What are information scraps?

Ethnographic work since the 1970’s has shown that knowledge workers often use short notes of unstructured text, for example on scraps of paper or in e-mails to themselves, that contain a wide variety of personal information. Despite the evolution of modern personal information management tools, today we continue to see very similar practices, using post-it notes or free text files instead of our iterate information applications. These 'scraps' of personal information are what we call information scraps. Our goal is to understand why information scraps exist and to build better tools to support their use.

What information scrap breakdowns exist in current applications?

- Input bottleneck: the prevalence of forms, required fields and widgets that must be manually manipulated forces the user to slow down in order to carefully formalize thoughts and navigate the interface, making cost of PIM use outweigh advantages.
- Inadequate schemas: PIM applications can currently only handle a small set of fixed schemas as data types, such as addresses, to-dos and calendar events; this ignores a large set of other scrap types.
- Fragmentation: PIM applications aggregate data by schema, resulting in data fragmentation; users typically have to input and retrieve information of different data in different schemas by different mechanisms.
- Short half-life: the contextual information people need to remember in order to decipher the meaning of their self-notes fades quickly with time.
- Mobility: information scraps often occur at unpredictable times and locations, when the user is not near a desktop or laptop computer to record the thoughts.

What next?

- Ethnographic study: A cross-tool study utilizing semi-structured interviews and walk-throughs of users’ physical and digital personal information to generate a taxonomy of types of information scraps and to understand the different ways they are used. This includes an investigation of the continued use of unstructured, co-opted digital and physical tools.
- Sloppy semantics: Extend jourknow’s text analysis to allow for extraction of information by automatic alignment with predefined semantic web ontologies using ‘sloppy programming’ techniques demonstrated in Little et al.: e.g., “meet 5pm Karger.”
- Personal Lifetime User Modeling (PLUM): Incorporation of the user’s desktop activity model from the time that a note was made to enable named entity and coreference resolution in information scraps. This will allow jourknow to understand whether the Donny you are mentioning is your biking friend, your coworker, or the name of a restaurant.