Recruitment of Subjects for Human Subjects Research

Recruitment is the process of identifying potential subjects, contacting those individuals (if applicable), and making the final determination about whether a subject meets the inclusion/exclusion criteria for a study.

Common recruitment methods include:

- Recruitment by interactions with individuals. For example, posters, flyers, or advertisements designed to inform the public of the study and to get subjects to participate;
- Recruitment by third parties, such as clinics, teachers, or other organizations that refer potential subjects to participate;
- Accessing existing data for the purpose of determining whether an individual or their data may be included in a study.

Recruitment is considered the beginning of the informed consent process; as such, Principal Investigators (PIs) are required to describe their recruitment plan to the IRB/IACUC in their proposal. For studies that only involve secondary use of data, the recruitment plan describes where the data is located and how it will be accessed.

Persons with the following study-related responsibilities should not participate as subjects in a proposed research study:

- data collection or other direct access to study data;
- direct subject contact and/or care;
- distribution and/or monitoring of investigational agents or study interventions.

When a PI seeks to recruit direct employees or students as subjects, steps must be taken to protect them from coercion and undue influence, whether real or perceived. Coercion can occur when an employee/student feels that refusal to participate in their superior's research may negatively impact their status or treatment at school or work. Despite these concerns, the IRB/IACUC recognizes that out of respect for subject autonomy, employees or students generally should not be excluded from participating in research merely because they are under the direct supervision of the investigator.

Supervisors should avoid directly interacting with their employees/students during recruitment and throughout the study, as even approaching an employee to participate in research may be perceived by an employee as creating pressure to enroll. Employees should be recruited through general announcements or advertisements/flyers displayed in neutral locations, and informed consent should be obtained by a research assistant or someone other than the supervisor. The IRB/IACUC may require the supervisor to provide explicit assurances to employees/students that their participation in the study, or lack of participation, will not impact their relationship in any way.

One recruitment method that allows researchers to have access to a large population of willing participants for research studies is using an online marketplace such as Amazon's MTurk.

MTurk houses a diverse, heterogeneous, population that is more attractive to researchers than the typical university campus population. It also allows for pseudo-anonymity between researchers and participants by having a third party (Amazon) overseeing payments (compensation) to participants.

MTurk is not designed with an eye towards human subjects research. It lacks the sophistication and security measures of dedicated survey software tools and collection of data by Amazon is subject to Amazon's Privacy Policy and Terms of Service.

Researchers need to consider the following when submitting an MTurk or similar online recruitment study to the IRB/IACUC.

Recruitment

- The title of the study and the description of the HIT are acting as a form of recruitment.
- Researchers should be clear about compensation and bonuses.
- Clearly and accurately state the time required to complete the task.
- Participants should be told if there is a screener in order to qualify. It should be clear to participants whether they are being paid for the time it takes to complete the screener or not.
- Researchers should be clear about the type of task participants are being asked to do. For instance, if the task involves writing, or watching videos, this should be stated in the description.
- The researchers name and/or school affiliation should be listed either as the Requester or in the description.
- If applicable, the link to the online survey should be included.

Consent

The first page of the online survey should be the consent document. The online consent will have all of the elements of a regular consent, but it will not require a signature. Participants will either click an "I Agree" or an "I do not Agree" box. The "I Agree" box will take them into the survey. The "I do not agree" box will thank them for their time and take them away from the survey. .

Debrief

If researchers are using deception or incomplete disclosure (i.e. – are not stating exactly what the study is about so as not to bias participants responses), then it is important to include a debriefing form at the end of the survey. This debriefing form could be embedded into the last page of the survey and would require participants to answer a final question allowing researchers to use their data (or not use their data) now that they know the true purpose of the study.

Confidentiality

While it may have been the goal that MTurk workers were anonymous to academic researchers, the reality is that anonymity cannot be guaranteed in any online environment were data is being collected. MTurk worker IDs can be linked to individuals' Amazon profiles including individuals wish lists and previous product reviews. Researchers should therefore be careful in deciding what information to collect from participants. The default should be that participants' MTurk worker IDs not be collected.

Finally, it is important for researchers to consider the Amazon MTurk (AMT) Terms of Service (TOS) and any online survey software (Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, Google or Microsoft forms, etc.) TOS especially as it relates to the collection of data tracking participants' online behavior and history (using cookies or other tracking systems) and the selling of participants data to third parties