

HOW TO SETUP YOUR OWN NETWORK OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

It stands to reason that product development and research go at different paces. Regardless of the domain, high quality also requires its time. We are an applied research centre that helps companies innovate through humane and advanced digital technology of high quality. Because we want to assist our clients to use research in preparation for the future of their businesses, it is our duty not just to anticipate the future, but to prepare ourselves for it. In our case, this means making long-term investments which will enable us to provide clients with the answers they need at the time they need them.

For seven years, we have been preparing for the future by creating, maintaining and growing a network of research participants. In our strategy to become experts on how human beings interact with digital technologies, research participants are the reason why we can call our design process human-centred.

Some may call them living labs, some may call them cohorts. However conceptualised, there are challenges in managing such a network and keeping it alive. We know it is difficult to find shared experiences on the creation and management of such a network, so we thought we could share some of our lessons learned, in case you would like to set up your own network.

The gatekeeper

This is a sensitive and highly time-consuming activity. Finding an honest, nice, organised, problem-solving person to manage the network from the research team side is essential. This will be the person who knows everything about the network, who connects researchers with research participants and who could ideally discuss with the researchers all the ethical implications of what they propose to do. Likewise, this person is the main contact point for people and organisations in the network, ensuring there is no more than one communication channel.

Recruiting participants

Our first approach was to find organisations that gathered groups of people who could become research participants. By explaining our mission and goals to the gatekeepers on the other end, we were able to establish collaboration protocols, which make it easier for the setup of any activity with research participants. Recruiting organisations and individual participants to the network is a long and difficult process – expect many

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invitation declines. Organisations may be wary of scams, fail to see value in research, lack the time or may be already involved in other research initiatives. It is important to prepare good, clear and simple visual materials to be transparent in explaining who you are as a research organisation, the kinds of things you do and why you do it. It is also important to be able to explain what you can give in return.

Managing the network

At a small scale, it may suffice to have a spreadsheet to keep track of participants and activities they have been involved in. Nevertheless, as you scale up, it may be worthwhile to have your own CRM just to manage the network. Apart from letting you easily derive statistics from your research activities and your network, know how often research participants are called or instantly know how many research participants a given project has involved, it also allows you to better protect participant data.

Quality of the data

In our human-centred design team we often ask ourselves whether our long-lasting relationships with many of the research participants are negatively influencing our data collection. Working on research around digital technology means that we expose participants to different technologies, which they would otherwise probably not be exposed to, and that participants learn about new technologies when they participate in our studies. Inevitably, we also get to know some of our research participants at a more personal level by listening to their stories throughout the years. However, this relationship of trust which we have built over the years ensures two very important aspects: participants will share data which they would not share in a more impersonal approach and they have learned the kind of feedback which is useful for our researchers in the quest to design better and more meaningful technology. This, we believe, is one of the greatest assets we have as a human-centred research organisation.

To learn more about the network, how you can enrol or how we could work with you, visit: <http://colaborar.fraunhofer.pt/>