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A FRAMEWORK FOR TESTING INNOVATIVE TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS: A CASE STUDY OF CARLINK—A COMMUTER CARSHARING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

Transit accounts for just two percent of total travel in the U.S. One reason for low ridership is limited access; many individuals either live or work too far from a transit station. In developing transit connectivity solutions, researchers often employ a range of study instruments, such as stated-preference surveys, focus groups, and pilot programs. To better understand response to one innovative transit solution, the authors employed a number of research tools, including: a longitudinal survey, field test, and pilot program. The innovation examined was a commuter carsharing model, called CarLink, which linked short-term rental vehicles to transit and employment centers. Over several years, researchers explored user response to the CarLink concept, a field operational test (CarLink I), a pilot program (CarLink II), and a commercial operation (the pilot was turned over to Flexcar in summer 2002). This multi-staged approach provided an opportunity for researchers to learn and adapt as each phase progressed. In this paper, the authors outline the CarLink model, technology, and early lessons learned; describe CarLink II operational understanding; provide a synopsis of the pilot program transition; and offer recommendations for future model development.

Key Words: Carsharing, CarLink, User Response, Operations, Survey, Field Test, Pilot Program, Sustainability

Word Count: 7,500 words

INTRODUCTION

Although public transportation use is growing in the United States, it still accounts for only two percent of total travel (1). In the San Francisco Bay Area, where there is an extensive public transportation network, transit use is higher: twelve percent of commuters used public transportation in 2002 (1). Congestion on freeways and surface streets, coupled with continuing air pollution, requires the examination of more demand-responsive alternatives. According to a nationwide report conducted in 2000, the San Francisco Bay Area averaged 92 hours of delay per person per year during peak commute hours (2). Not surprisingly, transit access is a major impediment to use; transit capacity often exceeds the number of people, living or working, within walking distance—one quarter mile or less—of a station. If existing access methods are augmented (ranging from traditional fixed route transit to more demand-responsive solutions), more individuals could use transit. Increased transit access would assist in reducing congestion during peak travel periods, while also improving overall system efficiency.

Designing innovative solutions that increase transit access and ridership is challenging. This is especially true in the context of altering long-term travel behaviors, particularly single occupancy vehicle use. Furthermore, individuals are reluctant to try unfamiliar ideas, new technologies, or both. Understanding how to change long-held travel patterns is one of the greatest challenges faced by transportation professionals.

There are many complex issues associated with testing and implementing transportation innovations. Significant data about an innovation's impacts are typically needed to justify large-scale deployment costs. There are several methods for gathering these data, such as simulation modeling, stated-preference surveys, and controlled testing. As confirmed by CarLink I, much can be learned from testing a transportation innovation in a real-world setting (3). Field tests and pilot programs provide a framework for investigating complex relationships among system efficiency, user acceptance/impacts, economic viability, and other operational issues.

Usually, field tests operate for a predetermined length of time to evaluate a new concept/ technology. In contrast, pilot programs can extend beyond this initial "proof-of-concept" phase by focusing on program sustainability. Whether instituting a new concept, technology, or regulatory framework, pilot programs can be beneficial to decision makers and participants. Pilots enable new ideas to be tested, modified, and assessed with limited financial risk and no ongoing obligation. At the same time, they can support program continuation and offer a cost-effective alternative to exploring transportation innovations.

From July 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002, a carsharing pilot program, emphasizing transit and employer access—CarLink II—was deployed in the San Francisco Bay Area. Pilot objectives included testing an advanced carsharing system, understanding user response to this service, and testing its long-term sustainability. This paper examines the CarLink technology, participant response, and lessons learned from this multi-stage initiative. The authors first review the CarLink model, technologies, and early lessons learned. Second, CarLink II operational findings are examined. Third, a synopsis of the pilot program transition to a permanent service is discussed. Finally, the authors conclude with opportunities for improving carsharing deployment initiatives based on these findings.

CARLINK PROGRAM AND RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Between 1998 and 2003, researchers deployed a three-phase carsharing research program in the San Francisco Bay Area, CarLink, in conjunction with the California Department of

Transportation (Caltrans), American Honda Motor Company, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) District, Caltrain, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. During the first phase, researchers conducted a longitudinal survey that examined CarLink concept response (for more information, see (4)). During the second phase, researchers assessed CarLink I—a demonstration that examined user response and operations in a controlled setting. CarLink I was based at the Dublin-Pleasanton BART station and operated for ten months during 1999 (3). In the final phase, researchers examined the CarLink II pilot program, which ran from July 1, 2001 through June 30, 2002, and was based at the California Avenue Caltrain station in Palo Alto. The research goals of this pilot project included testing advanced carsharing technologies, overall user response, and economic sustainability.

Broadly defined, carsharing allows a group of individuals to share a vehicle fleet, paying for use based on time and miles traveled (e.g., City CarShare, Flexcar, and Zipcar). The most common model is known as neighborhood carsharing, where a few vehicles are deployed in each of several neighborhoods for easy member access. These vehicles are accessed from and returned to the same lot. CarLink tested a commuter carsharing model that provided vehicle access at home and work, as well as a transit linkage on either end of a commute. This section includes a brief overview of the CarLink model, differences between CarLink I and II, and program pricing.

CarLink Model: A Brief Overview

Both CarLink I and II were based on the same commuter carsharing structure, involving three sets of members: Homebased Users, Workbased Commuters, and Workbased Day Users (described below). Both CarLink programs included a single, primary transit station that served as a vehicle transfer point for Workbased Commuters and Homebased Users who commuted via transit. CarLink provided a convenient transit linkage to and from home/work via a shared-use vehicle fleet. This same fleet was also shared by households and employers for tripmaking on evenings and weekends and throughout the workday.

During CarLink I, Homebased Users would drive their CarLink vehicles to a selected transit station each morning, park the car in a designated CarLink space, and ride transit to work. Next, a Workbased Commuter would arrive at the same station via train in the morning, pick up a CarLink car, and drive it to work, parking in a designated CarLink space at their work location. Throughout the day, Workbased Day Users could reserve CarLink vehicles for business and personal errands, returning the cars to a designated work lot after each trip. At the end of the workday, Workbased Commuters drove the CarLink vehicles back to the transit station and would take the train for the remainder of their trip home. After Homebased Users—riding the train for the majority of their commute home— returned to the transit station, they would pick up a CarLink vehicle and drive it home for personal use on evenings and weekends.

As mentioned above, the CarLink II pilot program is based on the same general model as CarLink I. However, lessons gleaned from user feedback and recommendations from the CarLink I staff and project partners (i.e., Honda, Caltrans, BART District, and LLNL) suggested several changes to improve the model and research focus. Overall, it was decided that more could be learned by adapting the model to a new setting and attempting to create a permanent enterprise. This section describes the CarLink II project components and how they differ from CarLink I. Table 1, below, summarizes the major differences between CarLink I and II.

TABLE 1: Differences Between CarLink I and II

STUDY CHARACTERISTICS	CARLINK I	CARLINK II
Number of Vehicles	12 Vehicles	19 Vehicles
Primary Transit Partner	BART	Caltrain
Transit Station Location	Dublin/Pleasanton	Palo Alto
Vehicle Type	Compressed natural gas Honda Civics	Ultra-low emission Honda Civics
Homebased Users	Up to 10 households, pay $200 per month.	Up to 16 households, pay $300 per month.
Workbased Commuters	Up to 20 LLNL employees pay $60 per carpool ($30 each).	Up to 63 employees of businesses at Stanford Research Park (primarily), share CarLink vehicles to carpool to/from work. Businesses pay $350 per month per vehicle (a combined fee) for Workbased Commuter and Day Use services (in contrast to employees paying for this service independently as in CarLink I).
Workbased Day Users	Employees of LLNL pay $1.50 per hour and $.10 per mile.	Up to 28 employees of Stanford Research Park companies and other nearby businesses have access to vehicles for business and personal use. Employers pay $350 per vehicle per month to subscribe to the combined Workbased Commuter and Day Use services.
Total Users	54	107
Employer	One: LLNL	Six: Several private companies at/nearby Stanford Research Park
Technology	In-vehicle tracking, smart key kiosk at transit station, smart cards, manual key boxes at LLNL, and on-line scheduling system at LLNL	In-vehicle tracking, automated data collection, smart key fob (or smartcard) entry, PIN-based vehicle login, on-line reservations, and in-vehicle navigation system
Program Length	Field test designed for limited 10-month duration	Pilot program with planned transition to on-going carsharing service
Research Goals	Document demand for commuter carsharing service and gauge user satisfaction and needs	Continued analysis of commuter carsharing (in a new setting) with greater statistical confidence (i.e., a greater sample size) and new emphasis on technology testing, its impact on cost reduction, and longer-term program sustainability

CarLink Economics

Both CarLink I and II required members (or their employers) to pay for vehicle use. Lessons learned from carsharing programs in Japan informed this design decision. There, the program lost participants when fees were implemented for services initially provided for free (5). Thus, CarLink service fees were required to test the economic value of the service. For members, fees covered all operational and vehicle maintenance costs, including fuel and insurance.

The fee structure was determined by a literature review, willingness-to-pay studies through focus groups, discussions with employers, and by estimating operational costs. The fee structure was below "market value" for both the demonstration and the pilot program as this was a new concept and users contributed to the research process. Participants provided feedback on the program and technology, including completing surveys and participating in focus groups and personal interviews.

CarLink I and II consisted of three user groups: Homebased Users, Workbased Commuters, and Day Users. Homebased members paid a monthly fee for car use to commute to and from the station and on evenings and weekends. CarLink I Homebased Users paid $200/month; CarLink II Homebased Users paid $300/month. The payment structure for CarLink I and II differed for the Workbased Commuter and Day Use portions of the model. In CarLink I, employees paid a flat Workbased Commuter fee ($60/month/car), as well as usage fees ($1.50/hour and $0.10/mile) for their personal CarLink vehicle use during the workday. Employers paid for work-related trips. As part of CarLink II, the model was adapted slightly. Under the new structure, employers paid a flat fee of $350/month per car, which covered both the Workbased Commuter and Day Use components. Employers joined CarLink II to provide the carsharing service as an employee benefit. Potential benefits include: 1) promoting employee retention, 2) reducing office parking demand, 3) encouraging transit use, and 4) substituting costly fleet vehicle program operations with CarLink in some cases. Each business had specific, and different, reasons for joining CarLink II.

EARLY LESSONS LEARNED

The CarLink longitudinal survey and CarLink I field test were designed to test the commuter carsharing concept. Proof of concept was the primary goal of CarLink I. Implemented as a demonstration, CarLink I ceased operations at the close of the research project in late 1999. In contrast, CarLink II was a pilot program designed to test integrated carsharing technology and long-term sustainability. Pilots allow for a more realistic evaluation of user response, since members understand that the program may become permanent. For instance, a member might sell a car if she believes the program will continue. This section provides an overview of CarLink longitudinal survey findings and CarLink I field test results, which informed the design of CarLink II.

CarLink Longitudinal Survey

From June to October 1998, researchers collected response data on the CarLink concept from 302 individuals (representing 212 households) in the Bay Area. These attitudinal and belief data measured change in response, which helped to explain the innovation adoption process. The survey consisted of a baseline (or initial survey) and three identical questionnaires that followed each of the informational media developed to explain the CarLink concept: an informational

brochure; video; and an interactive trial drive clinic with compressed natural gas (CNG) Honda Civics, smartcards, and a smart carsharing key management kiosk. An experimental group and a control group were recruited for the study to evaluate informational media impacts on CarLink response. Communication objectives emphasized the disadvantages of current modes, the advantages and disadvantages of carsharing, and how the CarLink system works.

Participating households, for both the longitudinal survey and the CarLink I field test, included four groups: 1) current BART commuters, 2) individuals who might use BART when carsharing becomes available, 3) people who do not usually take transit but could take it to work, and 4) individuals who live in neighborhoods with substantial BART ridership. These groups represented potential CarLink participants.

The final sample population consisted of 207 experimental participants (154 households) and 95 control group participants (58 households). A total of 488 individuals (i.e., both experimental and control) received the initial questionnaire. Throughout this study, there were 186 dropouts (58 did not return the first questionnaire, and 128 individuals dropped out after returning the second questionnaire). After the survey was completed, four focus groups were held with study participants in October 1998, to further gauge participant perceptions and overall response to the CarLink concept. The focus groups consisted of three experimental groups with a total of 28 participants and one control group session with nine participants.

Researchers found that CarLink response was influenced by the amount and type of exposure to the concept, as predicted by social marketing and learning theories (for more information on these theories, see (4)). Specifically, participants who only read the CarLink brochure lost interest over time (interest dropped from 45 percent at the time of the initial questionnaire to 33 percent during the final questionnaire), while nearly 78 percent of those who read the brochure, watched the CarLink video, and participated in the drive clinic reported that they would use CarLink as part of the final questionnaire. In fact, many indicated that they would be interested in joining the CarLink I field test (i.e., 54 percent of the experimental group in contrast to 33 percent of the control) in the final questionnaire.

At the drive clinic, held in September 1998, participants used a smartcard to access a CarLink vehicle and released the immobilizer, which blocked unauthorized users from starting the car, and took a test drive, accompanied by a researcher who documented their observations, questions, and concerns. The drive clinic offered participants a chance to see and try new technologies, as well as to interact with study researchers. Each participant completed a 20-minute exit interview with a researcher on his or her response to the CarLink system and willingness to participate in such a service.

During the exit interview, over 90 percent of participants said “Yes.” As a result of the clinic, there was a 21 percent increase in the “Yes” response category. Since control group respondents did not participate in the clinic, there are no corresponding data for them. Thus, it appears that the drive clinic was an effective tool for increasing positive awareness of the CarLink concept. Nevertheless, this response appears to be overstated (i.e., the social desirability effect or tendency of participants to overstate a socially desirable position, especially in the presence of researchers), as there was a 13 percent decrease (from the exit interview) in the experimental group’s response during the final questionnaire.

The CarLink program built on the longitudinal survey in three ways. First, researchers included 32 longitudinal survey participants in the CarLink I field test (i.e., 15 percent of the experimental population). Second, understanding about the value of multiple informational media was integrated into CarLink recruitment strategies. Finally, a trial offer was added to the

CarLink II program (i.e., an opportunity to try CarLink for a limited period of time prior to subscribing) based on the success of the drive clinic.

CarLink I

The CarLink I field test provided an exploratory test bed for this carsharing model. During the field test, many lessons were learned and success factors identified (3). Shortly after the CarLink longitudinal survey was completed, researchers contacted individuals who indicated that they would be interested in CarLink I field test participation. Individuals were able to enroll in CarLink I, if they had a match with one or more of the following field test requirements, including:

1) Homebased Use, those who could use the Dublin-Pleasanton BART Station to commute to work;
2) Workbased Commuter Use, individuals who work at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (LLNL) and could commute via BART; and
3) Day Use, those who work at LLNL.

Researchers were unable to enroll individuals that did not match one of these user groups. Given the restrictive participation requirements, a majority of interested participants did not meet the criteria for program participation. Interestingly, no one from the control group joined the field test. Thirty-two individuals or 28 percent of experimental respondents, who requested to be contacted about field test participation, became members (or 15 percent of the total experimental population). These individuals (i.e., from the longitudinal survey) represent 60 percent of the field test population. Twenty additional individuals joined the field test (i.e., not from the longitudinal survey), primarily in the Homebased User and Workbased Commuter categories. The field test was deployed in the Dublin-Pleasanton region from January to November 1999. As part of the CarLink I evaluation, several participant feedback tools were employed, including questionnaires, household interviews, and focus groups. A high percentage of users agreed to participate in the study (i.e., 73 percent response rate). This program enrolled 54 participants throughout the 10-month field test with 38 active participants. Active participants drove the vehicles frequently, whereas inactive members did not use the CarLink vehicles (even though they enrolled in the program). The participant pool was limited due to the short project duration, program startup delays, and limited CNG infrastructure (3).

The CarLink II pilot program built upon six key operational lessons learned from CarLink I:

1) Streamlining Technology: Several technology shortcomings (i.e., key management and vehicle tracking systems) contributed to delays and necessitated program modification. Technology should be integrated and customized to facilitate carsharing use. A stand-alone “smartcard” approach should be developed and tested in which fixed key box lots are not needed. In this way, participants could access vehicles with smartcards alone.
2) Limited CNG Infrastructure: During CarLink I, two CNG issues constrained operations: a limited number of CNG refueling sites and slow CNG refueling pumps at LLNL. The CNG component of CarLink I restricted vehicle range and participation. Also, users did not refuel vehicles as frequently as agreed. Use of

CNG vehicles in the CarLink I field test distracted from the shared-use vehicle evaluation. In the future, this model should be tested with internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles and fuel cards.

3) Guaranteed Parking: Guaranteed parking at the Dublin-Pleasanton BART station was a huge program incentive, as parking at this station filled up prior to 7AM at the time of the program. In the future, carsharing programs should be sited in locations where parking is costly and limited.
4) Vehicle Cleanliness: During CarLink I, operations staff and participants cleaned and washed cars. Nevertheless, vehicle cleanliness continued to be a chronic program issue. Consider hiring a third party to clean vehicles more frequently.
5) Employer Participation: Day Use participation in CarLink I was limited. In the future, test an employer-focused carsharing service with multiple companies located in a congested corridor with transit access and parking constraints.
6) Program Duration: CarLink I was a limited demonstration project (i.e., 10 months), which restricted understanding of user adoption and behavior because of its short timeframe. In the future, deploy CarLink as a pilot program with the potential to transition to an ongoing operation after the research phase ends.

CARLINK II USER & OPERATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

During the CarLink I field test, the primary goal was narrowly defined—to study user response to the commuter carsharing concept. In CarLink II, the research goals were broadened to evaluate long-term program sustainability and to test an integrated smart carsharing system. The California Avenue Caltrain station in Palo Alto was selected as the CarLink II transit hub after evaluating a number of potential locations in the San Francisco Bay Area. The criteria for site selection were: 1) located near a congested corridor, 2) significant number of commuters traveling to and from the station, 3) concentration of employers near transit station (i.e., within five to ten miles of station), 4) supportive transit operator, 5) limited bus or shuttle services, 6) transit parking at capacity, and 7) local governmental project support.

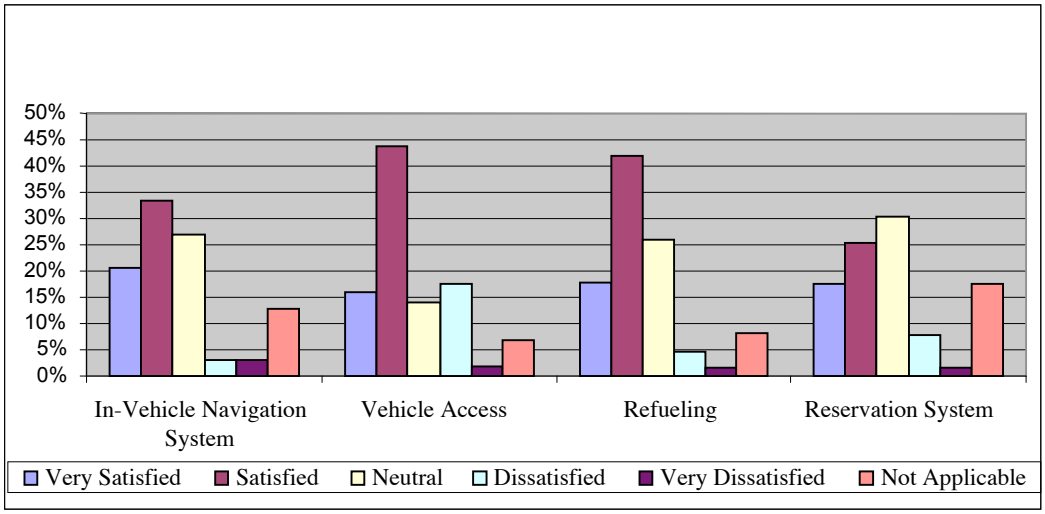
All sites evaluated for CarLink II had freeway congestion in both directions and commuters traveling to and from the transit hub. Other locations evaluated included Santa Clara/San Mateo Counties, San Jose, and the Dublin/Pleasanton area (location of CarLink I). Based on the above criteria Palo Alto was selected as the preferred location. The following section includes an overview of CarLink II user satisfaction and operational lessons learned.

CarLink II User Satisfaction

A total of 107 individuals participated in the CarLink II program: 16 Homebased Users, 28 Day Users, and 63 Workbased Commuters/Day Users. Fifty-three percent of participants were female and 47 percent male. Sixty-four respondents completed the final questionnaire (a response rate of 60 percent). Respondents included nine Homebased users (five male, four female), 21 Day Users (9 male, 12 female), and 34 Workbased Commuters (14 male, 20 female).

Technology was a major aspect of CarLink II operations since it facilitated user convenience, management tools, and program expansion. The CarLink II technology included: an in-vehicle navigation system for trip routing, refueling cards for maximum flexibility, and a reservation system for Day Use. Figure 1, below, provides user satisfaction data on four key program areas: 1) in-vehicle navigation, 2) vehicle access, 3) refueling, and 4) reservations.

FIGURE 1: Satisfaction with CarLink II Features



In-Vehicle Navigation System

The in-vehicle navigation system allowed users to route their trips and receive visual and voice instruction. This was not a program requirement, but an additional feature that provided convenience for some trips. Many users did not use it regularly, since their trips from the train to home or work were identical each day. While 13 percent never used the system, over 50 percent of respondents reported that the system was very satisfying or satisfying to use. It is interesting to note that system use increased during the second half of the pilot program, particularly among Homebased Users.

Vehicle Access

Vehicle access is defined as unlocking the car with a key fob and logging into the CarLink II computerized system with a personal identification number (PIN), which released the ignition immobilizer and attributed trip activity to the user's ID number. Ninety-two percent of users were satisfied with vehicle access at the program's mid point. By the program's end, only 60 percent were satisfied or very satisfied, and nearly 20 percent were dissatisfied with the system. Homebased Users were the most frustrated by the length of time (three seconds) the fob took to unlock the vehicle, and they felt that the location of the smart key reader (rear windshield) was inconvenient if holding a child, groceries, etc.

Refueling

CarLink II vehicles each included a fuel card and a PIN associated with each user. This system allowed individuals to refuel the cars at their convenience at local stations. Members were required to refuel a vehicle if the fuel level fell below 1/4 tank or a $10 fine was imposed. At the end of the program, 60 percent of respondents reported that they were very satisfied or satisfied with refueling, and only seven percent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Throughout the program, participants indicated that the vehicles were sufficiently fueled, although this was not

always the case. Homebased Users tended to fuel more frequently since they used the cars more often and for longer trips. Users also indicated that incentives for individuals who frequently refueled the vehicles (e.g., coupons for free coffee, videos, etc.) would have provided more motivation for refueling consistently.

Reservation System

The reservation system allowed Day Users to reserve vehicles from any computer from fifteen minutes to one month in advance of appointments. Typically, each employer set aside one vehicle that could not be reserved in advance to provide a system buffer. Since the reservation and access systems did not provide a "lockout" component (i.e., preventing one member from taking a vehicle reserved by another), members were entirely on an "honor system."

At the end of the program, 44 percent of the respondents were satisfied, and only eight percent were dissatisfied with the reservation system. However, during interim program interviews, 28 percent were dissatisfied with the system. This change likely reflects satisfaction with reservation system improvements made during the remainder of the program.

The primary reason for reservation system dissatisfaction was the lack of a lockout system—guaranteeing that a reserved vehicle would be waiting for the individual that requested it. Vehicle lockout was identified as an area for next generation technology development, as it was not addressed during the CarLink II pilot program due to cost and time constraints.

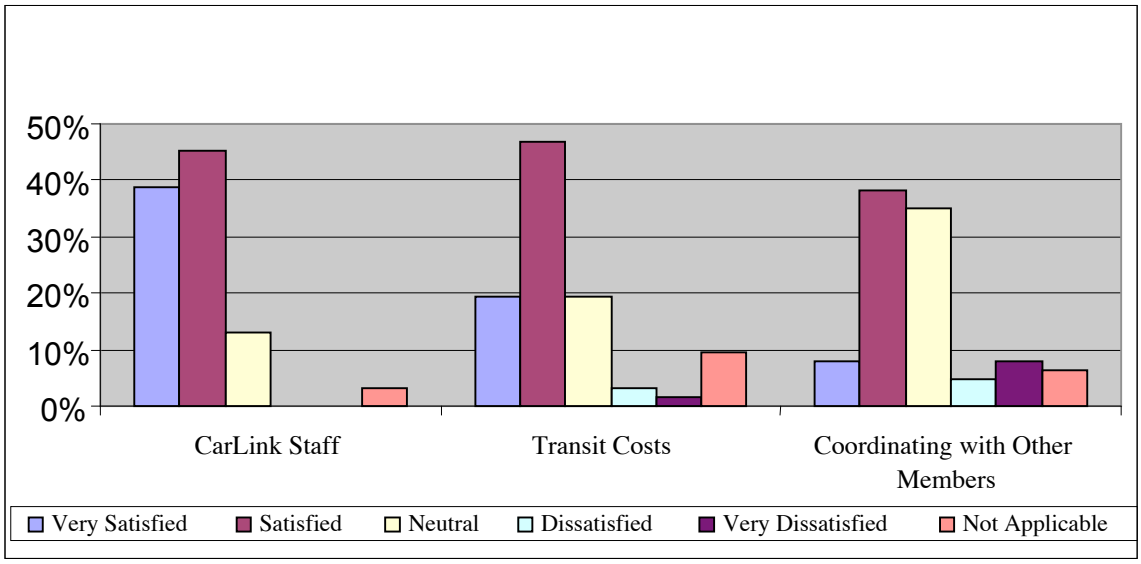
Other reservation system concerns involved the overall reservation process and website format, including:

- Scrolling on the web page was difficult;
- There were too many steps involved in making a reservation;
- All cars should be available to reserve in advance (i.e., not requiring that one of a company's CarLink II fleet vehicles be kept in reserve);
- The reservation page's clock was not always accurate; and
- There was no way to inform the reservation system directly (e.g., automated phone interface) that a Day Use trip was running longer than expected. Instead users had to ask CarLink II staff to check the reservation's page and notify the next scheduled user.

Despite reservation difficulties, many participants who were vocal about reservation concerns, seldom if ever, experienced a problem. However, the perception that a reserved vehicle might not be available became so dominant that many saw this as their most critical CarLink II concern.

In addition to technology, CarLink II staff, transit costs, and member coordination were important elements to gauge user satisfaction. Figure 2, below, provides a summary of final questionnaire response to various program features.

FIGURE 2: Satisfaction with Other CarLink II Features



CarLink Staff

A substantial amount of staff time was dedicated to responding to member issues. Thirty-nine percent of respondents to the final questionnaire were very satisfied, and 45 percent were satisfied with the CarLink II staff. No respondents were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. During the interim program interviews, participants also expressed satisfaction with CarLink II staff; 68 percent of those responding were very satisfied with CarLink II operations personnel. Members reported that CarLink II staff responded very quickly when problems arose and kept them well informed of relevant issues.

Transit Costs

Transit costs (primarily Caltrain) varied for individual members. All CarLink II member companies contributed to the transit fares of their employees. As part of the final questionnaire, 19 percent of respondents were very satisfied, 47 percent were satisfied, and only five percent were dissatisfied with their transit costs. Ten percent of respondents answered not applicable, since many Day Users carpooled, vanpooled, bicycled, or walked to work.

Member Coordination

CarLink II required all members to coordinate with each other to ensure that vehicles reached designated locations at required times (e.g., Caltrain during AM and PM commute peaks). In addition, Workbased Commuters carpooled from the train station to their employment location, and back again. Initially, a significant amount of time went into schedule coordination by CarLink II staff. Approximately eight percent of respondents were very satisfied, and 38 percent were satisfied with this process. Thirty-five percent were neutral, indicating that the majority of participants adjusted easily to schedule coordination. It is important to note that scheduling

flexibility was accommodated with additional (or unassigned) vehicles in the CarLink II fleet. To reduce costs after the transition to Flexcar—the private third party operator—the number of reserve vehicles was reduced.

Lessons Learned from CarLink II Operations

Similar to CarLink I, numerous lessons were gleaned from CarLink II operations. Issues ranging from parking to participant recruitment and retention are described below.

Parking Impacts

Since CarLink II was a pilot program, strong emphasis was placed on business membership (i.e., Workbased Commuter and Day Use participation), which could continue beyond the pilot phase. The Stanford Research Park (consisting of 150 companies, located between one and five miles from the California Avenue Caltrain station) viewed the carsharing service as an employee benefit. Building on a principal CarLink I success factor, locations with limited parking were emphasized during the CarLink II site selection process in early 2000. At this time, the parking lot at the California Avenue Caltrain station was close to 90 percent capacity. However, due to the subsequent economic downturn, lot utilization decreased to less than 60 percent by the end of CarLink II (July 2002). This change in parking impacted program recruitment, as guaranteed parking is a substantial incentive to carsharing use, particularly when parking is oversubscribed. Thus, various economic forces can have a notable impact on carsharing program adoption and appeal, particularly in a commuter carsharing program emphasizing transit connectivity. With job loss and less congested roads, there was less demand for transit and carsharing in Palo Alto.

Economic Impacts

As mentioned above, CarLink II site selection was conducted in summer 2000. At that time, the California economy had just begun to experience an economic shift, but the extent of this decline was not yet apparent. Earlier, the strong economy had contributed to increased highway congestion, and many transit lots were approaching or exceeding capacity in the Bay Area. Employers were anxious about employee retention, and Palo Alto was concerned about the impact of congestion on quality of life. At this time, there was no reason to believe the economic strength of Silicon Valley would diminish enough to affect CarLink II's longer-term operation. Silicon Valley lost approximately nine percent of its employment from the first quarter of 2001 to the second quarter of 2002 (i.e., the period of CarLink II operations) (6). This impact diminished user demand and willingness to pay during CarLink II, economic viability (i.e., CarLink II was unable to cover its costs), and long-term sustainability (i.e., transition to a third-party operator).

Integrated Carsharing Technology

Both CarLink I and II employed advanced carsharing technologies. In CarLink I, however, the two main technologies employed were not integrated together: 1) vehicle reservation and access technology, and 2) the radio-frequency based vehicle tracking system. Several CarLink I technology shortcomings contributed to delays and necessitated program modifications (e.g., user data transmission failure). In the future, it was recommended that carsharing technology be

integrated (e.g., tracking, reservations, and billing), customized to facilitate vehicle access, and designed to serve multiple lot designs. Furthermore, the Day Use reservation system was not integrated with the vehicle tracking system, meaning that real-time vehicle availability was not reflected on the reservation page. As part of CarLink II, American Honda Motor Company developed an integrated carsharing system that included: 1) vehicle access (smart key fobs); 2) an Internet-based reservation system; and 3) vehicle use and tracking (car location, vehicle miles traveled, fuel levels, user ID number, and time). CarLink II also included a navigational system. While the majority of participants were satisfied with the CarLink II technology, the following improvements were recommended:

- A "lockout" feature for reserved vehicles should be developed;
- The key fob door-release speed should be increased;
- The PIN entry screen process should be improved;
- The vehicle immobilizer should be integrated with the engine control unit to make this feature much more secure;
- The online reservation page should be modified to improve scrolling and reflect the correct time;
- The number of steps involved in making an online reservation should be reduced;
- A means to directly inform the reservation system that a trip is extending past the reserved time period should be developed (e.g., automated phone interface); and
- Reserved cars that are unused should be converted to "available for use" automatically on the reservation page after a 10- to 15- minute waiting period. (Furthermore, users should be fined if they do not cancel a reservation in advance.)

Participant Recruitment and Retention

Participant recruitment for a new transportation concept involves creativity and persistence. Engaging potential participants is challenging. Recruitment remains an ongoing effort due to member attrition (businesses and individuals) due to changes in home, work, or employment circumstances.

During CarLink II, a wide variety of recruitment strategies were employed with varying levels of success, including: the CarLink II website, brochure/postcards, a video, flyers at stations and in Caltrain bills, flyers on trains, articles/advertisement in local papers, community meetings, carpool lists, a trial offer, Stanford Research Park management recommendations, e-mail at employment sites, and word of mouth. The most effective tools included the trial offer (as noted during the CarLink longitudinal survey as a powerful recruitment device), flyers on trains, recommendations from Stanford Research Park, word of mouth, and e-mail communication. Least effective methods included flyers in the Caltrain bill and at the stations, the carpool list, and the CarLink II video.

The Palo Alto location presented a challenge for Homebased User recruitment. Two significant barriers were: 1) high levels of multiple car ownership are common in Palo Alto; and 2) transit station parking was not limited throughout the pilot program. The most efficient mechanism for Homebased User recruitment was the "trial" program, which allowed prospective users to try the system before committing to a monthly payment. The trial offer included one week of service for $25 (versus $300/month for full participation). More than 50 percent of the individuals that participated in the trial joined as regular members. Business recruitment was

conducted by working with local community contacts (e.g., City of Palo Alto, Stanford Research Park Management, and a local ridesharing group). In addition, some employees that saw the CarLink vehicles in parking lots or flyers on the trains, contacted CarLink II operations staff to learn more about the program. Once a business joined, their employees had access to the program at no additional cost. The employers were responsible for advertising the program to their staff and encouraging them to participate. Since employers paid a flat fee per car, it was in their interest to recruit as many employees as possible to maximize investment benefits. In the next section, the 12-month CarLink II pilot transition is discussed.

PILOT TRANSITION

Starting July 1, 2002, Flexcar—the private carsharing operator—began operating the former CarLink II pilot program. It was not possible to overlap personnel and operational protocols into a transitional phase due to funding constraints. As a result, there were two Flexcar operational phases. The first phase, lasting three months, maintained the CarLink II format to provide member consistency and Flexcar assessment time. During the second phase, Flexcar implemented a revised program approach and rates based on their economic assessment. Changes included: 1) fee increases (employer rates doubled to $700/month per car; Homebased User rates increased by $24.75/month to $324.75/month); 2) hourly rentals ($9/hour and 10 free miles or $40/month with five free hours and 50 miles); 3) fewer reserve (or backup) vehicles to reduce costs; and 4) restricted vehicle assignment and schedule adherence (i.e., vehicle must be returned to Caltrain at the same time each day with no flexibility).

Initially, all Workbased employers (four companies with a total of ten cars) and six Homebased Users remained in the program after CarLink II ended (two Homebased Users pursued other options after CarLink II). During Flexcar's first phase, one company reduced their cars from five to three and provided employees with an option of a commuter subsidy or CarLink. About half of the Workbased Commuters and Day Users stayed with the program. However, two member companies left the program when Flexcar fees were raised.

Flexcar also established other programs to coincide with the CarLink II model (i.e., hourly rentals in a few neighborhoods, at a foundation, and a public parking lot near downtown). Of these programs, only one neighborhood lot proved successful. While Flexcar increased fees to cover vehicle and staffing costs, the program was still not viable. In July 2003, the Palo Alto Flexcar program ceased operations due to: 1) downturn in the economy, 2) inability to cover costs, and 3) member schedule fluctuations.

It is interesting to note that City CarShare, another carsharing provider, also entered into the Palo Alto market at the completion of the CarLink II pilot program. City CarShare initially placed two cars in the same downtown lot as Flexcar. These cars were only used occasionally during the first year because they only had two registered members: one corporation and the City of Palo Alto. In fall 2003, City CarShare placed two cars on the Stanford campus. The cars are used by students, faculty, and staff. City CarShare moved their two neighborhood cars to the University Avenue Caltrain station (downtown Palo Alto) to coincide with the launch of the Stanford program. They are anticipating increased use at the Caltrain location. The City CarShare rates are the same as in San Francisco, $4/hour peak and $2/hour off peak and $0.44/mile. Monitoring City CarShare's results in the Palo Alto region is recommended.

CONCLUSION

An important benefit of field tests and pilot programs is the systematic approach to designing, implementing, and analyzing the operational framework and user response. This information can serve as a foundation for future study (e.g., moving from a field test to a pilot phase), commercialization (e.g. transitioning to an ongoing program), or program modification. The phased research approach of CarLink I and II provided the ability to investigate differences and similarities between the two methodologies.

Field tests are especially useful to investigate: 1) new concepts never tested, and 2) specific attitudes or marketing strategies in a controlled environment. Furthermore, there is no commitment to future operation. Pilot programs generally follow the demonstration phase. Pilots are useful to investigate: 1) long-term sustainability, 2) user response, and 3) beta test commercial products (e.g., the CarLink II technology) in a real-world setting. They are typically more flexible in responding to market conditions.

Both field tests and pilot programs can assist in establishing public policy direction by putting innovative concepts into operation. While pilot programs are operating in the field, they can be used to show decision makers how a program can work and give them the opportunity to experience the idea first-hand, discuss it with participants, and assess results. This experience is valuable to assist in the formation of realistic public policy initiatives that have a higher probability of success (given understanding garnered). Costs can be controlled, while the feasibility of replicating the pilot in other locations can be assessed. Data collected during the research can assist in forming better policies that can yield intended outcomes.

The CarLink II pilot followed the CarLink I field test, which was preceded by a conceptual market survey (4). The process of investigating the commuter carsharing model through the conceptual, field test, pilot and transition phases allowed researchers to gain a thorough understanding of how a project moves from concept to commercialization and what opportunities and obstacles it might face. Each phase has unique benefits, and the lessons learned during each stage inform program modification (e.g., technology); expand participation (e.g., private sector employers); and analyze commercial strategies.

The CarLink program provided researchers an opportunity to evaluate operations, user response, and commercial potential over time. Based on the CarLink program, the authors recommend that a conceptual study of innovative ideas be conducted in advance of program design (e.g., focus groups and surveys) to assess potential demand, response, and willingness-to-pay. Furthermore, the authors would argue that the field test phase be followed by a longer pilot phase (e.g., two years versus one). Finally, the authors recommend that expert advice from a researcher involved in the field test/pilot design coincide with the transition to an ongoing operation (i.e., commercialization phase). Results from the CarLink II transition indicate that additional time to adapt the model and study its impacts could have been useful. A twelve-month period is likely not long enough to achieve program sustainability, particularly during an economic decline and when revenue shortfalls are projected during the pilot phase.

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