

Summary of Findings

We interviewed both our target users – young professionals who work in a physical workspace, and stakeholder – the company manager, to gain a comprehensive understanding of this issue. Through our user research, we learnt that to address social anxiety in workplace, company-wide policies and resources are most ideal, but are often of low participation, or can't be implemented thoroughly. From company perspective, the key is to raise awareness. The people who experience social anxiety in workplace, on the other hand, would like to keep it personal, hence are looking for personal-level solutions. People who are vulnerable to the pressure and discomfort usually know what the triggers are, what they need is a tool that could help get them prepared for social interactions that frequently occur in workplace environment.

Design Research Participants

Participant 1

Carolyn, our first interview participant, is a graduate student major in information management, specializing in data science. This summer, she got her first intern job in the U.S. with UW Capital Planning & Development. She works in a cubicle environment, which is a safe space for her. Her ideal workspace is cubicles with super-high panel partitions so that people can't talk to her without walking into that space, and hence she could work in her own private space; an open office is too dense and loud for her. However, because of her career interest, she wants to work in the Internet industry, where open office floor plans are extensively used. She feels nervous/anxious when meeting with her boss, people from other departments, and clients. As an intern who's an introvert, she barely talks during regular meetings, and giving a speech makes her very nervous. She expressed that she needs help practicing social interactions in these scenarios, and also help to keep her focused under noisy environments.

Participant 2

Jane, our second interview participant, is a college graduate who has been working in the HR department of a financial company for about a year. She is responsible for performance appraisal - this position doesn't require much social interaction with other employees, hence it fits her introverted personality. She thinks smaller-scale activities help her release stress more, i.e. department-level activities are better than company-wide; team-building activities are nice but there could be conflict of interests among project group members. She told us that when HR interviews the candidate, they'll evaluate the person's psychological quality and ability to cope with stress, as well as social skills, so the job duties aren't really the source of stress - at least not for her; it's her personality and personal-level social interaction that trigger the anxiety.

Participant 3

Mike, our third interview participant, is a long-time manager of a software engineering team, including young interns, who was happy to provide a managerial perspective on the issue of social anxiety in the workplace. He noted that if a team member's social anxiety prevents them from contributing to a team responsibility (such as giving a status report/presentation), it adds to the workload of the others and can

create division among the team members. He has found that challenging employees to face their anxieties can improve their anxiety over time. This involves first recognizing the issue, then understanding the character/behavior of the employee exhibiting it. Once that is done, he challenges them to participate and take risks, but notes that this must be done slowly and with compassion, providing assistance when needed. He also mentioned important company benefits that encourage and support employees, such as an anonymous crisis hotline that employees can call for help, as well as team social events and optional meetings to practice public speaking.

Design Research Themes

From our research, we have noticed three common themes:

Level of Awareness

A common theme among participants seems to be the level of awareness about the presence of social anxiety in an individual. As confirmed by both our interview research as well as our initial project proposal research, an individual is often silent about their social anxiety, perhaps due to fear of being judged by their peers. As a result, they often suffer in silence. Coworkers and employers may not even notice the issue if the employee hides it well enough. Companies should recognize this fact, as lack of awareness about social anxiety in employees can contribute to the employees suffering as well as impact team dynamics.

Prevention vs. Treatment

In existing solutions, often times the focus is on either treatment of prevention of social anxiety, but not both. Though there are differences between the two approaches, they do not necessarily need to be separated. Treatment can be a source of prevention, and prevention can be a source of treatment. A holistic view of the problem is important in providing a solution.

Practice

Our research participants all made references to the idea of practicing (or wanting to practice) being social with others. Thus, active participation in social events is commonly seen as important for an individual's growth in combating social anxieties. The optimal extent or type of participation differs between individuals, but in general, taking small steps and gradually increasing exposure to social situations over time is preferable vs. forcing oneself to "jump in headfirst" so to speak.

Task Analysis

1. Who is going to use the design?

The primary users of our design will be young professionals that are at their early stage of career development, who are currently experiencing or who want to prevent issues with social anxiety related to the workplace environment. Depending on the final design, possible secondary users may

be companies/organizations, though this would likely be more of an administrator role than a primary use role (i.e. setting up a company-wide service for individual employees to use/control)

2. What tasks do they now perform?

From our research so far, one way individuals address their issue is to participate in company/department/team activities that focus on team building and socialization in a stress/work-free environment (barbeques, happy hours, contests, etc.). Another task performed is to make use of company benefits like anonymous hotlines and psychological consultancy. Before seeking help from others, they often search online to learn about their mental health condition, and try different stress release methods such as deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and meditation.

3. What tasks are desired?

Current solutions seem to focus on the treatment aspect more than prevention, and do so at a company/team level. Because social anxiety itself can discourage participation in company/team events, a desired way to tackle with this issue is having the ability to prevent/resolve/improve social anxieties at a personal level. Our interviewees suggested that they'd like a tool that could help them reduce negative thinking, face their fears, and practice how to behave properly in different social scenarios; for example, a company-specific set of instructions for how to behave in or resolve different social scenarios at work.

4. How are the tasks learned?

The tasks above could be learned in multiple ways. The company should let employees know what mental health resources are available and how to access these resources. Our interviewees said they had a basic knowledge of social anxiety, but not its impact on workplace. Hence, tutorials could explain to the user how to deal with a given situation, though they would require the ability to read.

5. Where are the tasks performed?

Company/department/team stress-relieving activities should be performed in respective context, while personal-level tasks should be able to be performed anywhere. Because social anxiety can arise at any time, we want to give users something they can use any time to get prepared and practice their day-to-day coping strategies for social interaction in the workplace.

6. What is the relationship between the person and data?

Since we haven't selected the optimal form of design, whether data will be collected from our users still remain undecided. In addition, quantifying social anxiety related parameters would require deep expertise in mental health, which we don't have access to. We may collect data like how frequently the self-help tasks are performed and how much time people have spent on these tasks. The data shouldn't be shared and access to the data is individualized. Also, it should be possible to do this without storing any personally identifiable information (names, id numbers, etc.).

7. What other tools does the person have?

Almost every young professional has a cell phone, and our interviewees said that they'd use their cell phone to search for preparation tips before giving a presentation/speech. For handling anxiety, there

are some guided meditation app, therapy app that matches people with a mental health professional, and scheduling/time management/habit tracking apps

8. How do people communicate with each other?

Our primary users don't communicate with their colleagues often, and most communication they have is about the project they're working on. Our participants admitted that they never had a real, deep conversation about stress or anxiety within workplace environment.

9. How often are the tasks performed?

Mostly, tasks are performed when a company organizes those team-building activities or mental health workshops. However, our target audience don't really enjoy after work drinks/dinner or other social events that are supposed to help bond with colleagues - they prefer spending time with their friends/family. For personal level tasks, they vary among individuals, but are generally performed less frequent than desired.

10. What are the time constraints on the tasks?

The tasks should contribute to a continuous practice to help people gradually overcome their anxiety. This may seem like a large time commitment, but ideally would be composed of small, quick uses that do not impose heavily on the user's time.

11. What happens when things go wrong?

Our design intervention shouldn't be a burden/new source of anxiety for them. We'd like to position our design as a helpful source, a nice addition to the existing resources, not a forceful/compulsive one. We want to provide personal-level solutions, and may use personal data to customize each user experience. If relevant data does leak, no personally identifiable information should be found.

Contribution

Huiru Luo: Wrote summary of findings, interviewed 2 participants, wrote part of task analysis

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