

Case Study: Atma Connect

Design With the User to Empower the User: How Atma Connect and Indonesian Communities Work Together for the Common Good



Principle(s) addressed:

Design With User, Reuse and Improve, Understand the Existing Ecosystem, Be Data Driven



Siti Sanisah, an AtmaGo user in Lombok, a disaster-prone island in Indonesia

Overview

[AtmaGo](#) is a social network that empowers low-income communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from natural disasters. AtmaGo offers users a digital platform to share neighborhood news, post and find jobs, and create local events.

AtmaGo is inspired by and dedicated to the Indonesian idea of “gotong royong” which loosely translates to working together for the common good. Or, as Atma phrases it, “neighbors helping neighbors.” The app connects neighbors around a location, provides community-based early warnings, and helps communities organize and participate in preventative activities. For example, during an AtmaGo resilience event, the online community will come together in person to learn about and act to clean and unclog drains to prevent flooding. Participants then share these actions on AtmaGo, informing and inspiring others to join. By addressing the root causes of civic issues, and organizing as a community to take actionable steps, end-users collaborate on AtmaGo to find local solutions to local problems.

Challenges:

Like any social impact start-up, Atma Connect has faced challenges along the way. A few years ago, the organization launched a new, highly-interactive version of its platform, but quickly found that the bells and whistles were slowing down performance for key users — many of whom have older feature phones running on intermittent connections.

Background:

Atma has made extensive use of designing with the user in mind. After launching an initial application focused on water pricing, Meena Palaniappan, CEO and the Indonesian Field Director (at that point the only member of the Indonesian team!), talked with users in low-income neighborhoods in Jakarta.

Meena and the team learned that users wanted more than just water prices and so Atma added a broader range of categories and developed new features. In 2016, the organization won the [IDEO.org/Amplify Urban Resilience Challenge](#), and received in-depth training and guidance from IDEO in using their human centered design (HCD) interview techniques. Building on that training, Atma has now conducted dozens of HCD-style interviews with thousands of users in Indonesia and in Puerto Rico.

Atma Connect, like many of the new social impact ventures that have sprung up in the wake of the mobile phone revolution, has been data driven from the outset. Their cloud-based platform has been rebuilt from the ground up to ensure that AtmaGo can scale across Indonesia (the world’s 4th most populous country) while also opening new locations across the world.

[AtmaGo is also data driven](#). The organization polls users to find new locations, uses a range of app and web analytics tools, and also analyzes the content in the thousands of posts being created every week.



After conducting additional HCD-style interviews and analyzing the data, the development team found the bottlenecks that could be fixed and features that could be dropped. Those changes made rapid improvement to performance and allowed the organization to return to its rapid growth path — and the experience taught the organization the importance of prioritizing performance over features and of creating a robust QA/QC process.

After building internal capacity and hiring a new developer team based in Indonesia, AtmaGo was rebuilt to ensure high performance across a wide range of phones and software. The team has recently relaunched an improved UI/UX that is built on a new high performance stack.

Project Lifecycle:

Analysis & Planning

After a rocky launch of a new app, Atma Connect doubled-down on [human-centered design](#) techniques to find the key features that users needed and to ensure that performance was at the forefront. Throughout the analysis and planning phases, Atma Connect staff interviewed users, spoke with community partners, and [used data](#) to [build a sustainable platform](#).

Design & Development

The creation of AtmaGo was an [iterative process](#), where staff redesigned aspects of the app, presented it to end-users, received feedback, and continued to rework features until they produced a product that resonated with users.

Atma Connect's development team, including the product manager, head of engineering, and other developers, are based in Indonesia, which provides a better understanding of local context. [Understanding the existing context](#) is key to building a platform that works for users. Atma Connect staff found that there was high mobile penetration within the Indonesian community they were working in, but the phones being used worked primarily with intermittent internet, such as Androids and feature phones.

To address this, developers used a range of techniques to minimize data usage for end-users and optimize the app for intermittent and slow internet connections.

Implementing

Atma Connect was able to quickly transition from the design and development phase to the implementation stage. Their standard process involves a project manager and UI/UX staff member working directly together to specify what the app features should look like, create it, and test.



Women using AtmaGo

Atma Connect aims to serve women because they are 14x more likely to die than adult men during disaster events. Atma Connect has gone out of their way to reach women in rural areas. It was particularly challenging because the culture of cell phone ownership, access to data plans, and digital literacy, are cultural hurdles that Atma Connect had to consider. The cost of reaching individual users, particularly women in rural areas, was much more expensive, but was considered a worthwhile investment that was core to their organizational values.



Flag of Puerto Rico

Atma Connect is preparing to launch their platform in Puerto Rico. Although the core ideas and technologies were developed in Indonesia, they have made extensive use of HCD-style interviews to develop local content, design local programs, and ensure that the look and feel of the platform makes sense to users in Puerto Rico.

RESOURCES

Visit Atma Connect's website at <https://atmaconnect.org/>

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Monitoring & Evaluation

Atma Connect has the ability to collect substantial data with the AtmaGo app. Staff can view information on community uptake on their dashboard, which relies on user-generated content. They can view how much content users are inputting into the app, and from there, analyze community needs. Atma Connect has also contracted with an external M&E company to specifically analyze the impact of a disaster on AtmaGo App users.

Community members get involved in AtmaGo in three ways:

- 1. They attend an AtmaGo sponsored event after receiving an invitation from a community organization or neighbor.**

At the event, they connect with their neighbors, learn about the event topic, such as social connectedness, or disaster preparedness, and learn how to use AtmaGo to continue to build connections and community. The participant then registers as a user of AtmaGo, makes a post to share information about the community or on an upcoming event.

After the event, they can access locally relevant information, write about issues that concern them, document community topics, as well as organize or participate in community building events. Like current users, they might participate in tree planting or home-based vegetable growing, inform the community about their businesses and seek partnership opportunities, and/or discover support services offered by community-based organizations in their vicinity that they could access.

- 2. They can begin using AtmaGo and register as a user after receiving a recommendation from a community organization or neighbor.**

They can also access locally relevant information, write about issues that concern them, document community topics, as well as organize or participate in community building events held by AtmaGo users and partners. Like current users, they might participate in a neighborhood cleanup or recycling training, inform the community about their volunteer and social activities, and/or discover ways to mitigate disaster before it occurs.

- 3. Lastly, they can begin using AtmaGo after seeing posts shared from the AtmaGo platform on social media channels** including Facebook and Twitter, conducting a search on a community related topic (e.g., disaster, food, community event), or being directed to the AtmaGo website through their site's use of search engine optimization (SEO) and/or Google AdWords.

Once on the platform, participants immediately see a feed of content from their local area and are encouraged to register to make a post and to follow a neighborhood. Atma Connect maintains contact which allows their site to send push notifications to users to inform them about new events, resources, and popular posts in their local area.



Man using AtmaGo

RESOURCES

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Lessons Learned:

- » Working directly with the user [<https://digitalprinciples.org/principle/design-with-the-user/>] early into the design process and including them as an active participant is critical to program success. It's not easy to always meet with end-users who are based on the other side of the world, but it's critical to understand nuances, cultural context, and gain their trust.
- » Working with funders who are eager to support work that heavily integrates user feedback is helpful in ensuring the sustainability [<https://digitalprinciples.org/principle/build-for-sustainability/>] and effectiveness of the programs.
- » While it is challenging to manage a software development team based in Indonesia, it is crucial to understand the local context [<https://digitalprinciples.org/principle/understand-the-existing-ecosystem/>] and receive feedback from the technical side as well.
- » Atma Connect also wanted to design an app that users checked every day. They realized that an app strictly dedicated to early warnings for disasters were checked less often, so they integrated other features like local news and events to bring users back frequently. They also partnered with other organizations [<https://digitalprinciples.org/principle/be-collaborative/>], like national and local governments, that do produce those warnings so they can relay that information to their users as well.