemented in the Werra-Meißner district (WM), a part of the north Hessian public transport company (NVV). The idea was formed in a coalition amongst different project developers in the NVV and the municipal public transport ministry in WM. The project is intended to challenge the hard accessibility of and the demographic trends characterizing the region.

The main problem in the region is a rapidly aging population and an increasing migration of citizens to bigger cities. The region has a limited offer in public transport solutions, leading to many people having only bad access to infrastructure, such as train stations, hospitals and grocery stores. Since the number of cars per citizen is high in German rural areas, the idea behind Mobilfalt is to enable ride-sharing of different people whose routes have the same starting and endpoint. The existing bus stop infrastructure should be used as meeting points and the booking and time schedule application of the NVV should be used as the reservation platform for Mobilfalt. In that way the project should increase accessibility, without implementing more bus lines or generating higher traffic frequency and simultaneously fostering social bonds.

The project start-up phase was financed by the NVV and the first online service was established by building on a former software from a “dial-a-bus” service of the NVV. This made the initial starting period less complicated and created the flexibility to establish a learning by doing approach without a long theoretical research phase.

The project was developed in line with sociocultural habits of the population. Through direct interviews and feedback sessions with first users, the needs and concerns of the target groups could be identified and incorporated in the platform design. Further features and monitoring mechanisms were continuously established, while the core functions were kept relatively stable.

The following target groups were identified initially and seem to remain over time:

- Kids and teenagers without drivers-licenses/cars
- Green lifestyle pursuers who might recently have left town for the country side
- Villagers with hobbies that require a ride (soccer, music lessons, etc.)
- Retirees with time and desire to help/drive others and meet people in their cars
- Villagers longing for more socializing and meeting places – in cars and elsewhere

From the conducted feedback questionnaires, initial security concerns could be extracted which led to the establishment of a mandatory driving license and passport check for registered drivers. Later on, the passport registration was suspended, because it turned out to be one of the main barriers for new drivers to register for the service. Since safety and knowing the identity of the driver are some of the service users' main concerns, the driving license check was further developed and is still in place.

Implementation

Resources:

Mobilfalt is a project planned, developed and implemented by the NVV. Horst Pipper stated, that the biggest investment was the automated software solution, that helps to implement Mobilfalt as a part of the regular public transport service offered in the region. Drivers can schedule their ride online and publish it via this system. Service users can find the offered rides online on the NVV platform. If users decide to book a ride with Mobilfalt, a message (SMS) is sent to the driver, telling him that he has a passenger request. The driver then needs to confirm that he is able to offer the ride and if not, Mobilfalt orders a taxi for the user in order to ensure that the ride can be offered as scheduled. The guarantee of mobility, that is included in Mobilfalt's service and realized in cooperation with the region's taxi services, is at the same time key to its service, but also probably the highest variable cost of the project.

However, Horst Pipper stated that the service overall is financially worth it, as costs are always compared to a bus-line, that would run instead. Given the high fix costs for a bus-line that would offer the same ride on an hourly schedule, even the occasional ordering of a taxi is economically reasonable to guarantee the mobility of users. The driver gets a fixed compensation of EUR 0.30 per km. Users had to pay EUR 1.00 for every ride regardless of its duration or the distance covered. According to Horst Pipper the pricing model has been rearranged recently and adapted to the price of a single-ride in the regular public transport system. This change was necessary, because the former, very cheap price of a ride with Mobilfalt made potential users think that the service was of a poor quality.

The federal state of Hess has supported Mobilfalt in the start-up phase with a grant of EUR 1,000,000.00. While this helped to fund and implement it, additional funding by the NVV was necessary and is until today the only additional funding resource besides public funds. Additional public funds from the state of Hess of EUR 200,000.00 were received after the first testing phase.

Given its direct implementation into the regular service of NVV, competition with other services was rather limited. Planned from beginning on as an addition to it, Mobilfalt fits well with the already existing public transport system. Only regional taxi companies had doubts about losing customers to the new and cheap mobility service offered by Mobilfalt. But the integration of taxis into the service as a back-up for Mobilfalt's drivers, convinced taxi companies to support the project. Impacts on the job market are rather limited as Mobilfalt relies on voluntary drivers that only receive a small monetary compensation.

Enablers and Barriers/ Bottlenecks:

A key enabler for Mobilfalt's successful implementation was the development of an adequate software infrastructure embedded in the NVV platform. Furthermore, Mobilfalt had a consistent marketing strategy. In addition to regular marketing via flyers and advertisement, Mobilfalt sent out ambassadors to communities and towns in the regions, presenting and informing about the project on several occasions. The first ambassadors were recruited from the regular staff of NVV, but now Mobilfalt has started coaching mini-jobbers to be its ambassadors. According to Horst Pipper the ambassadors' work is a very important measure to decrease safety concerns that potential users have when sharing rides with complete strangers. Marketing overall was very important during the implementation phase of Mobilfalt and is a key to its ongoing service. Continuous customer feedback, either on the customers' own initiative or in response to polls, helps to adjust the service and to get a better understanding of the impression Mobilfalt makes on the rural community.

Despite these efforts, a main barrier of Mobilfalt remains information spreading. According to Horst Pipper, there are still many people that, when questioned about it, had never heard of Mobilfalt. The low degree of familiarity amongst the general public might also be the reason for the main bottleneck of the project, the low number of new drivers. It is hard to recruit new voluntary drivers, if a major part of the population does not even know about Mobilfalt. Currently, Horst Pipper told us, about 130 drivers are registered and offering rides. On the other side, there are 2,500 persons signed up for Mobilfalt that regularly use the service. Horst Pipper stated that, given the number of active users, there was an urgent need for new drivers.

Legal Issues:

As Mobilfalt is incorporated in the public transport company NVV, legal issues were not perceived as a big problem according to Horst Pipper. As an example, data protection and privacy concerns are already solved in the NVV-system and therefore also for Mobilfalt. Thanks to two years of up-front planning, there were only minor legal questions to be solved. First, there was the question of how much the drivers could be paid without having to apply for a passenger transportation permit. This permit is needed for remunerated transport that aims at profit-making, but not for an only cost-covering service. In the end Mobilfalt successfully established a EUR 0.30 compensation per kilometre for the drivers, without crossing the thin legal-line that separates Mobilfalt from being a profit-earning business. Secondly, Mobilfalt had to solve liability and insurance issues. The main question was, if Mobilfalt as a company is in any way liable for the incidents that occur when transporting passengers or if the drivers are liable. As Mobilfalt is solely providing information on when, where and by whom the transport service is provided, it turned out, that liability and insurance issues are the driver's responsibility. In order to support the drivers Mobilfalt offers a downloadable form on its website that drivers can use to liaise with their personal liability insurance company. The form is a template that helps including the ride-sharing service the drivers offer in their personal liability insurance. According to Horst Pipper there has not been a single case in which an insurance company declined to include the ride-sharing service in the driver's personal liability insurance. Additionally, Mobilfalt is now planning to establish a general insurance instrument that will cover all the drivers in liability issues.

The outcomes, effects and further development

Mobilfalt as a mobility solution generates the following direct and indirect advantages for the villagers:

- Increased accessibility to important infrastructure in the core villages in the rural areas of the WM.
- Simplified user experience through incorporation in the regular Bus schedule.
- Fostering the community approach in rural areas through social exchange and getting to know the people in the region.
- Connection security through a taxi back up in case voluntary drivers are not available.
- Economic advantages for driver and passenger through cheap fares and a kilometre compensation for the driver.
- Enhancing mobility and social inclusion of elderly people.

The next steps in the project development are, first of all, the integration of all offered mobility services under the NVV into one platform. This aim will be pursued by adding regular buses, train lines, “dial-a-bus” service and the Mobilfalt solution to one public transport network and offering the best possible service for users of public transportation. Moreover, establishing further knowledge exchange with other mobility solution providers in Germany is planned in order to generate a constant learning mechanism and support the ideas of each other.

References

Pipper, H., project coordinator, interview, 8 March 2018