

Oyster Card Eases Commute

Transport for London's Oyster Card is a contactless smartcard that is used to pay for journeys on the London Underground, London Buses and on limited train journeys out of the city. Travellers pre-pay or top up their card periodically at Underground stations or online. To use the card they must then hold it close to a reader located at the entrance to the platform or on the bus. (By using RFID technology, the card does not have to touch the reader, hence the name 'contactless'.) This is repeated at the end of the journey and the system calculates the cost of the journey and debits the amount from the traveller's account. This information is stored in a chip in the card, then later a central database is updated. The system is advertised as being:

1. A time saver, meaning travellers do not have to queue to purchase tickets.
2. Efficient for users, with the system automatically calculating the cheapest amount the journey could have cost and debiting that figure.
3. Easy to use.

London mayor Ken Livingstone is keen to see the system extended and has offered to pay for the installation of readers for rail operators so that more commuters from outside the city can benefit from it. Train operating companies have been accused of delaying a decision to accept this offer as, while they can see the benefit for customers, they cannot see the benefit for themselves because the mayor will not pay for ongoing operating and maintenance costs.

Questions

1. An Oyster card represents a concept known as e-money. Explain what you think this means and how the system could be extended outside of public transport. What would some of the barriers to adoption be? Why would people choose or not choose to carry this card?
2. Why do you think Livingstone is keen to see the system extended?
3. Are rail operators' concerns justified? If you were mayor, how would you respond?
4. Consider the other technologies discussed in this chapter. Can you suggest any ways in which some of them could be used to improve public transport?

SOURCES: Transport for London (website), <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tfl>; Staff, 'Train Operators Urged to Adopt Oyster', *Computing*, January 29, 2007.