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2c: Contextual Inquiry Check-In | Contextual Inquiry #1 (Mark)

Mark is a 28 years old, software engineer at Google Kirkland. He and his wife, Helen, moved to Seattle 18 months ago, and has been commuting to the Eastside ever since. Commuting is a big part of Mark's routine, he spends about an hour and a half every day driving or riding the bus. He is a very active person. Mark loves to watch and participate in sports. He also goes to the gym regularly (about 3-4 times a week) and when he does not have time to go to the gym he works out at home.

For this contextual inquiry, I met Mark at his condo apartment and it's just been a little over a year since he rented the place. Mark told me he has been taking over the household cleaning activities since Helen started grad school. She also works night shifts which means, she does not have a lot of time left between her job and school. Therefore, they decided that Mark will be the one who is mainly responsible for the housework until she finishes her degree and has more free time to help.

We were very happy to receive feedback about our initial focus and changed the protocol before our first inquiry. Luckily, after these revisions, we had a wider range of questions that steered away from observing only planning behavior. During the talk with Mark he did not mention planning explicitly, nor using any types of planning artifacts. However, the system Mark uses to determine what and when he needs to clean was extremely interesting. When he notices the house is getting dirty, he reminds himself to clean.

"I tell myself that I should clean, then I tell myself the same thing for several days until I notice that I have been telling myself the same thing very frequently, then, I clean."

This session also gave us insight on Mark's feelings and motivations around housework: "I feel like I don't want to do it. It is boring and I don't realize a difference when I finish cleaning the house. I feel it was not a productive thing to accomplish. Also I think that I can live with a little bit of mess" We also learned that Mark cleans in the order he sees things. He will start by sweeping the floors first, then moves to other tasks. Additionally, we learned that for Mark the frequency and order of cleaning a room is directly related to his location in the house. While talking about the bedroom (the room he tends to overlook while cleaning) he said: "[it] is the most remote room from the center of the house and the less visible room in the house." Another problem we covered was maintenance duties (ex. appliances, changing filters). Mark told me he that the only maintenance job he does is when something breaks-down . There may be an opportunity here to help people with the "hidden" cleaning/maintenance activities that could result in an extension of the lives of their appliances.

Overall the session went very smoothly, and I collected some pictures of the living room and kitchen along the way. However, it was hard for us to treat this as a contextual inquiry, instead it ended up being more of a semistructured interview in context. For upcoming interviews we still want to go to the participant's homes because we believe that being in their environment helps them recall past events. For our user group we decided to focus on people who lack time and who are responsible for managing the chores in their households. Also, this inquiry helped us realize that we want to explore in depth areas around what triggers cleaning and "hidden" activities in our upcoming sessions.