

Building Trust in Crowd Worker Forums: Worker Ownership, Governance, and Work Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Crowd worker forums serve as sites for trust-building between workers that is not supported by more specialized tools. The four largest Mechanical Turk forums have different governance styles. The first author, a professional crowd worker, is, with other workers, building a worker-owned, democratically governed forum. We expect this approach to increase trust among workers, and between workers and requesters, and lead to higher quality work and a better work experience.

ACM Classification Keywords

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Crowd work, Mechanical Turk, forums, trust, communication, worker-owned platforms, governance, MTurk Crowd.

INTRODUCTION

Amazon Mechanical Turk (“MTurk”) is a market for labor, primarily small piecework tasks and academic surveys. “Requesters” price and publish tasks (“human intelligence tasks” or “HITs”) to an open market. Workers, view the HITs and choose which ones they want to complete. After the HIT is completed, the worker submits the work and the requester reviews it. If the requester approves the work, the worker is paid; if the requester rejects it, they are not. Rejected HITs negatively impact a worker’s approval rating, and there is no appeal. In either case, the requester retains ownership of the completed work [2] (Sec. 3b). This leads to unethical requesters posting HITs, obtaining the completed work, and then rejecting payment to the worker. Wage theft is not uncommon—but while it is illegal in other industries, MTurk’s Participation Agreement [2] makes it legal on MTurk. It further states that Amazon will not mediate disputes between workers and requesters [2] (Sec. 3f). When requesters reject usable work, mistakenly or maliciously, workers have no way to claim payment. Lacking any support from Amazon, workers have developed their own methods to protect themselves and other workers from unscrupulous requesters on the platform.

MTurk offers no way for all workers to communicate with or contact each other. As a result, several unofficial discussion forums for MTurk workers have been developed. Amazon is

aware of the existence of these online worker forums. In Amazon’s Best Practices Guide for Requesters, they note: “Many Workers communicate with each other through online message boards and forums” [1]. The four most popular are Turker Nation, MTurk Forum, MTurkGrind, and MTurk Crowd.

MTURK WORKER FORUMS

The need for worker forums

MTurk worker forums serve the same purpose as internal corporate Slack channels or IRC channels: they are a place for both socializing and rich information sharing. In general, online forums serve three fundamental needs for members: functional needs, social needs, and psychological needs [14]. For MTurk workers, forums exist to build community and trust between workers, to increase skills, to increase knowledge, to share information, to provide collective protection, and to provide moral support and encouragement to each other.

The first author posted a poll to the MTurk Crowd daily work thread on March 10, 2016 [12]. It showed that workers use the forum to find HITs (91 votes; 71% of total), to share HITs (44 votes; 34%), to read and share information about HITs and requesters (93 votes; 72%), to socialize (73 votes; 57%), and to feel like part of the worker community (78 votes; 61%).

Building trust in worker forums

When a new requester posts work to MTurk, workers often email the requester asking clarifying questions. This is also used as a test to determine if the new requester will be responsive to worker concerns. A responsive requester indicates that the work is not a scam and the requester can be trusted. When workers receive a response or have questions answered by email by a requester, they often share this information on forums with other workers. When workers build friendships with each other on forums, they trust information they receive from each other about requesters, even when they haven’t talked to the requesters personally. “Transitive trust” [8] is established: Worker A trusts Worker B, and Worker B trusts information they received in an email from Requester C with an instruction about how to complete Requester C’s work. Then, by transitivity, Worker A trusts the instruction from Requester C that Worker B has posted on a forum.

In recent research on how MTurk workers collaborate with each other both on forums and offline, Gray et al. [5] found that “workers collaborate by referring tasks to each other. Here again workers use their social connections to convey trust, this time to convey trust that a task or requester is legitimate

and will pay.” While workers use a variety of tools such as Turkopticon [6], a site where workers can share reviews of requesters, the relations of trust built in the ongoing social exchange of worker forums are missing from the information shared through such tools. Specialized information exchange tools cannot therefore fully replace information shared directly by a trusted member of a worker forum. Gray et al. agree, noting: “a friend vouching for a requester or the time and effort it will take to complete a task provides the worker with a level of confidence that cannot be easily replicated with a purely technical solution” [5]. The information shared by workers on forums is, as a result, unique, and highly valuable.

FORUM DESIGN IN PROMOTING COMMUNITY TRUST

Forum governance styles

MTurk worker forums have different governance styles and designs. Turker Nation is the oldest of the four major forums. It has private sections that are accessible to only approved members; most information on the site is not public. Martin et al. [9] wrote, “Turker Nation is strict compared to other forums. Their rules and large number of ‘banned’ members attests to this” (p. 230). Two other forums, MTurk Forum and MTurkGrind, are owned by individuals who are forum developers and investors, not workers; these forums struggle to respond effectively to the needs and experiences of workers.

MTurk Crowd: a worker-owned, democratic forum

The newest forum is MTurk Crowd, established in January 2016. It was built collaboratively by four long-term workers, including the first author. All had experience on other forums and wanted to create an open, transparent forum that was worker-owned, collaboratively run, and valued forum member input and democratic decision making. Like other forums, it has a daily thread where workers share HITs and information. It has guides written by forum members about how to best use MTurk. It also has posts requesting member input on forum guidelines, design, and moderation. Member input is highly valued and members are encouraged to help enforce community norms of submitting honest, ethical work. Rather than rules, it has a set of guidelines explaining expected behavior based on Discourse’s “Universal Rules of Civilized Discourse” [4]. Forum members can flag issues when moderators are needed [10]. This collaboration by forum members helps shape a positive, helpful community with distribution of the labor of forum operation.

Since the forum is only two months old at time of writing, it’s difficult to gauge its impact. However, a Google search for “mturk forum” lists the site on the first page of results. The site has 809 registered members and over 110,000 messages. Requesters are joining the site to share information about their HITs and build trust with workers.

MTurk Crowd is designed and operated according to the hypothesis that a forum with transparent decision making and a belief in the high value of each member will increase trust between members relative to forums with other governance styles. Empirical and experimental research in the social sciences suggests that when people trust each other, they are more willing to share resources and information [11, 13, 7].

Practical experience suggests the same is true of MTurk workers in forums: if forum members trust each other, they can make more informed and educated decisions based on shared information about HITs and requesters. We expect therefore that better communication and increased trust will lead to better outcomes for everyone: requesters will get higher quality work, and workers will have clearer instructions about how to do the work, leading to fewer rejections, a higher effective wage, and a more pleasant and psychologically sustainable work experience.

THE CHALLENGE OF OUTREACH

A major challenge in further growing the benefits to workers from the trust built in forums is locating workers and attracting them to join and participate in forums. Forum outreach is nearly impossible since there is no way to contact or send messages to other workers through MTurk and the platform policies [3] prohibit posting HITs that include advertising or marketing material. Forum operators can attempt to improve search engine rankings and post forum information on social media, but by the time new workers or workers needing help search for these forums, they have already decided to seek help. The difficult question—for all forum operators—is how to reach workers who don’t know worker forums exist and may not think to search for them.

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