



Using Amazon Mechanical Turk and other compensated crowdsourcing sites



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Abstract Crowdsourcing is becoming recognized as a powerful tool that organizations can use in order to get work done, this by freelancers and non-employees. We conceptualize crowdsourcing as a subcategory of outsourcing, with compensated crowdsourcing representing situations in which individuals performing the work receive some sort of payment for accomplishing the organization's tasks. Herein, we discuss how sites that create a crowd, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, can be powerful tools for business purposes. We highlight the general features of crowdsourcing sites, offering examples drawn from current crowdsourcing sites. We then examine the wide range of tasks that can be accomplished through crowdsourcing sites. Large online worker community websites and forums have been created around such crowdsourcing sites, and we describe the functions they generally play for crowdsourced workers. We also describe how these functions offer opportunities and challenges for organizations. We close by discussing major considerations organizations need to take into account when trying to harness the power of the crowd through compensated crowdsourcing sites.

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1. The non-employee work revolution

The value of using non-employee work has increasingly become recognized as a viable business strategy for organizations. One method of using non-employee

work that has received significant recent attention is crowdsourcing, which has been defined as employing information technologies to outsource business tasks and responsibilities to Internet-based crowds of individuals (Prpic, Shukla, Kietzmann, & McCarthy, 2015). Crowdsourcing utilizes the skills and expertise of people online to engage in organizational functions or parts thereof that can be done more effectively or less costly by non-employees. There are Internet users that possess relevant skills for organizational

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needs, yet who are best contracted for individual tasks rather than permanent or full-time employment relationships (Aguinis & Lawal, 2013). The Internet facilitates this sharing of work with such workers and its transmission back to organizations. We focus here on compensated crowdsourcing, which we define as crowdsourcing situations in which individuals performing the work receive some sort of payment for accomplishing the organization's tasks.

Prpic et al. (2015) and Ford, Richard, and Ciuchta (2015) offer important initial specification of the nature of crowdsourcing and the internal organizational needs to sustain crowdsourcing initiatives. This article builds on these works by focusing attention on characteristics of sites that provide crowds and the nature of how workers participate in such sites. In discussing such applications, the authors draw on the existing literature base as well as personal experiences as workers on such sites.

This article begins by describing the general characteristics of crowdsourcing sites and providing examples drawn from them. We then discuss the wide variety of tasks that have been accomplished via such sites, drawing on the categories proposed by Prpic et al. (2015). The article then moves into discussing the characteristics of significant online communities that have developed around the sites and how they impact worker engagement with particular tasks and companies offering such tasks. Finally, we draw all these elements together in offering practical considerations for organizational use of such crowdsourcing sites.

2. The nature of crowdsourcing sites

In agreement with the conceptualizations of crowdsourcing offered by Ford et al. (2015) and Prpic et al. (2015), we view crowdsourcing as a subcategory of outsourcing. Crowdsourcing is outsourcing whereby the workers doing the tasks are recruited through the Internet, whether or not the actual work is done online—although in the vast majority of cases it will be. This article focuses on a subcategory of crowdsourcing: compensated crowdsourcing. In compensated crowdsourcing situations, individuals who complete the work receive some type of payment for accomplishing the organization's tasks. This payment typically takes the form of monetary rewards, although some sites compensate individuals with things like gift cards.¹

Amazon Mechanical Turk is one of the best known and most used of crowdsourcing sites. Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) was launched by Amazon itself as a means of hiring people to do microtasks, such as labeling image files, for the main Amazon site (Landers & Behrend, 2015). Amazon then opened up MTurk to other companies with tasks for hire, to potentially be completed by the pool of workers on the site. Workers register for the site and then, based on their qualifications, participate in small jobs—called Human Intelligence Tasks, or HITs—that are posted by *requesters*: the organizations that have need for such tasks. The workforce on MTurk is primarily made up of individuals from the United States and India, although workers do come from all over the globe.² Table 1 offers a list of major compensated crowdsourcing sites.

The quality of work done by compensated crowdsourced workers—primarily workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk—has been examined, mostly from the perspective of academic research. The quality of MTurk sample data has been found to be equivalent to in-person participants for tasks/uses such as psychological surveys (Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013), behavioral tests (Casler, Bickel, & Hackett, 2013), matched-comparison groups (Azzam & Jacobson, 2013), body size estimation (Gardner, Brown, & Boice, 2012), and natural field experiments in economics (Chandler & Kapelner, 2013). Results suggest that Amazon MTurk and other crowdsourcing sites can be a good source of data for research-like tasks and questions.

There have been a few tasks examined wherein issues arose with crowdsourced workers. For example, Goodman et al. (2013) found that compared to in-person study participants, workers on MTurk are much more likely to use the Internet to find answers to questions asked. So if you ask a worker to make a judgment when a factual answer exists, MTurk workers are likely to find that exact answer rather than just make an estimate. This could hurt tasks that are aimed at organizational understanding of what people naturally know rather than what they can find out online. Chandler, Mueller, and Paolacci (2014) caution that crowdsourcing workers may be less likely to be affected by experimental manipulation and experimental deception, in part because some workers have participated in enough experiments to have seen such manipulations before. As such, tasks that require deception of workers might be less

¹ See Swagbucks (<http://www.swagbucks.com/>) for one example.

² For one illustration, see this map of locations of all workers who engaged in tasks by the requester, Techlist: <http://techlist.com/mturk/global-mturk-worker-map.php>

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