

Guidelines for Successful Recruitment in International Usability Studies

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Abstract

Good recruitment of participants is crucial to the success of any usability testing project. In international studies, the risk of recruiting the wrong participants is far greater than usual. In this paper, we offer guidelines for recruitment based on our own extensive experience of performing cross-country usability studies.

Keywords

International usability studies, cross-cultural issues, participant recruitment

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Introduction

Performing usability studies in different countries presents a unique set of challenges to the usability practitioner. A common mistake is to assume that the practices and resources that work in our own country will be sufficient in another. As a result, the quality of participants recruited (and therefore the outcomes of the project) can be severely compromised.

Many of the pitfalls of conducting fieldwork in another country have been documented previously. However, while there is a growing collection of literature on methods for fieldwork (e.g., Nielsen, 1996; Masten & Plowman, 2003; Gillham, 2006), less attention has been paid to the other practical aspects of conducting studies abroad, such as recruitment of participants. Those few papers that do include practical lessons from conducting international research tend to cover the entire project lifecycle, and do not address recruitment in any depth (e.g., Dray and Siegel, 2005; Dray & Mrazek, 1996).

As an international partnership of usability consultancies based in the UK, Germany, France, Italy, and China, we believe the importance of recruiting participants has been underplayed. In this paper, we present guidelines derived from our combined experience of testing in various countries. While we concentrate on our five countries, this advice is intended to be applicable as 'good practice' in any location.

In our experience, recruiting for international testing entails considerably higher risk than at home. Windows for testing in other countries are often scheduled before the constraints and issues surrounding the target audience are understood. Partners in other countries are often located and commissioned with haste and expected to simply replicate the recruitment carried out in the home study. In countries with little or no usability testing industry, recruiters often misunderstand or misinterpret their brief. The advice in this paper is intended to help usability practitioners locate and effectively manage recruiters outside their own countries.

Above all, it should be stated that the best way to succeed in finding the required sample of participants is to have experienced and reliable partners in each location you plan to work in. It is partly the experience of having encountered the issues we describe in this paper that prompted the birth and development of our own partner network.

Finding Suitable Participants

Social Class and Ethnicity

When screening participants, some questions that might be included in the original questionnaire may cause difficulties when asked in the target countries. Social class is a good example of this. We are often given screeners by UK clients that specify the employment status of the intended audience, using the classes A, B, C1, and C2. This is commonly used as a 'rule of thumb' for identifying social class in the UK, but other countries may not have an equivalent classification system. In other countries, it may not mean the same thing to be 'middle class' as it does in the UK (indeed, it may not mean much at all). Professional status is not the same indicator of social class in different countries.

As a result of such differences, the people we recruit in other countries may not be the type of people the client was expecting. This is not always a bad thing, but should be communicated to clients early (e.g., "You may find that young couples in China do not generally own xxxxxx"); the expertise and advice of local recruiters is, therefore, very important. Also, explicitly describing the type of person required is often more useful than specifying exact figures (e.g., 'holds a senior managerial position' instead of 'earns at least \$80,000 a year').

Recruitment in other countries also brings other surprises for clients. Many large European cities have diverse ethnic populations, which the client may not have taken into account. Maybe it is necessary to specify a certain group - for example, 'English as a first language' - if the client is expecting 'real English people'. Even then, a US client may be surprised to see their test participants in London include several Australians and Americans!

The question of ethnicity can also involve moral and legal problems. In France, all citizens are regarded as 'French' regardless of their ethnic origin, and questions regarding this are considered inappropriate.

Lifestyle and Income

Similarly to with social class, lifestyle cannot always be directly translated from one culture to another. For example, a typical marketing segment in the US is 'young married couples'. If a US client wanted to study the same audience in Europe, they would need to be aware that one in five French couples live in the same house (cohabit), but are not married. The segmentation must be altered to recognise that French couples are different to US couples, rather than screen out potentially useful participants.

Job titles vary across countries as well and have to be translated appropriately. What do we call a CEO in China or France? Again, this emphasizes the point that it is inappropriate to use names/classes/categories for participant profiles, but rather it is important explicitly state what we are looking for. In the case of the CEO this could be, for example, that the participant we are looking for must be the supervisor of at least 500 workers.

To take another example, some screeners assume that students live away from home. While this is usually the case in the UK, French students often stay with their parents, at least in large cities.

Attitudes toward disclosing information about income can vary across cultures. In China and several European countries, including Germany and Italy, people may be uncomfortable revealing their exact income. It is better to ask them to place themselves within a range (e.g., 1,000 – 2,000 € monthly, 2,000 – 3,000 € monthly, etc). Average incomes vary across countries as well. For an international study, we needed participants whose income was good enough to be able to buy the product being tested –we discussed this with our recruiters and partners to come to a conclusion. Again, we needed clear text to make sure we found what we were looking for.

Another question that Germans might feel uncomfortable answering would be "What is your job"? At the time of writing, unemployment rates in Germany are at approximately 10%, and some Germans may be unhappy about revealing that they are out of work. A range of options in the screener, including euphemisms such as "between jobs" or "looking for a job" can help avoid potential embarrassment.

Managing the Recruitment Process

Dealing with Recruiting Agencies

Internationally, most recruiting agencies, as well as potential participants, are not aware of what usability testing is. When working with external recruiters, it is essential to make the recruiters understand what we will do during the tests and what our specific needs are. Even with detailed and specific recruitment screeners, it is necessary for the recruiters to understand the context of what we are doing. Having a good idea of the concept and goals of a usability test enables the recruiter to understand the relevance of participant profile criteria. Best practice within our partnership is to invite recruiters to a usability lab, show them around, and make sure a mutual understanding is established of the needs and pitfalls unique to usability testing. Perhaps, you can even use a key figure from your recruiting agency as a test participant in a suitable study, or in a mock-up test.

When recruiting abroad, it is important to be aware that some institutions offer their recruitment service only if engaged to provide other, usually more lucrative, services as part of the same job; for example, they only recruit people when the tests are conducted in their own facilities.

As noted earlier, many European countries now have diverse ethnic populations. In addition to the problems discussed earlier, recruiting immigrants with poor language skills (who nonetheless fulfil the screener criteria) can be a pitfall. Some years ago, we carried out usability testing in Germany for a major client from the US. We were able to convince our client that working with local participants was essential for a successful international usability project. Unfortunately, the first participant our recruitment agency sent along was – a US citizen. He did speak German well; however, it was rather embarrassing to break the news to our clients. We have had similar experiences in the UK with London residents who have a poor quality of English.

These examples show how important it is to use a reliable recruiter for successful usability testing. Careless agencies will relax the recruitment criteria without first consulting the usability tester, so that it is easier for them find people. For example, when native German speakers are required, some recruiters might send

people who speak German well, but if it is not their mother tongue, it can be difficult for them to adequately express their thoughts and opinions, which is exactly what we are after in a usability test. It is important to be very specific about restrictions – take time to think about whether there are ‘loopholes’ in the screening material that need to be filled-in. So, “...must be born in Germany, must have lived in Germany since then and must be a native German-speaker” is much tighter than simply “must be a German national”. As mentioned before, it helps if the recruiter has understood the relevance of having participants who have an opinion that they are willing and able to get across. It is not always appropriate to mention ethnic background, but language requirements are usually acceptable.

The lead time required for a recruiter from a market unknown to you to find suitable participants may vary and depend on a number of factors, including which country it is, how many participants are required, how hard they are to find, and so on. As ever, the value of advice from a trusted partner or recruiter from whichever country is invaluable here, and in the absence of this, allow as much time as you can.

If you expect to work in a particular country again in the future, it is a good idea to arrange to spend time with the recruiter after the project, in order to give them feedback about what went well and what didn't. Explain to them how you would want it done differently next time.

Dates and Times for Testing

When scheduling participants for an international usability test, we need to take public holidays into consideration, as they not only differ across countries but also across regions within one country. For example, some public holidays in Germany change according to the region (e.g., the 6th of January is a public holiday in Baden-Wuerttemberg, Bavaria, and Saxony-Anhalt, but not in the other 13 states of Germany). A similar situation exists in Italy, where bigger cities have a specific public holiday once a year (e.g., 24 June in Turin, 7 December in Milan, 29 June in Rome). All activities are suspended on that day in that specific city. This is something clients may not know, even if they have checked the date of national holidays. In France, it is impossible to find participants during the summer holidays in August, and most French recruiting agencies will actually be closed in August. The same applies for tests on a Sunday. In China, it is essential to take the traditional Chinese calendar into account, e.g., the Spring festival, which is held on different dates every year.

It's not just holidays that need to be considered when scheduling participants for a usability test. Testing during the week or on the weekend must also be handled differently. In Germany, tests are usually scheduled during weekdays and during working hours. It is more difficult to recruit participants during weekends or in the evenings, as this time is usually kept free for family life and recreation. In Italy and the UK, tests may be conducted during the working week, but it is simpler to get participants to agree to testing during lunch time (around 1 pm) or after 6 pm (after the working day). In the UK, it is possible to find participants for studies on the weekend, but they will expect greater compensation for their time. French people are generally unwilling to participate in a usability test on a Sunday, even if the tests are conducted in their homes.

In China, however, it is very difficult to find participants during weekdays, especially during working hours. Scheduling usability tests for Saturdays and Sundays is, therefore, common practice in China.

Anticipating 'No-shows'

In our experience participants not showing up (“no-shows”) happens everywhere. Depending on the incentive (the higher the amount of incentive, the lower the likelihood of no-shows!) it is likely that there will be at least one no-show per run of 15-20 participants.

It is also a false economy to shave incentives as low as possible if this leads to more no-shows than otherwise may have occurred. The problem of no-shows may need to be addressed differently in different countries.

In Germany or China, we usually overbook by approximately 10%, to get the right number of participants. For example, if 10 participants are needed, 11 are recruited. Recruiters bear the costs of non-attendance of participants.

In the UK or Italy, a participant failing to show up is quite rare and it is not so common to book more participants than is required. To address the problem of no-shows, participants are requested to keep the

appointment. The recruitment agency may emphasize the importance of the research work, although it is important not to stress this too much, because it can put unnecessary pressure on a participant, which may affect their behaviour in the session, or make them less likely to turn up instead of more likely. It is acceptable to request that the person arrive on time and to notify you as early as possible if they are unable to take part in the test. It is always a good idea to call the participant the day before the test to reconfirm the appointment.

That said, in London and Paris, public transport can be unreliable, and strikes/delays can make participants late or prevent them from attending. If test sessions are scheduled during strikes, one must anticipate a lot of no-shows and delays. It can potentially ruin the study if a lot of logistics are involved (e.g., observers coming from another continent, interpreters, etc.). When a strike is announced in the public transportation system, it is generally more reasonable to postpone the test sessions if at all possible.

Dealing with Participants

Getting participant consent

Once the actual study begins, it is assumed that participants will be asked to sign forms giving their consent to the study, the recording of their image and voice, and so on. Again, what the form includes and does not include can vary from country to country.

In many European countries, including the UK and Italy, the participants' personal information is protected by privacy laws. There are legal requirements that the participant must give their explicit permission for their information to be recorded and used. The wording and exact permissions given may vary depending on the various laws in each country. In Italy, there is a specific form for this. When choosing a recruiting agency, it is important to ensure that they are aware of these legal issues and that their consent forms contain the necessary points to avoid any legal problems.

Care should be taken not to make the wording of the session introduction and the form too 'official' or intimidating. While participants in the UK, for example, may be happy to sign the forms, in France we have observed participants deliberately sabotaging tests where they feel constrained by the 'rules' of the test session.

Incentives

The incentives required to persuade potential participants to take part vary a great deal from country to country. This is linked to the cost of living - incentives required in the UK are substantially higher than in most of mainland Europe.

In China, more so than the US or Europe, there is a delicate balance to be struck in offering the correct incentive. The smaller the target segment, the higher the incentive required. Incentives must be very high to persuade people of high social status to participate. Testing during working hours also increases the figure required to persuade people to take part. However, care must be taken when offering above market-rate incentives, as we have found that many Chinese people can be suspicious of being offered obviously inflated sums.

Briefing Participants

The point at which participants are told about the goals of the research, and the organisation behind it, varies a lot in usability studies across the world.

In many countries, it is advisable to introduce the goal of the study at the beginning when the consent forms are signed. It is usually best to not identify the client until the end, if at all. Of course, if asked, a client's identity must be offered, but if it will damage the study to let this be known too early, inquisitive participants should be told that they will be told once the study is over. It is well known that participants tend to avoid criticizing clients' products if they are aware of their identity. In countries such as China this tendency is even more pronounced, and Asian clients can be very sensitive about the potential damage to their reputation caused by being associated with a poor prototype.

Equally, introductions to the purpose of usability testing must be handled with care. The standard practice of emphasizing that 'we are testing the product, not you' is even more important in Asia than in the West.

Chinese people care a great deal about saving face (especially the men), and they can become highly embarrassed if they meet difficulties or fail to finish a task in front of the moderator.

Conclusions

The primary purpose of this article is to raise awareness of the potential pitfalls of international recruitment for usability tests, and secondly to provide useful guidelines for practitioners. We hope that by focusing on the needs and pitfalls that are unique to international projects, the following guidelines will help practitioners to manage the recruitment process in a different country. However, it is fair to say that most problems are common to recruitment in many countries, and best practices will involve adjusting the parameters from country to country to achieve the best results.

Guidelines

When planning screening criteria:

- Describe the target group in familiar terms – make sure the target population (or its equivalent) exists and the label given to it makes sense in the target country.
- Explicate this description: what are the reasons for choosing this specific target group? This helps recruiters to identify equivalent groups if the original segment is not appropriate for the target country.
- Discuss with your local recruiter whether it is possible to define a target group that meets the given segments – the intended audience may simply not exist in the target country.

How to find a local recruiter:

- Start looking for local usability labs that have already established a network of reliable recruiting agencies: recruiters who know and understand usability testing are far more likely to understand the screener requirements.
- If there is no local usability consultancy, look for agencies of qualitative market research. Their methodological background is probably the most similar to usability; it should be easier for them to understand your needs.

How to find the right participants:

- Give quality specifications to the recruiter that clarify your expectations – agree on a service level with them (e.g., timelines to recruit users, typical costs, no-show rate), tell them what you expect from them (e.g., they will provide directions to office, they will phone on day before to confirm meeting), and commercial terms (e.g., not paying for a no-show, invoicing timelines)

If you intend to test again in the same location:

- Cooperate with recruiters on a long-term basis; invite the recruiters to a usability test.
- Debrief recruiters post-testing and discuss lessons learned – if you can't find experienced usability partners locally, train the recruiters so they understand you better in future.

These guidelines have been derived from our experiences of working as a partnership on many international projects. Much of what we have covered in this paper may be considered good practice for recruitment generally and not specific to international studies. Nonetheless, it is as well to have these in mind when recruiting internationally.

In our experience, as with recruitment in your own country, the only way to mitigate risk in international recruitment is to establish ongoing relationships with trusted partners in locations you are likely to test in. This removes many of the problems associated with naive assumptions made in the segmentation and by unskilled recruiters. Obviously, experienced usability recruiters are not always possible to find other countries, and we offer these guidelines in the hope they will help practitioners successfully manage international recruitment in the absence of such a partner.

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