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HashLearn Now: Mobile Tutoring in India

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Abstract

Looking at today's competitive exams scenario, a single mark may lead to a differentiation of rank in multiples of hundreds or even thousands. Looking at this problem from student's perspective this article discusses the role of anywhere, anytime help for the students in getting answers for their problems on a real-time basis from the application known as HashLearn Now. The smart phones usage by students clearly signifies the importance of this application for getting their queries answered by experts in the domain of PCM (Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics). This paper discusses the need of such kind of

application, development along with the functionality, uses and business model. This application along with its user friendly interface and responses from students makes it applicable on a wider level acceptance for the target audience preparing for engineering entrance exams of national and international repute. The usage of the application along with affordable pricing plans makes it as one of its kind.

Keywords: **Online Tutoring; HashLearn; PCM; Engineering Entrance Exams**

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of e-commerce and internet marketing, student centric resources have evolved rapidly over the course of last decade and are changing the face of businesses, services and industries. The development of personal computers and internet led to the dawn of an era which not only focused on optimizing physical flows but also information flows. With further advancement of devices such as smart phones, tablets, cloud platforms, the opportunities for both businesses and consumers are scoping a much larger canvas. Innovations such as social networks, content platforms are relaying the information at a much faster and efficient manner thereby redefining the interaction points with the end users. While internet penetration was close to 1% in 1995, the number of internet users increased by ten folds between the year 1999 to 2013 with each billion being added to the list of internet users in lesser span of time [1]. With infrastructure growing across the world and internet becoming an integral part of our life, developing countries are not lagging behind; more than 2 billion people from developing countries are connected with the internet. However, 4 billion populations from developing countries still remain offline, representing over 2/3rd of the population of the developing countries [2]. India is showing tremendous progress in terms of internet penetration. In 2001, India had approximately 7 million internet users with the number at 190 million as of June 2014 becoming the third highest internet user after China with 620 million and US with 275 million. India is showing a year on year growth of over 40% with an estimated user base of over 500 million by 2018. As seen from above statistics India offers a tremendous opportunity with the growth of mobile internet. In the year 2014, 10.7% growth in usage has led to 47.0% penetration, or a total mobile phone population in India of 581.1 million people. The number of Smartphone users is also increasing at a fast pace with India expected to cross US by 2016 also reaching a user base of 200 million [3]. Mobile internet not only adds mobility and ease to the end users, it is also the single form of access to internet for a large part of the global population. Apart from removing the constraints of wired connections, mobile devices come with their own set of unique data points and features. Today over 1 million mobile applications have been downloaded for more than 100 billion times [4]. With the ease of mobility and access to consumer information, along with an easy to use touch interface, the way consumers interact and share information ubiquitously is transforming the pace of mobile applications usability at a faster pace.

Internet economy is expected to contribute over 5% of Indian GDP and is growing at a tremendous rate [3]. Beyond the ways that internet is directly impacting Indian GDP; the impact of internet can be felt in many ways. Academia and Research can find a big enabler in the form of internet resources greatly contributing to the growth of the sector. Key sectors such as healthcare, education, transportation etc can be improved with a better information flow. With initiatives such as Digital India and key focus on infrastructure along with the rise of entrepreneurs shows promise for the increasing the effective use of internet in India.

BACKGROUND: INDIAN TEST PREPERATION INDUSTRY

Indian educational sector, like their global counterparts, are focused on few niche categories in education like Content Delivery, Practice Tests and Analysis. Content is being democratized today with content being on offer in various modes at subsidized rates. This situation begs for us to think as to what sort of innovation can grow and drive the Indian education industry. From the experience with speaking with students and educators across different Indian cities, the need for timely human help for a student during his learning was fairly evident. Today, the high student-teacher ratio and lack of timely help deters the student's learning process. A student's inability to grasp a particular concept right at that time leads to confusion in the following concepts that are taught in class thereby leading to a drop in motivation. Conventional test preparation with its high student teacher ratio, factory-model and poor standardization of class delivery has wiped away the one-to-one attention required for a truly personalized learning experience matching the pace of the student. The primary research has shown that most students don't ask questions in class or to their peers in fear of embarrassment or being judged. And help not given at the very moment when it's required or even after a time gap leads to a downward spiral in the student's learning and motivation. This instant-help requirement can never be offered by regular coaching institutes owing to the unique nature of the industry and its dynamics [5].

HASHLEARN NOW – OVERVIEW

EDVICE rebranded as HASHLEARN Now is India's first mobile-only, on-demand tutoring platform that provides instant help to students by connecting them with hand-picked tutors from India's premier colleges. HashLearn Now currently caters to Class XI and XII Board Exams and Engineering entrance exams and is in the process to add more verticals. All tutors on the platform are from premier institutions of the country. When a student is stuck with a concept in any topic or a math problem, the student simply opens the app, selects the topic and gets connected instantly to a tutor in that topic. While signing up tutors, the application process also allows them to specify the topics within a subject they'd like to cover. This ensures the best fit for the student unlike coaching centers where the same professor usually covers everything in a subject. Once connected, the tutor is paid by the minute for their time while on the student end there are different subscription plans a student can opt for and take unlimited sessions for a specified period of time.

MARKET ANALYSIS

Before proceeding to building a product, understanding the size of the market and its nuances forms a crucial part of forming a plan of action. The key variables to be analyzed were the Total Addressable Market (TAM), the market segment characteristics (constraints in the industry), user behavior and tutor behavior (supply side). From the primary research the authors have drawn some unique insights about the crucial stakeholders [6].

TUTORS

- Approximately 1 Lakh students enter premier Indian engineering institutes every year. These are some of the brightest students who have cracked these exams and understand its nuances inside-out. Most importantly, they relate to students very well because they have been there, done that.
- India has no robust 'part-time job' culture for students.

Most of these tutor entrepreneurs have spent a good part of their Class 9 to 12 periods honing one thing - test preparation. Through HashLearn Now, a genuine monetization opportunity that leverages their core skills and experience with no steep learning curve required is being created. They start earning immediately and get paid seamlessly for the time they tutor.

STUDENTS

- Today, the mobile has become an extension of the lives of students. Today, more than 2 million students take engineering entrance exams annually. And all of them are heavy mobile users. Without building multiple features/distractions, HashLearn Now's focus has been to offer a superlative mobile learning experience to students [7].

- HashLearn Now delivers value where conventional test preparation fails. By focusing on instant help at the moment when it's required, personalizing learning, offering it at the pace of the student, keeping it affordable so that it does not pinch the pocket, and most importantly, connecting them to a tutor audience who truly understand their difficulties, HashLearn Now is attacking conventional test preparation in key areas where the current industry has failed.

KEY PRODUCT FEATURES

In terms of any product or service, it is essential to arrive at a set of features which is to be offered at the key stages of the evolution of a product. Based on the market understanding, tools available and the consumer interactions; the key features which were needed and served as the starting point for the product and value proposition offered by HashLearn Now, which has been listed below.

- HashLearn Now supports Class XI and XII (Board and Engineering Entrance Exams) in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics.
- A student is connected to the tutor instantly (minimum of 30 seconds and a maximum of 5 minutes)
- Tutoring happens through a Whatsapp-like chat interface as students and tutors are extremely comfortable and familiar with such an interface.
- The platform also allows students and tutors to send images through gallery and the in-built phone camera. It also provides a doodle board (white board) where both the parties can doodle complex formulae or diagrams and send it across to each other.
- The product has an in-built wallet which can be topped up by students by paying money through the app itself. HashLearn Now has collaborated with PayUMoney, India's leading payments provider to accept payments.
- The product also stores every lesson transcript and makes it available to both the student and the tutor for further reference.
- The product allows students to invite other friends and rewards them for the same with free tutoring minutes in case of a successful invite [8].

LAUNCH STRATEGY

HashLearn Now was launched in closed-beta (only users with an invite can use the app) from June 18, 2015 to July 28, 2015 with over 86 students from 20 different schools. This beta programme was intended to create a buzz about HashLearn Now in these respective schools and also help us figure out various operational and technical hurdles involved in the smooth functioning of HashLearn Now! During the beta period, 244 downloads (158 tutors and 86 students) was achieved with over 105 successfully completed tutoring sessions which amounted to 1170 minutes or 19.5 hours of tutoring on the platform. The average session duration was 11.14 minutes. Through this beta, a key realization was how the test group's reach should be small since the product is not expected to perform to its potential during this period.

PRODUCT STRATEGY

The team at HashLearn Now constantly iterates the product and its offerings based on customer feedback. Once the beta was released on June 18th, 2015 all the users were engaged over telephonic conversations, email and other messaging platforms to understand how the product experience could be improved. Through this feedback, the option for a student to enter his doubt before requesting a tutor was introduced which thereby helped the tutor to make an informed decision if he should take up the student's request to tutor. The introduction of commonly used phrases as helper messages improved increase the pace of the conversation and avoided unnecessary typing. Another constant request was to be able to read old chat transcripts and learn from them. This increased engagement on the platform as students were using the app to study their previous lessons. In this process the platform transitioned from the pay as you go model and introduced subscription plans in order to increase usage [9].

MARKETING AND GROWTH STRATEGY

In HashLearn Now's perspective, digital marketing seemed the way to go due to the low costs and lesser friction involved in executing a marketing campaign digitally. However, education industry thrives on offline marketing and hence HashLearn Now adopts a hybrid model to instigate growth in the product. In this regard, different channels were experimented with to figure out the most suitable channel in terms of costs and quality of leads for HashLearn Now. The following are the channels that were employed to market HashLearn Now,

- Content Marketing - Quora, Blogging
- Facebook Marketing - Groups, Facebook Advertisements, Facebook Pages
- Offline Marketing - Pamphlet Distribution, Institution Visits, T-Shirts
- PR Strategies - TOI, VCCircle, Inc42

Content Marketing
Content Marketing is the cheapest yet the most powerful form of marketing digitally. Luring consumers into your website through relevant content is the gospel of digital marketing and the team at HashLearn Now explored various ways and channels to do so. The primary channels that were used in this case were Quora, HashLearn Now micro-website and the official blog. An effort was made by the team to answer various test preparation related questions on Quora and subtly introducing HashLearn Now at relevant junctures. Through the HashLearn Blog, a series of blog posts called 'A Day In the Life Of' during the months of June and July, 2015 were made where each article was an account of a science/engineering discipline student's lifestyle in premier Indian engineering institutions which were exactly the target audience. The micro-site with essential information such as product features, overview of the paid plans, frequently asked questions and contact details for HashLearn Now was also launched. All of these efforts resulted in over 27,000 page views on the micro-site [10].

Paid Facebook Marketing
Facebook advertisements are usually of these types - image, carousel of images and videos. Video advertisements were excluded due to constraint of resources and lack of experimentation ability. Two different campaigns were executed and the learning from the first one played a crucial role in improving the ad performance in the second campaign (Table 1).

Table 1: Facebook Paid Advertisement Campaigns – Overview.

Particulars	**Campaign 1**	**Campaign 2**
Advertisement Type	Single Image	Carousel
Targeting	2 Cities: Indore and Vishakhapatnam	Pan India
Audience Interests	IIT-JEE	IIT-JEE, BITSAT, IISc,

		Toppr.com, Embibe.com, Bansal Classes etc.
Audience Reach	27,000	8,00,000
Total Spend	Rs 633.34	Rs 33,391.61
App Installs	2	666
Cost-Per-Install (CPI)	316.67	50.14
Click-Through-Rate (CTR)	0.73%	1.32%

Insights from Facebook Marketing

- Facebook provides an extremely cost-effective way to acquire users when high-quality advertisements are created by targeting the right audience.
- Running facebook advertisements also increases organic downloads as facebook ads reach thousands of people and even though they don't download right off facebook, they eventually search on Google Play and download the app.
- However, the quality of leads is pretty abysmal when it comes to facebook advertisements. The conversion from first-time usage to a paid user used to be 13% from organic traffic whereas with facebook advertisements it is at 5% only [11].

Public Relations Strategy

Effective Public Relations is extremely crucial to get the much wanted visibility during the early stage of a product. Although there are various Public Relations agencies who carry out a press release exercise for a fixed fee, the team at HashLearn Now worked out ways to remain visible in the market without any spend on this at all. HashLearn Now has been covered in Times of India (Bangalore & Chennai Regions), TechCircle, Inc42. The product has also been adjudged as the winner of Unitus Seed Fund's StartEdu3 which in-turn created a lot of buzz for the product.

Revenue and Retention Strategy

HashLearn Now in its brief history has had an array of payment plans. They can be widely categorized as Pay As You Go and Subscription Plans.

Pay As You Go Plans (Utility Model)

Every user is given 30 free tutoring minutes in order to experience the product. Once this has been completely used, the user can top-up any number of minutes as per his convenience. Every HashLearn Now tutoring minute is worth Rs 2.5/-. For instance, if a student recharges for Rs 100, he will receive 40 minutes of HashLearn Now tutoring in his wallet. Apart from this simple model, the platform offered different pay as you go packets which a student could use and top-up which contained special discounts. You can find the details in the below Table 2 [12].

Table 2: Pay As You Go Plans.

Top-Up Amount	Minutes Credited	Extra Minutes
INR 49	22	10%
INR 149	69	15%
INR 249	120	20%
INR 349	168	20%

These payment plans have been disbanded since v1.1.4 as the traction has been concentrated on the unlimited plans.

Subscription Plans

HashLearn Now subscription plans follow a simple unlimited model wherein for a valid amount of time a user can take unlimited sessions on the HashLearn Now app. The following subscription plans have been introduced so far (Table 3).

Table 3: Subscription Plans.

Top-Up Amount	Validity
INR 49	24 hours
INR 499	30 days
INR 999	90 days

Revenue Overview

As of end of November, 2015 HashLearn Now had generated over 79,671 INR in revenue across various payment plans with 84 unique users having paid at least once and over 43 of them having paid at least twice i.e. at least 50% of HashLearn Now's paid users are recurring paid users. Students have opted for different plans and below are an analysis of the payment plans opted [13] (Figure 1).

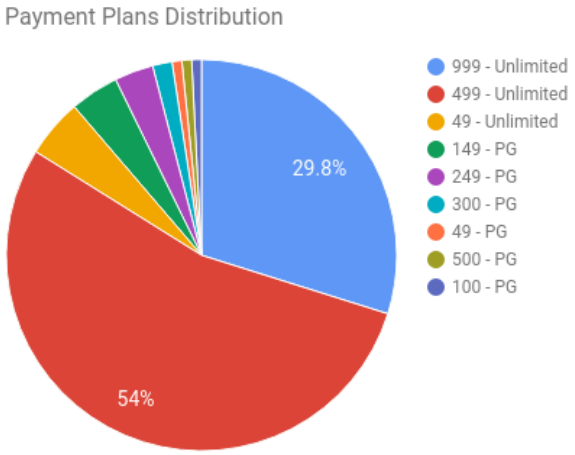

Figure 1: Payment Plans Distribution.

REVENUE ANALYSIS

Clearly, more students prefer the subscription plan over the pay as you go plans. This can be attributed to the following reasons:

- Parents who are the decision makers in this case relate more easily to a subscription plan as traditional payment models in the test preparation industry has been subscription based.
- Recurring payments using online payment gateways is a hassle to both parents and students and hence pay as you go model is under-preferred.
- Students are wowed by the possibility of having a tutor round the clock for unlimited duration of time which is only possible with the unlimited plans.

OPERATIONS STRATEGY

The product was started with the assumption that the average usage by any tutor will be 5-6 hours a week and put the student usage at 1 hour per week, and hence keeping a basic ratio of 1:6. The selection of tutors was done to ensure a uniformity across the topics as the notification system was simply a function of the topic the tutor specialized in. With the start of the beta program, many of authors assumptions had to be revisited. From distribution of topics in the lesson requests to usage patterns such as the timing of the sessions, each factor greatly determined the strategy chosen. With connection percentages as high as 95%, the product also witnessed a drop till 76% in September, 2015. In October, 2015 different models were executed to improve the manner that incoming requests were handled. An analysis of topics, tutor availability based on time preferences led us to undergo a second round of recruitments. The activation of tutors based on a forecast of demand on occasions such as vacations, weekends became a central part of operation strategy. As HashLearn continues to grow, processes to improve the notification system to accommodate the usage patterns by tutors such as performance and timing are being worked upon. Furthermore to reduce fatigue and uniformity on tutor side, an improved method to assign tutors is being put in place. The key leanings for the authors during this period has been to learn and adapt with the usage patterns and to set the standards of performance, to keep a keen eye on consumers and still be driven by set priorities and goals [14].

CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

With Beta Programme, an effort was made to bring in students studying in some of the best schools of the country allotting them a given set minutes. The pattern that was observed in pay-as-you go plans was a reluctance to exhaust the minutes and a constant feedback from students was," I will use it later when i need it" which was contradictory to authors earlier assumptions. The team expected the students to be comfortable with the platform and get quick help every time they were stuck and not ponder about the costs involved at such an age, particularly because they couldn't really analyze that the costs of all the other solutions in the market were higher. However, with the introduction of

subscription plans, the usage became much more friction-free and students started averaging about 3 sessions in daily studies. Some of the problems such as bias and familiarity to certain tutors they have already gotten to know motivated some students to close certain sessions and to try to get connected to the tutor of their choice which clashed with HashLearn Now on-demand promise. Furthermore sessions became a lot more flexible, the pattern of questions now included counseling help, conceptual questions etc. A new limit of each session at 30 minutes was introduced measure. The usage spiked in the evenings but still continued to be scattered, not allowing us to really close the platform at odd timings such as 3:00 AM. Each of the user segments had a different need even within such a defined market. With 73% of sessions rated 3 and above, the platform is still at a nascent stage with more consumer patterns to explore.

TRACTION

HashLearn Now went live on Google Play on July 29, 2015. Here are some key highlights post launches as of November 30th 2015.

- 2819 downloads.
- 2320 students who have signed up on the platform.
- 84 unique paying students and 2 recurring paying students.
- The overall revenue so far has been Rs 79,761.00.
- 3422 tutoring sessions on the HashLearn Now app and 786 unique students have got tutored on HashLearn Now at least once.
- The total tutoring duration has been 49,646 minutes or 827.43 hours on the platform.
- The average session duration is at a healthy 14.5 minutes which proves the initial assumption that short-form problem solving tutoring is a necessity in today's Education market.

CONCLUSION

Having understood the impact of internet and mobile across the world, the authors studied its potential in Education by studying various successful education companies in India and across the world. Along the way, the authors have conceptualized a live product betting on the growth of mobile and familiarity with chat amongst mobile users today. HashLearn Now is functional and hundreds of students and tutors are using the product on a daily basis. This also gives us a unique opportunity to understand student and tutor behavior better and make suitable changes to the product as authors go ahead. The authors further went on to briefly describe the product lifecycle, marketing strategies and its impact, revenue and retention cohorts, usage patterns and the various operational necessities in order to run an on-demand product such as this. Hence, the authors have given an overall picture about the macro scenario, how it impacts an individual sector and product and ultimately focused on the day-to-day functioning of such a product (Figure 2).

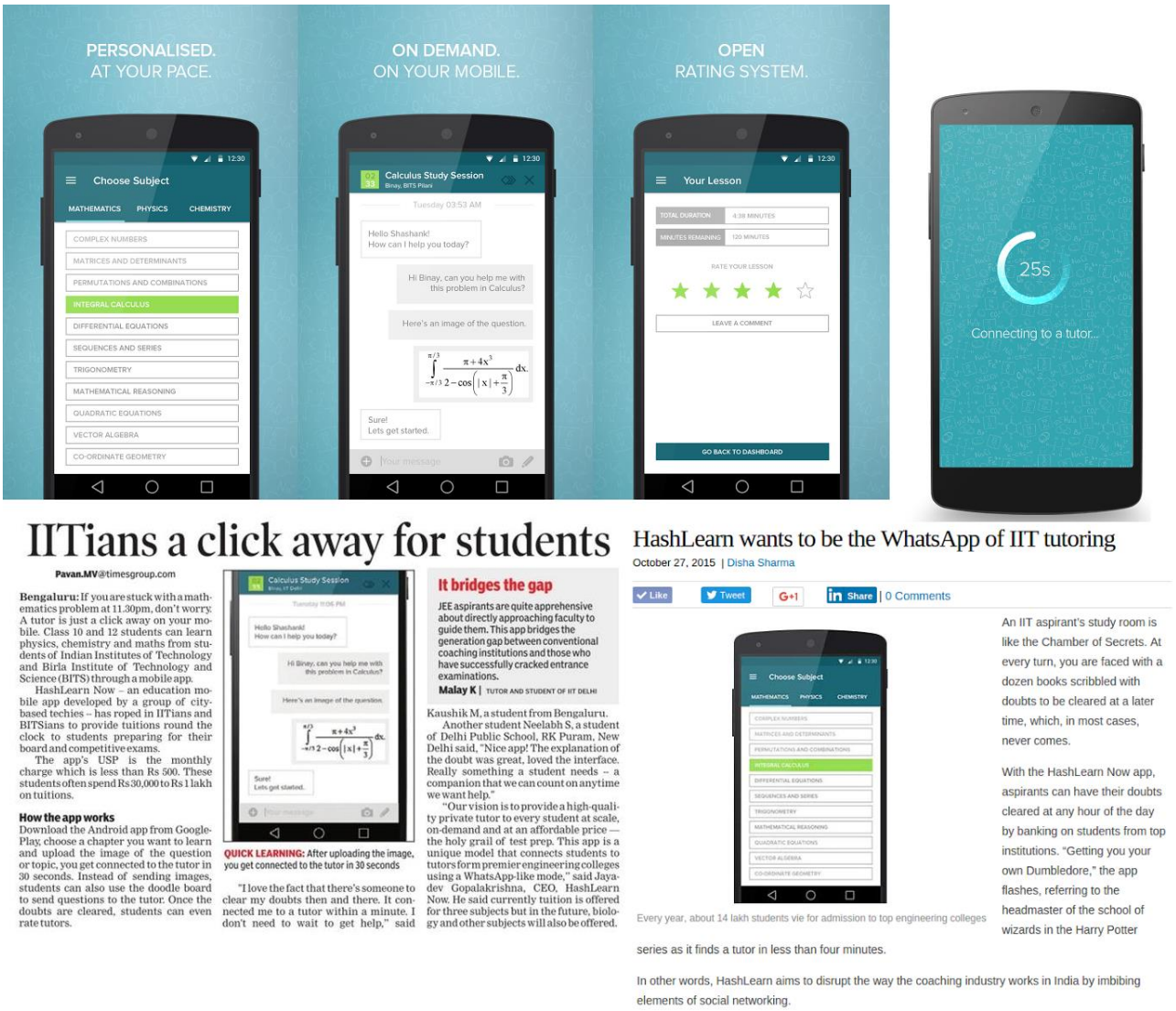

Figure 2: Snapshots of HashLearn Now.

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