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APP PAYS COMMUTERS TO TAKE ROUTES THAT EASE CONGESTION



TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Urban Engines uses algorithms to help cities determine key congestion choke points and times, and can then reward commuters for avoiding them.

Congestion at peak hours is a major problem in the world's busiest city centres. We've recently seen Gothenburg in Sweden offering **free bicycles** to ease the burden on public transport services, but now a new app is looking to take a different approach to the same problem. **Urban Engines** uses algorithms to help cities determine key congestion choke points and times, and can then reward commuters for avoiding them.

The Urban Engines system is based on commuters using the smart commuter cards already found in many major cities. The company tracks journeys made with those commuter cards, and uses that data to identify main areas of congestion, and at what times the congestion occurs. The system has already been employed in Washington, D.C., and Sao Paulo, Brazil, helping provide valuable data for work with city planners.

It's in Singapore, however, where the most interesting work has been achieved so far. There, commuters who have signed up and registered their commuter cards can earn rewards when they travel. They will earn one point for every kilometre travelled during peak hours, or triple that when travelling off-peak. The points earned can then be converted into discounts on future journeys, or put towards an in-app raffle game, where they have the opportunity to win sums of money. Urban Engines claim there's been a 7 to 13 percent reduction in journeys made during peak hours, with 200,000 commuters taking part.

The company is based on an original experiment carried out in Bangalore. The rewards program there, carried out among 20,000 employees of the Indian company Infosys, led to 17 percent of traffic shifting to off-peak travel times in six months. A similarly successful experiment has also been carried out on the Stanford University campus, and the plan is to now expand to other major cities. Investors include Google Ventures, Samsung Ventures, Andreessen-Horowitz, and Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt.

How else could big data be used creatively to identify and then ease the pressures put on the infrastructure of major cities?

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