Recruiting Without Fear
How to Find First-Rate Participants for Design Studies
UIE Quick Start Reports

There are many ways to study how people interact with web sites or other types of designs. Whether you prefer usability testing, field studies, focus groups, or some other approach, UIE Quick Start reports will get you up and running—quick.

The series will walk you through the basics of designing a study, recruiting participants, facilitating sessions, reporting findings, and more. These reports will distill many years of usability consulting into tips and strategies you can use with confidence.

In Recruiting Without Fear, we show you how to overcome one of the biggest obstacles to design studies: finding the right people to study.
Overcoming the Fear of Recruiting

We once had a client who was gung-ho about instituting usability tests for his company's products. The trouble was, his designers were not quite as gung-ho as he was. They dreaded the extra work of devising tests and facilitating sessions and tabulating results and, gosh, all those test users—wherever would they find enough people? One day our client announced to his design staff that test users would appear in Conference Room B, ready to work with any of their products, every Tuesday afternoon at 2:00. Don’t ask us how he made them appear (we think it involved a mermaid and three wishes).

In the first couple of weeks, one of the teams ran two tests, and the rest of the users came, sat for an hour, and left. But after a month, designers were fighting over the schedule. After three months, usability testing expanded to three days a week—and to Conference Room C. With recruiting out of the way, the biggest obstacle to testing had vanished, and the designers quickly gleaned valuable information about their products.

You’d be amazed how often people tell us they’d love to do design studies on their products or web sites or intranets—they’d love to do usability tests or field studies or focus groups—but they can’t, because they have no way to round up participants. They don’t have a list, or they don’t know how to screen for qualified candidates. Like the designers who worked for our client, they thought recruiting was just too hard.

The truth is, recruiting is a lot easier than most people assume. If you’ve never done it, you can set aside all your preconceptions about what it’s like to approach and interview large numbers of strangers. Recruiting for design studies is not like telemarketing or door-to-door canvassing. No one will think you’re a pest. As a recruiter, you enjoy several big advantages:

- Every person who uses, or might use, your design, is a likely participant. All you have to do is locate them.
- When you find them, they have a vested interest in improving your...
design—it will be better for them to use. They will want to help you. If they can’t participate, they will recommend others who will.

- It’s a rare person who is not eager to see how design works from the inside. People want to participate in your study just to learn how design works.
- You don’t have to chase people. Anyone who plays hard to get lacks the enthusiasm to make a good participant.
- Most candidates want to qualify, and will grant you time for careful interviewing. The better they understand what you are doing, the more clearly they will see how important it is that they not participate if they don’t qualify.

No single thing about recruiting is difficult. Ninety percent of the tasks are common sense. The only hard thing to master is the amount of detail—so many candidates, so many lists, so many requirements, so many calls. It’s not rocket science, but if you don’t stay on top of the details, the job can expand to sap your time and energy. We know. We’ve been there.

Here at User Interface Engineering, we have continually reviewed and improved our recruiting process since 1988. Our last no-show was in 1999, a user who totaled his brand new car on the way to the test. He called us to apologize before he called his insurance company. We have not recruited an unsatisfactory participant, or disqualified test data, in at least that long. To get every test to run without a hitch, and produce as much high-quality data as possible, we have learned to choose participants very carefully. Above all, we’ve learned how to gain control over the mass of detail.

Now we are going to share our process with you. We’ll give you tips and tricks to organize your work—checklists and step-by-step instructions we have developed and tested over the years.

If you need to recruit participants for a usability test, field study, or focus group—especially if this is your first time—we’ll help you learn the basics, fast. If you are debating whether to outsource recruiting or do it yourself, you’ll get a better idea of what in-house recruiting entails. If you already outsource, you’ll pick up some pointers for coaching your recruiter.

In the following pages, we’ll walk you through the process of recruiting, from start to finish. By the end, you’ll see that there’s nothing to fear except fear itself.
Simple Steps

Nothing in the following pages will surprise you. Recruiting is 99 percent common sense—a series of logical, and easy, steps:

- First, you decide who is going to actually do the job. It could be you or someone else on the team. (Or, as you’ll learn in the next section, you can head for the Yellow Pages.)

- You and the study team work out a description of exactly what sorts of people you want to test, so that you know who to recruit and who not to recruit. We’ll show you how to tell a description that produces good sessions from one that doesn’t work so well.

- You pull together a list of people to approach—to see if they qualify. There are lots of ways to do this.

- Then you contact those people to 1) let them know that there is an opportunity to do a session with you, and 2) give them a general idea of who you need, so only suitable candidates respond. This makes the next step a lot easier.

- The final step is a phone interview with each candidate who replies to your overtures. You listen and talk until you are sure they are who you want, and they know what they are getting themselves into. Then you schedule the good ones.

- All that’s left is to keep in touch with them to make sure they don’t forget to show up.

That’s it. That’s the whole deal. True, the devil is in the details. But if you plan things out beforehand—just as you would any other project—recruiting will go smoothly.

The Outsourcing Decision

Before we launch into the recruiting process, FAA regulations require that we show you the exit door. Yes, there is an exit door, an easy way out. If you’re short of time, or can’t attend to the mass of detail that recruiting entails—or if you just wish you could wave a magic wand and make the burden of recruiting go away—then don’t recruit. Hire a recruiting firm instead. (Enter the search terms “respondent” and “recruiting” on Google or, better yet, ask colleagues to recommend a firm.) Professional recruiters generally charge from $100 to $125 for each qualified participant they find, and most companies that go this route feel they get their money’s worth.

Of course, there is a downside, or we wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of producing this report. Using a recruiting firm, you will experience a relatively high rate of no-shows—a commonly cited figure is 10 percent. No-shows are painful. As the clock ticks past the appointed hour, the facilitator and any observers pace the floor
before shutting down the equipment and wandering glumly off to try and salvage the afternoon.

You will need to explain very carefully to the recruiting firm what sorts of participants you seek. Depending on how well the recruiter understands your business and your intended study, you must prepare for the possibility that some participants will arrive expecting something entirely different from what you have planned. To minimize the risk of choosing unsuitable participants, some recruiters require you to write a screener—a list of canned questions the candidate must answer correctly in order to qualify. (As we’ll explain later, we think screeners are a bit impersonal for the type of relationship we hope to establish with participants.) If, on the other hand, the professional recruiter does a nice job of bonding with prospects, those people will show up hoping to meet the recruiter, only to find a roomful of strangers.

One more drawback of using professional recruiters: you will lie awake the night before the session wondering if the recruiter made the reminder calls.

Contrast that to what happens when the job of recruiting falls to a team member who is part of the study:

- The team member knows the format and objectives of the sessions, understands the requirements for participants and the reasons they are important, and knows the design and its requirements. None of this has to be transmitted to a third party or updated when it changes.

- The team member can relay back to the team what the candidates say about the market, the design, and competing designs. Recruiting becomes an extension of the investigation going on in the sessions.

- The team member can exercise more discretion in selecting and rejecting participants. Sessions run better because the participants fit them better—and the team learns more.

- The team member will be quick to detect problems with the criteria for selecting participants, and quick to bring them to the team’s attention and suggest revisions. Certainly, any good recruiter can do this, but the team recruiter can do it faster. Time is money.

The team member can help the candidate engage with the team and its goals right from the start. Insiders can manage this bonding better than outsiders, because they have a deeper understanding of the session’s procedures and goals.

In case you haven’t guessed, we predict you will achieve the best results if you or someone else on your team does the recruiting. But if time and resources don’t allow it, by all means outsource.
Who Should Recruit?

Let’s say your company intends to do its own recruiting. The first step is to appoint a recruiter. In deciding who should do the job, there are three things to consider.

First, the recruiter should be part of the group that is actually planning and running the test. As we’ve noted, a recruiter who belongs to the design team understands what the design problems are and how the sessions will run. The recruiter reflects these things to candidates so they know what they are getting into, and can measure the candidates against the design and the test in the process of qualifying them. The person’s job function—manager, developer, designer—doesn’t matter so long as he or she works with the team every day.

Second, the recruiter should be good at managing detail, and comfortable with work that entails a plethora of to-do lists, notes to oneself, phone tag, spreadsheets, index cards, and the like. Some people thrive in this kind of milieu, others shrivel. Choose accordingly.

Finally, the recruiter should have good people skills. The person must be capable of engaging in friendly, relaxed conversation that puts the candidate at ease. At the same time, the recruiter will have to keep track of what candidates say and judge whether they qualify or not. That means steering the conversation into areas where candidates will reveal the traits that participants need to have. These skills are not hard to learn, but the recruiter must generally enjoy human interaction, or else the job will be more than a little taxing.

Does that sound like someone on your team? You, for instance? For now, we’ll assume you’ve got the job.

What Sorts of Participants Do You Need?

Your first duty as a recruiter is to fill the slots—a participant for every seat in your study. Any session is better than no session. If you give the facilitators and observers enough warm bodies to work with, you have accomplished a great deal. But you will soon discover that all warm bodies are not equally useful. So, the recruiter also has a duty to make sure the right sorts of people fill those slots.

Let’s start with the basics. No matter what business you are in or what kind of design you are developing, all participants must meet three qualifications: they should have proper motivation, they should be capable of working with a facilitator or with other participants, and they should express themselves clearly.

**Motivation:** If the participant has no interest in the goals of your study, you will not get valid results. (In this regard, field studies enjoy an advantage over usability tests and focus groups: because the participants work with tools and tasks that are already a part of their lives, they are inherently motivated.) Participants who find the task or topic meaningful to their lives, and understand why
they are taking part in the study, will enter the session with the right attitude: they’ll put energy into completing the task, judge the outcome as critically as they would in real life, and treat your designs-in-progress as if they were real products.

The right kind of motivation looks something like this:

- The participant’s attitude is that of a professional working with other professionals.
- The participant has an interest in the end result of improving the design they use.
- The participant expects to enjoy the work involved.

**Cooperation:** You also need participants who engage with people enthusiastically. Ask anyone in this field about their worst experience, and we guarantee you will hear stories about people who wouldn’t speak at all, or had no opinions to share, or were unwilling to try something they thought might be hard, or stubbornly refused to cooperate, or went off on their own agenda.

“Plays well with others” is a key requirement. In focus groups especially, participants have to cooperate with peers they have never met before. And in any type of session, they will need to interact well with the facilitator and team members during question-and-answer periods.

**Articulateness:** All participants must speak articulately. There’s no point in putting people through costly exercises if they can’t explain to observers what was difficult.

Meeting these standards makes the study about the design, and not an exercise in participant management. In fact, if your participants meet only these requirements—if they are otherwise indistinguishable from sightseers on a passing tour bus—you can sit them down with your team’s design and learn something from them. We’ll give you some pointers on how to recognize such candidates a bit later on.

If you think of participating in your study session as a job (which it is), then these requirements are qualities that every one of your employees should have—no matter what type of session you put them in. Now we’ll look at the kinds of requirements that are unique to each design study.

**Specific Requirements**

Design teams usually identify a set of qualities and attributes they think will make a difference in the outcome of the session—traits relating to the participants’ demographics and experience—and write them up in a profile. The profile becomes the recruiter’s spec sheet.

If you’re the recruiter, it’s not necessarily your job to create the profile; the profile typically grows out of discussions among all the design’s stakeholders. But, it is your responsibility to ensure that the profile makes sense, is workable, and will produce
the desired result, which is simply to bring to the session the participants who will yield the most useful information.

**Simple Profile**

Let’s start with a simple example, a profile for a focus group that will brainstorm ideas for improving an upscale home entertainment center. [Figure 1]

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**Focus Group Profile: Luxury Home Entertainment Systems**

*Objective: Brainstorm new features or components for the upscale home entertainment center.*

- Household income above $150,000
- Own a home entertainment center that is the focus of a room
- Serious interest in two of these areas:
  - Sports (watching 12 professional sports matches per year)
  - Audio (listens to music only—not as background—at least 1 hour a week)
  - Video games (plays at least 5 hours a week)
  - Movies (watches at least 50 movies a year at home)
  - Theater (either a ticket subscription or 4 plays a year)
  - Network television series (watches 2 shows every week, or owns the DVDs)

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**Figure 1:** A simple profile. Sticking to a few clear, objective restrictions makes the recruiter’s job easier without compromising the results of the study.

The profile is effective because every requirement will help produce better feedback:

- The income requirement will help participants stay away from focusing on cost (the more affluent seem able to pay better attention to what they really need—or want).
- The ownership requirement will ensure that they have thought about what aspects of home entertainment they value or find lacking.
- Diverse serious interests will seed the discussion with different points of view on what is worth having in a home entertainment center.

You’ll also notice that the criteria for meeting each requirement are clear and objective. Free from ambiguous definitions and arbitrary restrictions, the profile should prove easy for the recruiter to work with, and should produce a group that brainstorms well together.

**Profiles Within a Profile**

Few profiles turn out as simple as the last example. Often, for instance, the design team needs to test more than one set of participants in order to isolate problems and their likely fixes. Figure 2 is the profile for a usability test on a Help package used in tax preparation.
The profile begins with requirements similar to the focus group profile. The first three give objective criteria for eliminating total novices and confirmed experts—and for screening out anyone who would never have occasion to do these tasks in the real world. By explaining the purpose of each requirement, the profile grants the recruiter some room to exercise judgment.

But the study also seeks to test the effects of different types of experience. For that reason, the profile uses classifiers—criteria that divide participants into groups. In this case, the classifiers have to do with participants’ past experience, or lack of experience, with various approaches to tax preparation. Such distinctions often affect how participants behave in a study and can point the way to effective design changes.

We consider this profile exemplary for several reasons: It contains a manageable number of classifiers. Every requirement aims to make the test results clearer and easier to interpret. And every question the recruiter must ask the participant has a definitive answer.

As a recruiter, you need to recognize the difference between a workable profile and a problematic one, and be prepared to offer suggestions for fixing what’s broken. Now let’s look at a profile that needs help.

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**Usability Test Profile: Help Package for Tax Preparation Software**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application experience on MS Windows platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We want people who already know how to use a computer fairly well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. taxpayer for a minimum of 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We want people who are familiar with the process of filing taxes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No professional experience doing taxes (no more than 2 returns per year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We want people who will need assistance with complex tax tasks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classifiers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Done own taxes before? (Yes or no)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used tax software before? (Yes or no)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used the test tax package before? (Yes or no)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: This usability test profile contains *classifiers* that divide participants according to experience.
Testing a profile

Figure 3 is a profile for an exploratory usability test of the web sites of two banks. The design team, which is developing the web site for one of the banks, has been working on two sections of the site. The team members want participants to attempt a couple of application processes. Participants will also try the same tasks on a competitor’s site, in order to compare two different page layouts and ways of presenting requirements for mortgage qualification. The tasks will be done on mockups, and participants’ own financial information will not be required. The team’s questions are 1) can the participants complete the mortgage applications? 2) how do the participants react to each bank’s information requirements? and 3) can the participants complete the sign-up process for online bill payment?

Let the test begin:

Keep restrictions to a minimum. The first thing you notice about this profile is that it contains far more restrictions than the profiles we looked at earlier. With too many restrictions, you will have too many reasons to say no to candidates. You may never fill the slots, either because finding candidates who match this complicated profile takes too long, or because the profile is so detailed that few candidates match it no matter how many you call. The difficulty is compounded if the design you are studying is a corporate intranet and you must recruit within the company.

Sometimes unnecessary restrictions are the result of hasty assumptions. A client once handed us a profile for a usability test of email software. Among the restrictions was “Must own a computer.” Not so fast, we thought. We reminded the developers that many people who don’t own a computer nevertheless use email at work and in pub.
lic libraries. Removing the restriction made recruiting that much easier, without compromising the study.

The profile in Figure 3 contains a restriction that imposes quotas on different income groups. This means that, as soon as a couple of folks with low or high incomes are scheduled, the recruiter will have to reject some candidates who meet all the other requirements. Is this restriction worth the trouble it brings the recruiter?

We would say the restriction adds nothing. Since the amount of the second mortgage is not critical to the test—the participant might simply borrow an amount sufficient to paint a few rooms—and since all participants are homeowners (who, unfortunately, always need a loan), adding this restriction is not likely to improve the results of the test.

Often, restrictions appear simply because someone believes the participants should match the market’s demographics to a tee. The trouble is, demographics don’t predict how participants behave in a session. A client once gave us a profile that required participants to have two phones in their home—a characteristic that had shown up in a market study. We explained that the number of phones the participants owned would not affect the way they approached, engaged with, completed, or commented on the software we were testing.

It’s the same with age restrictions. Granted, age is useful and effective in bracketing markets. Few people over 12 choose to go to Scooby-Doo movies alone. If they can manage, they drop their kids or younger siblings off and try to get into something R-rated. Few people over 40 need equipment for full-contact sports. Few people under 25 take out mortgages. Because age works so well descriptively, using these perfectly good descriptions to restrict participants seems to make good sense.

But age doesn’t describe behavior any better than income does. The market for video games makes a good example. It’s a huge market, and game players are predominantly young—very young. But an age restriction for sessions of a site selling video games would be worse than useless. Why? The difference in knowledge and sophistication between two 16-year-olds, one who plays and one who doesn’t, is huge, whereas the 16-year-old player might well test identically to a 30- or 50-year-old enthusiast. And although the 30-year-old might be harder to locate and schedule, getting permission and making other necessary arrangements to test the teen can be complicated. (Testing surly adolescents is no walk in the park, either.)

The age restriction in Figure 3 may make the test group look more like the bank’s depositors, but we can’t say what effect it will have on what happens in the test, since participants must already be depositors at some bank. Because it buys the session nothing in exchange for the recruiter additional grief, we would vote to dispense with it. The “Bank debit card holder” restriction also adds nothing. Away with it as well.

The important restrictions in a profile are not about what people are, but about what they have done, do, and don’t do—and what they will or won’t try to do in the session. If a restriction fails that test, try to persuade whoever put it in to take it out.
Make sure specifications are clear. Unless the restrictions express clearly and concisely what the session needs, you will qualify, in good faith, participants the team doesn’t want to see.

Suppose you were studying the installation wizard for a financial software package. Because you would expect users to behave differently according to their level of experience, the design team might include a classifier that calls for both novices and experts. The difficulty comes in defining “experience” so you can measure it in a candidate. Is the team interested in candidates’ experience with particular tools (such as spreadsheets)? With the domain (banking)? With the task (installation)? You will have to press the authors of the profile to be more specific.

Even then, you are only halfway to enlightenment. Say the team amends the specification to read: “Experienced at installing software.” Now imagine asking a candidate, “Are you experienced at installing software?” The candidate will have no idea what you mean by “experienced” and you will have no idea how to evaluate the answer, be it yes or no. Instead, the profile needs to specify what the candidate should have done (or not done).

If the profile defines the restriction as an event, neither you nor the candidates you interview need make subjective judgments about experience. You can make clean and clear decisions about who qualifies and who doesn’t. This requirement would then read “Has personally installed software packages x, y, and z.”

Figure 3 has a requirement of “three years’ web experience,” which is a good idea; participants who lack experience with links, forms, and buttons will take up too much test time. But the way this requirement is stated, you could find yourself testing someone who has spent three years playing “Bejeweled” using a bookmark his kid set for him—and nothing else. Best to replace that requirement with a more concrete stipulation such as “Has made three or more separate purchases online.” That will cover the level of experience needed for this test (finding sites, comparing products, small money transactions).

**Usability Test Profile: Bank Web Site**

Test Objective:
(1) Test design mockup of online application for second mortgage
(2) Observe reactions to bank’s information requirements
(3) Test signup for online billpay service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Requirements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is a homeowner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25%–50% do not bank on the web</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least 25% have or had a second mortgage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25% do not use online bill payment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has made three or more separate purchases online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4: A leaner profile makes recruiting go faster.
Figure 4 will produce the same (or better) test results, with a lot fewer candidate interviews.

Profiles are hard to get right the first time. That’s why we strongly advise you to push back against any requirements that seem gratuitous, vague, or overly restrictive.

**Surrogates**

Another time to push back on a profile is when the recruits are inherently difficult to schedule—say, because they work in a high-powered profession. In that case, propose to your team that you recruit surrogates to do early tests or rehearsals. You can line up a few bona-fide subjects later. Once, when we needed to test ER physicians, for instance, we conducted the first tests with medical students.

Surrogates can help eliminate gross imperfections in a design without wasting the time of the few available participants who meet the full profile. Testing with surrogates is okay as long as you realize that they may bring biases that your final participants do not share. If your team makes any design decisions based on sessions with surrogates, make sure the bona-fide subjects have a chance to corroborate those decisions.

**Final Exam**

Here is a final litmus test for your profile. After you have completed several recruiting calls, assemble the design team, describe each candidate you have spoken to, and discuss whether or not they merited qualification, and why. If you all agree at that point, you have a good profile. If not, you will receive a lot of input for fixing it.

**Building a List of Contacts**

Now that you know what sort of people you want to work with, you’ll need a way to find them. The recruiting process proper starts with a good list of people to contact.

If you’re like us, you hate making cold calls. Luckily, you won’t have to do much of that. The best way to find candidates is to make them come to you.

**WEB SIGN-UP**

The minute you finish reading this report, post a sign-up form on your web site and invite people to become candidates for study sessions. Have people input their contact information and a brief self-description. That way you’ll know something about them and can be sure they are interested in participating. Many organizations have luck with this approach. Figure 5 (on the next page) shows how the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service goes about it. Ask everyone you meet who is interested in design testing to sign up and tell their friends about it. Have your colleagues do likewise. You will be astonished at how fast the list grows.

We have maintained a sign-up form since 1994 and, with next to no effort, have received applications from 6,000 people. So what if two of them live in the Maldives Islands—if we ever want to have a session there, we are all set. More than half the list is local to us.
Help improve our site!

We are committed to ensuring our website serves the people who use it.
Help us by volunteering to participate in usability research, focus groups,
and other types of product evaluations. We’re looking for all types and
levels of computer experience, so anyone who’s interested is eligible to
sign up!

what is involved in being a participant?

Sometimes we interview you over the phone about a particular web page or product. Other types of testing require
that you come to our office in Washington, DC. Normally, we need participants for a session lasting from 1-1/2 to 3
hours. We’ll tell you how much time is required when we call about the possibility of you being a participant. Every
evaluation is different, but typically we ask you to perform tasks on a particular web product we are developing.
Frequently we’ll either interview you or have you fill out a questionnaire after the session for your opinion on how
easy the web page was to use.

We may ask your permission to videotape the sessions to conduct detailed analysis of how the product performs and
may capture your face on video. If you agree, you’ll be asked to sign a video consent form. We treat all video data as
confidential information.

when do you do these evaluations?

Typically we arrange testing Monday through Friday (10 a.m. to 5 p.m. ET) and try to accommodate our participants’
schedules as best we can.

how soon will I be asked to participate?

Sorry, we really don’t know that. It just depends on the type of web products we are developing. When we have an
evaluation that fits your profile, we’ll most likely give you a call to arrange a session.

how do I sign up?

Please emailippone@ers.usda.gov with your name and contact information. We will then contact you to get a basic
idea of your professional background, experience with computers, and information-seeking needs. After we have this
information, we will let you know when a session becomes available. Remote (phone) testing is open to anyone in the
United States. Product evaluations held in-person at our headquarters in Washington, DC are limited to individuals
within the immediate DC metro area (DC/MD/VA).

anything else I can do?

If you have friends or colleagues whom you think might be interested in participating, feel free to point them to this
web page so they can sign up to participate too.

Figure 5: The USDA’s Economic Research Service uses a simple page to recruit potential participants for
upcoming studies.
COMPANY DIRECTORY (FOR INTRANETS)
If the subject of your study is a corporate intranet, all your contacts will come from inside the company. Try poring over the company directory with someone from Human Resources who can help you pick out people who are likely to match your profile. If you find that you have gone through the entire company without filling all the slots, you may have to test someone you have already rejected.

REFERRALS FROM THE WELL-CONNECTED
Some types of professionals are well placed to hook you up with large numbers of candidates fast. Faculty at local colleges or church groups, for example. They are an excellent conduit for recruiting students—and not just their own students (news spreads fast on campus). Give them a brief description of your study and ask them to send students to your web sign-up form.

When we’re stuck, we contact acquaintances in the real estate business. Typically, these people know what all their clients do for work and what kind of technological toys they have in their homes—all sorts of information that can help them identify promising candidates. Again, ask them to pass your url or email address along to their clients.

GROUPS AND ASSOCIATIONS
User groups and professional associations will often give you time at their meetings to talk about your sessions and recruit for them. Members of such groups are interested in new products, and, because they regularly attend meetings outside of work, are apt to be good at managing their own time and fitting your schedule.

CO-WORKERS
In the case of intranets, where co-workers are the target market for the design, your fellow employees are your only candidate pool. But even if you are studying something other than an intranet, fellow employees can be useful in a pinch. They can stand in for real users in a rehearsal, catching the obvious design gaffes before real testing begins.

The trickiest issue in recruiting employees is confidentiality. Employees may fear humiliating themselves in front of co-workers if they make mistakes, and may hesitate to criticize designs created by their peers. Under those conditions, the session is unlikely to generate honest feedback.

As the recruiter, you must reassure employees that nothing they say or do in the session will affect their performance review or job assignment—or find its way into lunchroom gossip. And you have to make sure the team conducting the study promises to maintain strict confidentiality. In-house studies work only if all concerned make the same commitment as the City of Las Vegas: what happens in the sessions stays in the sessions. Depending on the culture of your workplace, you may want to recruit participants who are articulate, cooperative, and brave.
**EXISTING CUSTOMERS**

If you are refining a design that already has customers, feel free to draw on that list. Just be aware of a few caveats. Customers who already use the product have a strong interest in seeing it improved. That’s good, of course—except that it is a strong interest in seeing it improved to work better for them. When they engage with the design in your session, they feel they are helping drive the product toward a solution to their problem. If the next version does not incorporate the improvement they thought they contributed, they will be disappointed. Be sure to forewarn customer-participants that their feedback will enter the design mix with contributions from many other people.

**PARTICIPANTS YOU’VE WORKED WITH BEFORE**

If your organization has never recruited, you won’t have such a list. But next time, you will. Since you will have interviewed, met, and worked with them, you will know whom to call and whom not to call for a particular session—and they will know what they are getting into. The negotiation will be short and satisfactory to both sides, regardless of the outcome. These people are also a great source of referrals.

Oh, and before we forget, we should warn you about a few tactics that, in our experience, don’t work. Anything that involves broadcasting to large numbers of people promotes chaos. That’s why we don’t use newspaper ads, job center postings, or mass emailings. While a single ad can net 200 responses, the great majority will not match the qualifications we specified. Worse, the emails continue to arrive (or the phone continues to ring) days after the study is over.

If we blast our message out to our extensive email list, the response is equally overwhelming. Having replied, each recipient expects to test and expects an immediate response. If you take too long to get back to them, they conclude that you aren’t all that interested, and respond in kind. Recruiting works better if you keep up the momentum.

Whichever sources you use to build your list (and we suggest you try several), aim to collect three to six names for every slot you must fill—more, if your profile has a lot of restrictions and classifiers.

Now that you’ve built a list of contacts, the next step is to send them an email.

**The Contact Email**

Your contact email should work like a help-wanted ad in a newspaper. It should state every requirement plainly and unambiguously to prevent unqualified people from wasting their time or yours. If you are recruiting for an intranet study, the contact email is a good place to give assurances of confidentiality and state whether the employee will receive payment. (See the sidebar, “The Price of Participation,” on page 17.)
Recruiting Without Fear: How to Find First-Rate Participants for Design Studies

Sample Contact Email

To: <insert contact’s email address>
From: Will.Schroeder@uiie.com
Subject: User Interface Engineering is Testing Again

Hi <insert contact’s name>,

<insert personal comment if possible>

I am looking for some users for a small usability test next week. We are testing the functionality of several banking web sites, so unless you keep your every dime under your mattress or buried in the yard, you stand a good chance of qualifying.

Some more specific qualifications are:
- A savings or checking/savings account that pays interest
- Have made several purchases on the web

I will be looking for clients of several local banks. (Of course I can’t tell you which ones.)

I am looking for users who work their bank accounts online, but I also need a few who never have.

Please pass this along to any of your friends who might fit and be interested.

If this looks possible, we will need a brief phone conversation to go over some details of qualification. Please let me know the best number and time to reach you.

Will Schroeder, Principal
User Interface Engineering

Figure 6: The contact email provides enough information about the study to let the recipient decide whether to respond.

The email in Figure 6 is relaxed and informal, both because our participants expect that from us and because the requirements are flexible. The only two non-negotiable screens are explicitly stated.

The language also makes clear that the test population has sub-groupings (experienced and inexperienced online bankers), signaling that not everyone fitting the general profile will qualify.

For more rigid requirements, we spell it out: “We are testing three income groups, so I will need to know your household income if you wish to qualify. I will let you know if your income category fills up before we get to you.” If people respond and we find that the slots for their income group are already filled, we let them know this immediately, so as not to discourage them from trying again next time. Treat your candidates with friendly respect from the start and they will reciprocate. What goes around comes around.
The Price of Participation

At some point in the planning process, you’ll have to decide how much to pay each participant you recruit. A lot depends on your budget—but you should offer them something. Many companies that undertake usability testing pay participants in cash, often between $25 and $50 per hour. Other companies give away gifts. For example, Microsoft typically doesn’t pay participants cash, but gives them their choice of select Microsoft software.

Whether you pay in cash or in mugs and caps, the fee is symbolic. These sessions are hard work, and you will be asking a lot of each participant. It would be easy for people to conclude that whatever you can afford to pay them is too low for what they contribute, and they would be right. Unless the session itself is the motivator, no amount of money will make it work.

Even though most qualified participants want to take part, busy people still like to hear why you want them for a particular session. They also want to know what they’ll get out of the experience. You can tell them:

- “Your colleagues are working on this product.”
- “You’ll meet the developers producing the designs you depend on.”
- “You can see, and even influence, what’s new in your field.”

For some participants, it makes all the difference just to know that their contribution will count.

Intranets

When employees take part in studies of their own organization’s intranet, they typically do so on company time. We’ve seen that few companies give employee’s extra money, with more giving them small gifts for their efforts. For most employee-participants, the chance to improve a design that directly affects themselves and their colleagues is payment enough.

Candidates who reply to the email will know something about what they are applying for, and—since you have already mentioned some of the basic restrictions—be halfway to qualifying before you pick up the phone.

The Qualifying Interview

The telephone is the recruiter’s most important tool (this is a good time to buy a headset if you don’t have one already). Although you may be tempted to interview candidates through the convenient medium of email, the phone offers several big advantages: you can tailor questions to candidates’ responses, for example, and you can easily engage in open-ended conversation, which is the best way to evaluate experience and expertise. Unless you or the team knows the candidate, use email only to schedule phone conversations. If you’re interviewing within your company, consider having a relaxed, face-to-face talk.
### Blank Recruiting Call Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>Write Down Before Call</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Name:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Today’s Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Email Address:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Phone:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where did you get their name?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2</th>
<th>Getting Started</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduce yourself and call purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tell candidate how you got their name.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3</th>
<th>Basic Screens (Candidate must pass these or jump to section 9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meets requirements in contact email. (Verify conversationally.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is available for sessions and can make the trip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understands what to expect and is eager to participate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>4</th>
<th>Specific Qualifications (Add any helpful notes)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5</th>
<th>General Quality of Participant (Candidate must pass these or jump to section 9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explains well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motivated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexible (takes conversational direction, accepts your definitions).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personable (responds to you as an individual).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6</th>
<th>Fits a Slot (Describe which part of the profile this participant fits)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7</th>
<th>If There Is an Open Slot for This Participant . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Schedule the candidate. Write time and date here:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describe the forms you will send.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Deliver forms by: Fax ✔ Email ☐ Postal mail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Explain what participant is to do if they have questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instruct participant to fill out forms in advance of session.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Get all contact information from participant in case of emergency. (Phone and email)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>8</th>
<th>If There Are No Open Slots . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inform participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can you call if there’s a cancellation? Yes No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>9</th>
<th>If They Don’t Qualify . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Would the participant be interested in future studies? Yes No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>10</th>
<th>At the End of Every Recruiting Call</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ask if they know anyone else who would like to take part in a session. Record names and contact info:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thank the candidate for their time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>11</th>
<th>After the Call if the Candidate Qualifies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record the session time and date on your calendar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assign the participant an ID number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mark forms with participant’s ID number:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Send out forms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Figure 7:** The checklist we use for tracking recruiting calls. We’ve put a blank form at the end of this report for you to copy and use.

There is a lot to cover in the qualifying call. For an overview, look at Figure 7, which is what we use to keep track of important points during a qualifying interview. The checklist helps ensure that we touch all the bases, and it prods us to record the most...
important information about the candidate. At the end of this report is a blank, full-size checklist that you can modify to suit your project.

**Phone Skills 101**

Everyone has phone skills. If you spent as much time playing golf as you spend on the phone, you would be Tiger Woods or Annika Sorenstam.

Just as you would on any other phone call, begin by saying who you are and why you called (by the way, don’t worry that candidates will take you for a telemarketer—you are answering their email, remember?).

Hello, Peter. This is Will Schroeder of User Interface Engineering. I got your email about testing. Do you have ten minutes to go over the qualifications?

We always say 10 minutes. If Peter doesn’t qualify, it will be less. If he is really interested, it will be more like 20 or 25. So far, after a thousand or so interviews, no one has complained about how much time it took.

If you have met Peter, something personal may be appropriate—perhaps you have a mutual friend or have read about him somewhere or remember that the last time you saw him his leg was in a cast. Then down to business.

**Preliminary Screen**

Qualification is hard work; it’s not something you want to put Peter through before finding out that he didn’t read the restrictions in your email carefully, or will be in Copenhagen the week you are testing in Miami. In the opening phase of the call—the preliminary screen—confirm that Peter understood the email and put him at ease about the nature of the session. At the same time, you will be looking for signs that he can express himself well. You might begin:

We are looking for people to do a usability test about banking on the web. Have you ever done a usability test?

If Peter says yes, you say:

Tell me what that was like.

If he gives a good, concise, complete description, and then tells you how he felt about it, you know you’ve got a live one. If not, draw him out by asking him for specifics about his first account. If he adds detail and color, mark the appropriate points on your checklist. If not, you may not be speaking to a good candidate.

If Peter has never taken a usability test, tell him what to expect. Don’t forget to say:

I can’t stress too strongly that you are on our side, part of the team. We are testing the design, not you.

When you are satisfied that he is clear on what awaits him, you say:

Does this sound like something you want to do?

So far, nobody has ever said no to this. But if Peter is going to, you want to hear it now. Next you say:

What kinds of things have you purchased on the web?
If he says nothing, perhaps he didn’t read your email carefully. That does happen. But it also means you can’t use him. You apologize, because you have no need to fault his enthusiasm, and he might still give you a good referral, or qualify for another study—and move on to the exit interview, which we’ll get to in a minute.

As Peter describes his purchases, you can use this as another opportunity to draw him out, or if you have decided that he is articulate enough to make a good participant, you can move on.

The next question depends on which slots you have filled, since you are studying two groups, online bankers and a few who don’t bank online. You probe for which group Peter belongs to:

Do you do anything with your bank online?
What kind of transactions have you done?

As he lists them, see if he mentions a second mortgage—which is, as you recall, the subject of the web form that this usability test will study. If so, check it off. When he finishes, you can draw him out some more (if you still need to):

How did you decide to do those particular banking transactions online?
Or: What do you know about other types of transactions your bank offers?

You are trying to learn how savvy he is about online banking without reading him a list of functions. You particularly don’t want to ask him about paying bills directly through the bank, since that is part of your test. If he doesn’t know this service exists, then you don’t want to make him savvy—or at least a little more savvy than he was—and corrupt a perfectly good novice.

If you have a slot for him at this point, then say:

We’re testing the last week of the month. The sessions are three hours long, from nine to twelve in the morning and one-thirty to four-thirty in the afternoon. Can you make those times?

If the time is agreeable, then move on to the next phase—detailed qualifications. There are two ways to approach these, by a written screener or by an open-ended interview. Let’s look at screeners first.

**Screeners**

The screener is a script that helps the recruiter apply the restrictions and classifiers of the profile systematically. With a screener, you go down the list of qualifications, ticking them off one by one as the candidate meets them, or terminating the interview if the candidate flunks a question. If you are nervous about steering an unscripted conversation, you should probably write and use a screener—at least for part of the conversation. If you work with a professional recruiter, you will almost certainly need to prepare one. You can get a good idea how screeners work by following the flow of questions in Figure 8 on the next page, which covers all the requirements we outlined earlier when we revised our bank web site profile.
Screener for an Online Banking Test

Hello, this is Will Schroeder from User Interface Engineering. I got your email—is this a good time to talk about taking part in a study?

I need to ask you a few questions to make sure that you match the study profile.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Instructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you own a home?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TERMINATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At which bank do you have a checking account?</td>
<td>Your bank</td>
<td>TERMINATE after 4 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other bank(s)</td>
<td>(same)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you do any of your banking online?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TERMINATE after 4 participants or skip next question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What sorts of banking do you do online? (Get a complete list and record it.)</td>
<td>Online bill pay</td>
<td>TERMINATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Anything else)</td>
<td>Continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many items have you purchased on the web?</td>
<td>Fewer than 3</td>
<td>TERMINATE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>Continue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you now have, or have you ever had, a second mortgage?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>TERMINATE after quota of 2 online users and 2 who do not bank online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>TERMINATE after quota of 2 online users and 2 who do not bank online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IF CANDIDATE QUALIFIES: That’s it for the questions. For a reimbursement of $100, would you be willing to come into our Middleton offices for a 90-minute interview the week of March 28 during business hours? A group working on a web site design that you can benefit from will appreciate your help.

IF YOU TERMINATE: Those are all the questions I have. Thank you very much.

Figure 8: This screener for a usability test makes interviewing systematic but inflexible.

Screeners get the job done, but they have drawbacks:

- They are inflexible. No matter how clear a question seems, misunderstandings happen. Since most responses are yes/no, they contain no clues as to whether the person has understood the question. Some candidates who should qualify, don’t—and vice versa. In a more open-ended format, you have many opportunities to confirm each piece of critical information.
• Unless the screener is carefully worded, candidates can often guess which yes/no answer is the “right” one. Those who really want to qualify sometimes bend the truth. In contrast, open-ended questions don’t telegraph the answer; candidates volunteer what they think is important, and you listen for the answers that will help you decide. (The answers will also reveal how well candidates express themselves.)

• Screeners are impersonal. Giving the candidate a series of gates to pass through is not the best way to begin the collegial relationship you want to have with session participants.

• The screening format sets up an “I ask, you answer” framework that tends to silence candidates. If you don’t give candidates a chance to speak their minds, you can’t tell if they are articulate, suitably motivated, and able to play well with others.

If you do use a screener, you can lessen these drawbacks by delivering it in a relaxed, friendly manner, and exploring some of the critical answers off-script. In other words, you should deliver the screener in the style of an open-ended interview.

**Open-Ended Interviews**

Open-ended interviews let you probe in ways that screeners don’t. They give you a better idea of whether the candidate possesses the right motivation and other personal qualities for the study. You can’t simply ask, “Are you articulate?” and expect a reliable answer—the candidate must demonstrate it. You can also get candidates to reveal information about their experience without your giving them cues that could influence their behavior in the session. Peter, for example, might look at the online bill payment section the night before the session if you tipped him off that it was on the test. (You would like participants to discover this service on their own, if they don’t already know about it.)

So we have two kinds of questions that are critical for qualification and don’t fit screeners well: the question that has no good answer if you ask it directly (“Are you articulate?”) and the question that has an answer you don’t want to give the candidate built into it (such as “Do you use online bill-paying?”). You have to manage the interview so that the candidate answers the questions without being directly asked. In other words, you have to steer the conversation and be patient. Sooner or later, you will hear everything you need to know. As Yogi Berra said, “You can observe a lot just by watching.”

In the open-ended interview, unlike the screener, the candidate does not always answer your key qualifying questions in the same sequence, as you will see in the following example. Just tick off points on your checklist as they come up. Figure 9 (page 24) records the highlights of Peter’s phone interview.

But don’t stop with filling in the blanks. Take reams of notes. One of our recruiters keeps all his notes on an ever-growing stack of five- by eight-inch index cards. When he is recruiting, he lays them out like a game of solitaire. Another recruiter keeps everything (every single detail) in a spreadsheet. When he starts working, he just sorts on
the appropriate column. You probably know already what the best way is for you to manage this information. Everything you learn about the candidate—the mundane as well as the extraordinary—will be of value to the person who runs the sessions. And it will certainly help you identify good candidates to use in the future.

In the conversation you have been pursuing with Peter, you need to qualify on two points you can’t address directly:

- You want to be sure that Peter will make an articulate and cooperative contributor to the session. Since this will require a great deal more than yes/no answers, you need to get Peter to talk, so you can hear him explain his thoughts and feelings, sense his level of enthusiasm for the session, and learn how he takes direction when you change the subject.

- You want to know whether he pays bills online (you are looking for two novices as well as seasoned online bill payers). If he doesn’t pay online, you don’t want to make him aware that you are interested in the issue, because observing whether Peter notices the option is part of your session design.

All you are going to do is get Peter to talk about himself, steer the conversation to the right topics, listen carefully, and evaluate his fitness on those points based on what he says (or doesn’t say). You make the first move:

You: If you don’t mind my asking, where do you have your checking and savings accounts?

Peter: Sovereign Bank.

Aha! Sovereign happens to be one of the competing banks in your study. This may or may not disqualify Peter—depending on what slots you have already filled—but you have given him no clue about the importance of his answer.

You: Remind me what you do with the bank online?

Peter: I check my balance and track my checks online—that’s all.

You: How does that work for you?

Peter: Pretty well. I can get on whenever I want and see which checks have cleared and how much is left. I hardly need to look at the statement when it comes at the end of the month.

You: Does the site offer any other services?

Peter: Oh, you bet. You can see on the home page that they let you do almost anything you can do at a bank—apply for mortgages and loans, get CDs, and all that stuff.

You: Have you ever looked into doing any of that online?

Candidates always seem to know the difference between “looked into” (meaning “done a little research”) and “thought about” (meaning “Has it entered your mind?”). “Looked into” will always yield an answer with the kind of concrete detail you are seeking—if Peter has any to offer.

Peter: Haven’t had the need for loans, thank goodness! I looked into buying a CD online. The procedure looks complicated, though. (Begins to describe it.)
Recruiting Call Checklist for Peter

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Write Down Before Call</th>
<th>Getting Started</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Name: Peter Camenzind</td>
<td>• Introduce yourself and call purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Email Address: <a href="mailto:poc@soominternet.com">poc@soominternet.com</a></td>
<td>• Tell candidate how you got their name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Where did you get their name? Hermann-Hesse</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Today’s Date: March 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Basic Screens (Candidate must pass these or jump to section 9)
- Meets requirements in contact email. (Verify conversationally)
- Is available for sessions and can make the trip.
- Understands what to expect and is eager to participate.

4. Specific Qualifications (Add any helpful notes)
- Depositor at Sovereign Bank. Owns home.
- Has a second mortgage - nervous about this type of process.
- Online deposit checking and checkbook tracking — no billpay.
- No detectable bias for or against web or brick & mortar.

5. General Quality of Participant (Candidate must pass these or jump to section 9)
- Explains well.
- Motivated.
- Flexible (takes conversational direction, accepts your definitions).
- Personable (responds to you as an individual).

6. Fits a Slot (Describe which part of the profile this participant fits)
- Depositor, Sovereign Bank, web use with second mortgage

7. If There Is an Open Slot for This Participant . . .
- Schedule the candidate. Write time and date here: March 29, 2pm
- Describe the forms you will send.
- Deliver forms by: □ Fax □ Email □ Postal mail
- Explain what participant is to do if they have questions.
- Instruct participant to fill out forms in advance of session.
- Get all contact information from participant in case of emergency. (Phone and email)
  - Cell: (781) 555 3219
  - Home: (617) 555 9328

8. If There Are No Open Slots . . .
- Inform participant.
- □ Can you call if there’s a cancellation? □ Yes □ No

9. If They Don’t Qualify . . .
- □ Would the participant be interested in future studies? □ Yes □ No

10. At the End of Every Recruiting Call
- Ask if they know anyone else who would like to take part in a session
- Record names and contact info:
  - Harry Haller, friends: (617) 555 8912
  - hhaller@soominternet.net
- Thank the candidate for their time.

11. After the Call (if the Candidate Qualifies)
- Record the session time and date on your calendar.
- Assign the participant an ID number:
  - U4
- Mark forms with participant’s ID number:
- □ Send out forms.

Figure 9: This is the same checklist as on page 19, here filled in with information we gleaned from our interview with Peter.

You consult your checklist—the second-mortgage issue remains open. You steer once again:

You: Have you ever done a big transaction at your branch bank?
Recruiting Without Fear: How to Find First-Rate Participants for Design Studies

Peter: Yes. I got a second mortgage about two years ago. I was a little nervous about all the details, so I went to the bank, sat down with the branch manager, and got it done. It was so easy. She even gave me a sheet of tips, which reminded me of things like the tax deduction on second mortgages.

Case closed. You have learned everything you need to know without revealing any part of your session agenda. The technique doesn’t always work so quickly, but it always works.

Filling the Slot
Scheduling the participants is the final step in qualification. Before offering them a slot, we make sure to inform them of any other requirements for participating. As we’ll explain shortly, you’ll probably be sending the participant some forms and questionnaires to fill out, and now’s the time to mention them. Participants can feel tricked if you schedule them first and then reveal all sorts of requirements.

It’s important to schedule qualifying candidates in the first call. Otherwise, you risk losing them. Candidates who can’t commit to a date and time after you have spent 20 minutes selling them on what is essentially an opportunity rather than a chore may never be able to nail down a time. Also, if you don’t know which slot a qualified participant is going to fill, scheduling others becomes more and more problematic.

Sometimes candidates will ask if they can change the time or date of a session for their convenience. Try to be nice about it, but don’t give in too easily. This is one person trying to change the time of a meeting already scheduled for many people. Not only does it mean lots of extra work for you, but the chances are the person will try the same trick again at least once before finally showing up.

In the present case, Peter agrees to be part of the 2:00 session on March 29. At this point, most of Peter’s checklist is complete. It’s time for the exit interview.

Exit Interview
Obviously, there are two exit interviews—one for those who qualify and one for those who don’t make the cut.

When candidates don’t qualify, always conclude on an up note. You can tell them it’s not that they failed; they just didn’t fit the requirements. If it makes any sense at all, you can even apologize because they are “overqualified.” And remember, you are responding to their email—they have already said they want to collaborate, so give them a way to do that. Ask them if they know others who might qualify and might like to participate (and don’t forget to pose the same question to those who do qualify). We give a small reward for successful referrals—a T-shirt, say, or a gift certificate to Amazon.com. And our gratitude. Never forget the personal thank you.

When candidates do qualify, you will want to add a few items to the checklist—more complete contact information (you may need to reach them on short notice) and the best way to deliver them your package of forms. And of course you should ask them to refer other suitable candidates. Finally, ask if they have any more questions about the session, then thank them. That’s it for the qualifying interview.
Time to file all you’ve learned about the candidate where you can find it to use for your next recruiting job.

**The Package of Forms**

Before you conduct the interviews, you’ll want to have a package of forms ready to send participants who qualify. Send off this package the moment you get off the phone (experience has taught us that participants need ample time to prepare forms in advance of the session). What forms do you need? Here’s what we recommend:

- Instruction letter. This gives the time and date of the session and directions to the session location. The letter also spells out what participants should do if they get lost or need to cancel, and what to wear (something casual and comfortable). A sample appears in Figure 10.

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**Figure 10: An example of the instruction letters we send to scheduled participants.**
Recruiting Without Fear:
How to Find First-Rate Participants for Design Studies

Introduction

You are participating in a study of peoples' ability to use computer systems. The study's purpose is to provide information to help make computer systems easier to use. In the study, we first ask for some background information, then ask you to perform some tasks with the system. The tasks have been designed to be interesting and pleasant to do. We are studying the ease of use of computer, not you.

All information we collect from you is confidential. We will use the information for statistical and summary purposes only and we will not associate your name with the data we collect.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no physical or psychological risks associated with the procedures of this study. During the session, the study administrator will assist you and answer any questions. You may stop your participation in the study at any time.

Statement of Informed Consent

I have read the description of the study and of my rights as a participant. I agree to participate in the study.

Initials: __________

Release

For consideration received and accepted herein, I hereby grant User Interface Engineering and its assignees ("Company") the irrevocable right to use my voice, image, and likeness for any Company business purpose, including but not limited to evaluation, product development, research, and training.

I warrant that I have the right to make the above-described grant.

Signature: __________  Date: __________

Figure 11: A sample consent and release form. We use this to ensure the participants know what to expect.

- Consent form. Working in front of observers, especially with products and concepts that are “under construction” can be stressful. The purpose of a consent form is to make sure participants know what to expect. They have the right to take a break at any time, or even withdraw from the session if that seems necessary. Our forms state this clearly, and ask participants to sign indicating that they have “read their rights.” A copy of our form is in Figure 11.
PRE-TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

We will keep this information strictly confidential.

1. Your household is a □ single person □ couple □ household with children

2. Ages of children: __________________________

3. What is your approximate household income (to the nearest $500)? ________

4. Highest level of education:
   □ High school □ Associate degree □ Bachelor's
   □ Graduate degree □ Technical/trade college

About Your Work:

5. What is your current (or most recent) job title? __________________________

6. Please describe your job responsibilities:

   ________________________________________________________________

   ________________________________________________________________

You and the Web:

7. What year did you begin using the web? ________ How often do you use the web? ________

8. What was the first browser you used? __________________________

9. How often do you go on the web each week at work? ______ For how long? ______
   (We are interested in sessions here—if you are connected all day, please count the number of
   times you actually go to the web to do something, breaking from other activities.)
   How often do you go on the web each week at home? ______ For how long? ______

   If you are unsure about how to answer these questions, email will@ui.e.com, and he'll help you get it
   right.

Figure 12: A sample background information form.

- Background information form. This form confirms that the participant meets the demographic or occupational requirements for the session, and collects information in greater detail than you had time for in the interview. A side benefit of this information (such as descriptions of job responsibilities) is that the user appears more three-dimensional to whoever reads the final report. Collecting this information in advance saves valuable session time.

   We’ve included a simple background form in Figure 12.
Send the following forms as the occasion warrants:

- Release form. If you are recording the session, you’ll need the participant’s permission to use the recording as data. We often include the release form with the consent form, as in Figure 11.
- Nondisclosure agreement. Include this only if it is absolutely necessary. It can scare people away.

Be sure the participant understands what to do with the package—we ask people to bring it to the session filled out, but you may wish to review it ahead of time. We also assign each participant a code (we gave Peter U4, for user 4), which we write on the forms so we can match them with the person who filled them out. When we later report our findings, the code enables us to keep participants’ identities confidential.

**Planning Your Recruiting Campaign**

Now that you know how to find and contact candidates, and how to qualify them, you must be thinking this is a heck of a large number of balls to keep in the air at one time. Here’s how to break the process down so you can keep control.

**How Many Recruiting Calls**

The first thing to decide is how many recruiting calls you can make in a day. Even after much experience, the most we can sustain day after day, with fresh repartee and unwavering attention to detail—which is what has to happen—is four. Fatigue can make you tired and impatient; we have lost candidates simply because we made one call too many. The sidebar “How Many Contacts Will You Need” (next page) will help you to calculate how many people you need to contact to ensure an adequate response.

If your soliciting email eliminates the most obvious misfits, such as people who won’t use their own credit card in an e-commerce study, then expect to schedule 40 to 60 percent of those who respond.

**When to Send Contact Emails**

In some ways, recruiting is like sales. Your contact email should get candidates interested in what you are doing—even excited about it. But if you generate excitement and expect it to pay off for you in the interview, you can’t let it die away. When candidates answer your contact email, they expect a speedy response.

We have two ways of dealing with this. Either we send out only as many emails as we can handle in the next several days (and send a few more each day to keep them coming) or we maintain a list of the responses and send a mass email every other day reporting on recruiting progress. Both approaches work well.

We send out the first set of emails two or three days before we plan to begin calling. The number we send out is usually about eight times the number of participants we aim to recruit. However many you need to send in total, don’t mail out more than 10 or 15 at once.
How Many Contacts Will You Need?

Over the years, we’ve worked out a formula for determining how big our list needs to be when we start sending out the contact emails:

\[ L_S = N_P \times E_R \times I_R \]

Where:

- \( L_S \) is the *List Size* you’ll need when you start recruiting for a study.
- \( N_P \) is the *Number of Participants* you want in the study.
- \( E_R \) is the *Email Response Rate* that you can expect, once the contact emails have been sent out.
- \( I_R \) is the *Interview Response Rate*, or the number of interviews you need to have to schedule a qualified participant.

When we’re starting a new project with a profile that’s unfamiliar, we assume that we’ll only get one person to reply out of every four that we contact; so that’s an \( E_R \) of 4. We also assume that, of every two people we interview, we will qualify and schedule only one; so that’s an \( I_R \) of 2.

With these assumptions, if we’re going to try to recruit eight participants for our study, we’ll calculate the list as:

\[ L_S = 8 \times 4 \times 2, \text{ or } L_S = 64. \]

So we’ll need to start with a list of 64 contacts to ensure we find the eight participants we need.

As you learn the idiosyncrasies of your own projects, you’ll get a better idea how many people will respond to emails and how many you’ll have to interview. Then you can substitute your own numbers in the formula.

From time to time, you will hit dry stretches, where you turn down several candidates in a row, and it will seem like your study is doomed and you are to blame. But the law of averages is on your side if you have planned your campaign carefully.

Don’t forget that the person who sits next to your candidate at work, or plays basketball with her on Thursday night, or is in the same car pool, could be just the person you are looking for. You should always ask for referrals, whether you qualify the candidate or not. Once we scheduled five participants with a single phone call—when we asked if the first guy knew anyone who might fit, he passed his cell phone from one co-worker to the next.
Recruiting Without Fear: How to Find First-Rate Participants for Design Studies

Figure 13: A day-by-day countdown to recruit eight study participants.

After a few days, tally the responses to your first couple of dozen emails. This gives you a clearer idea of how many contacts you should initiate to make three or four recruiting calls a day. Check to see that your lists and sources are long enough to
support this many feelers. Make a schedule for sending out batches of contact emails and stick to it.

Figure 13 is a day-by-day countdown for a campaign requiring eight participants.

**Following Through**

When you’ve filled the slots, your work is half done. It’s not over until all participants show up on time and ready to rock’n’roll.

**Checking In**

A week after scheduling, but some days in advance of each session, contact the participants again. See if they have questions about the forms or the details of the session. We’ve learned never to assume that we’ve made our instructions absolutely clear.

Discussing the content and questions on the forms ensures that the participant is clear on what you need, and builds rapport between the participant and the design team.

- Ask if the participant has read the release forms (and especially the NDA, if there is one) and is okay with it. If not, talk it through and explain any sticking points.
- Certain questions on your background form will confuse some participants no matter how often you rework the language. This call is a good time to deal with such issues.
- “Have you thought of anyone else who might like to do this session”—if you have unfilled slots—“or work with us some time in the future?” This question often generates valuable referrals.

But you have another reason for the check-in call. *This is a point where the timid think about backing out.* If they have doubts, deal with them now, while you have plenty of time to find replacements. The call—which can’t be rushed—will also strengthen rapport between the participant and the team, and can further stoke the person’s enthusiasm.

**The Reminder Call**

Follow the check-in call with a reminder call the day before the session. To avoid laying yourself open for a no-show, you should actually speak to the participant. Keep trying until you do. Don’t settle for leaving a message.

This call should be short and sweet. Remind participants of the test time, ask them if the directions are clear, and check to see that they have filled out the forms and will bring them along. Also, be sure to give participants a minute to think about whether they still have questions. Be brief, not brusque.
When the Participant Doesn’t Show

There are two kinds of no-shows. There is the kind where they call as soon as they decide they’re not coming. We call those cancellations. And there is the unforgivable kind—where we find ourselves ready to work and wondering how long we are going to wait before hanging it up. Let’s deal with that kind first.

If the participant has not appeared 10 minutes before the starting time, which is what we ask them to do, we start calling every number of theirs we have (and we usually have several, for that very reason). Nine times out of ten we reach them or learn that they are on their way. One time in ten we wake them up. In that case we negotiate a new start time.

If we can’t reach them, we decide how long we can wait before cutting our losses. Provided we have taken the time to prepare them properly and build a working relationship, they eventually arrive, embarrassed but ready to work.

Because of the way we recruit participants, cancellations—not no-shows—are the problem we confront most often.

When participants cancel, they generally have good reasons. It’s not because they don’t want to take part, but because something serious has come up—an illness, a blizzard, a car accident. If there is a slot open, we put them into it immediately. Otherwise we thank them and part on good terms. This leaves us with a slot to fill at the last minute.

How to Fill a Slot Fast

In such an emergency, instinct will urge you to schedule whomever you can yank off the sidewalk, and let the session facilitator bail you out. Before yielding to the pressure, there are much better alternatives to try.

To fill a slot that has suddenly opened, we quickly make calls in this order:

1. First, we call each participant who has committed to a slot farther in the future, starting with the last scheduled session. If someone agrees to reschedule, we are moving a fully qualified and prepared participant into the open slot. With the few days’ grace we have gained, we can then qualify and prepare a new participant for the later slot.

2. If the first strategy fails, we call every candidate who qualified but could make none of the times. Schedules change. Candidates sometimes regret saying no and change their minds. These participants are almost as valuable as the first set.

3. If the second strategy fails, we take another look at the candidates who didn’t quite qualify and ask ourselves, “With what we know now, could they provide a worthwhile session?” We may already have witnessed some sessions, so this can be a useful review.

If none of these pans out, it is too late to qualify new candidates for that particular slot, so we postpone. We reschedule as soon as we identify a qualified candidate.
**Self-Evaluation**

When all the sessions are over, you’ll need a way to measure how well you did your job as a recruiter. May we suggest drawing up a mental report card and rating yourself. Here’s how:

- If one or more sessions failed to materialize because participants didn’t show or couldn’t be recruited, don’t rate yourself; your process has a hole in it somewhere. You might know where it is already. If you don’t, likely trouble spots are:
  - Too few contact emails.
  - Scheduling participants who lack the proper motivation.
  - Too little follow-up with participants between the phone interview and the reminder call.

- If you filled every slot, give yourself honorable mention. This is a substantial accomplishment, especially for a first-time recruiter. (If all the sessions worked but there were a few empty seats, downgrade your performance to merely acceptable and review your process.)

- If every participant was on time with all forms correctly filled out and all preparation complete, you rate a pat on the back.

- If every participant was articulate and focused and brought the right experience to the session—and the facilitators, coordinators, and observers raved about how good the participants were—you are almost there. Magna cum laude.

- If, after every session, the design team can’t talk about anything except how helpful the results were, and how big a difference they are going to make in the success of the design—and they ignore your recruiting work completely—you have arrived. You are no longer part of the problem; you’re part of the solution. Give yourself top marks.

**For Next Time**

By the end of the study, you will have extracted a great deal of useful information about the qualifications of a host of candidates and participants, and learned even more about the participants by observing them. Saving as much of it as possible will help make recruiting easier next time.

If you want an even larger candidate pool for the future, make sure participants and reasonable candidates urge their friends to add themselves to your list. Follow up on all the referrals you got from the exit interviews and get them on a list for next time as well.

You can be sure of one thing: the second time will be easier. You’ll have candidates you can call right away. Because you’ve taken notes on candidates, you can begin to...
screen before you call, skipping people who would probably not fit the new profile. You now have a good idea how long it takes you to make a recruiting call and how many calls you should make to schedule the number of participants you need—so you can set your own timeline, modifying Figure 13 so it works better for you.

Finally, before you start calling again, take the time to reread the section headed “The Qualifying Interview” and note what worked for you and what didn’t. Candidates will respond even better as you become more comfortable interviewing.

Who knows? Now that you have gotten your feet wet, you might actually begin to enjoy recruiting the next time around.
The Tao of Recruiting

- Recruiting is easy if you keep track of the details.

- Most people *like* to participate in the design of web sites and other products. No one will think you’re a pest for trying to recruit them.

- The best recruiters enjoy human interaction.

- All study participants should have the right motivation (an interest in helping to improve a design), a desire to cooperate, and the ability to articulate their thoughts and experiences.

- The participant profile is the recruiter’s spec sheet. Every requirement should make the test results clearer and easier to interpret, and should use objective measures that allow the recruiter to readily determine if a candidate qualifies.

- Age restrictions on participants are generally not useful. Age doesn’t predict behavior.

- If members of your target market are difficult to schedule, start by recruiting surrogates—people who meet *some* of your requirements. Surrogates can uncover the major design flaws before you schedule bona-fide participants.

- You don’t have to make cold calls. Put the word out on your web site and among your friends that you’re looking for study participants—and let them come to you.

- Realtors can help you find good participants. They know who earns what, where they live, and what they own.

- After you’ve built a list of contacts, solicit people in batches small enough so you can reply immediately.

- When you talk with prospective participants, ask them for referrals.

- The phone is better than email for conducting a qualifying interview. It lets you tailor questions to candidates’ responses.

- Open-ended interviews work better than “screeners” (lists of prepared questions that put candidates through a series of gates). With screeners, candidates can often figure out the “right” answers, and they have less opportunity to show how well they express themselves.
When you talk with a candidate for a study, take *reams* of notes. Everything you learn about the candidate—the mundane as well as the extraordinary—will be of value to the person who runs the sessions.

- Explain all requirements—any forms or homework that need attending to—before scheduling a participant. Otherwise the candidate may feel tricked.

- Have candidates provide you with every phone number at which you can reach them.

- Send forms and instructions the moment you get off the phone from scheduling a candidate.

- Assume that a quarter of the people you solicit by email will respond and that half of those people will qualify for your study. In other words, contact eight times as many people as you need.

- Check in with the participant a week before the session. This is a good way to stoke participants’ enthusiasm and eliminate any confusion about the requirements.

- Give a reminder call the day before the session. Be sure to actually speak to the participant.

- You know you’ve succeeded as a recruiter if everyone raves about how well the sessions went and completely ignores the recruiting work you did.
About the Authors

Will Schroeder, Special Contributor
A former consultant at User Interface Engineering, Will specializes in project management, systems analysis, data analysis, and psychophysics. Before joining UIE, he worked for 17 years at Foster-Miller Inc., an engineering consulting firm. He has lectured at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in visual studies and environmental design.

Will has a Master of Business Administration degree from Babson College, a BET in Mechanical Engineering from Northeastern University, and a BA in English/Mathematics from Harvard College.

He currently serves as Principal Usability Specialist at The Mathworks, in Natick, Massachusetts.

David Brittan, Director of Publications (dbrittan@uie.com)
David Brittan is a journalist and editorial manager who specializes in bringing technical subjects to life for a wide audience. He has been an editor of such magazines as MIT’s Technology Review, IBM’s Think Research, and Issues in Science and Technology. His writing has appeared in New Scientist, The New Republic, Ed. (Harvard Graduate School of Education), Contract Professional, and many other publications.

Before entering journalism, David was an award-winning classical accordionist. He received a Bachelor of Music degree from San Diego State University and performed graduate studies in musicology at Harvard University.

Jared M. Spool, Founding Principal (jspool@uie.com)
If you’ve ever seen Jared speak about usability, you know that he’s probably the most effective, knowledgeable communicator on the subject today. What you probably don’t know is that he has guided the research agenda and built User Interface Engineering into the largest research organization of its kind in the world. He’s been working in the field of usability and design since 1978, before the term “usability” was ever associated with computers.

Jared spends his time working with the research teams at the company, helps clients understand how to solve their design problems, explains to reporters and industry analysts what the current state of design is all about, and is a top-rated speaker at more than 20 conferences every year. He is the conference chair and keynote speaker at the annual User Interface Conference, is on the faculty of the Tufts University Gordon Institute, and manages to squeeze in a fair amount of writing time.
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Company Background
User Interface Engineering is a leading research, training, and consulting firm specializing in web site and product usability. Jared M. Spool founded the company back in 1988 and has built User Interface Engineering into the largest research organization of its kind in the world. With our in-depth research findings based on user observation, we empower development teams to create usable web sites that increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Research
We conduct original research on all aspects of web site usability. In addition to our groundbreaking studies on the Scent of Information and Online Branding, we’ve identified best practices for creating e-commerce sites that increase bottom-line results.

Publications
If you are like every other web designer we’ve ever met, then you want to build the best possible sites you can. We’ve designed our UIE Reports to tell you everything we know about what it takes to create the best web sites.

Training Events
We offer the only research-driven, in-depth training courses designed to teach web designers exactly what it takes to build usable web sites and products. UIE offers training events designed for the entire development team. Topics cover how to design for web-site usability, designing for ROI, paper prototyping techniques, and tricks for including usability testing in the product design process. Events include:

**UIE Roadshow: Know Your Users—Denver, Washington DC, Seattle, and Minneapolis Winter, 2005**

When it comes to your users, do you really know what they want? Are you unsure whether you’re getting the most out of your user research? Many teams tell us they are missing key information to get into the mind of their users.

To answer these critical questions, we’ve found four of the world’s most renowned experts on delivering successful content: Kate Gomoll, Ellen Story, Kim Goodwin, and Ginny Redish. This winter, we’re bringing these four experts with us on the road for our third Roadshow, which we’re calling Know Your Users. In this 3-day event, you’ll have the opportunity to spend a full day with each presenter.
Recruiting Without Fear:
How to Find First-Rate Participants for Design Studies

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Program details available in April 2005
Take your organization’s web design and usability practices to the next level. At User Interface 10, the most knowledgeable experts we know will offer practical design tips. You'll spend four days learning advanced techniques from top design, information architecture, and usability experts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Write Down Before Call</th>
<th>Getting Started</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Today’s Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email Address:</td>
<td>Phone:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you get their name?</td>
<td>□ Introduce yourself and call purpose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Tell candidate how you got their name.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. **Basic Screens** *(Candidate must pass these or jump to section 9)*
   - Meets requirements in contact email. *(Verify conversationally.)*
   - Is available for sessions and can make the trip.
   - Understands what to expect and is eager to participate.

4. **Specific Qualifications** *(Add any helpful notes)*

5. **General Quality of Participant** *(Candidate must pass these or jump to section 9)*
   - Explains well.
   - Motivated.
   - Flexible *(takes conversational direction, accepts your definitions).*
   - Personable *(responds to you as an individual).*

6. **Fits a Slot** *(Describe which part of the profile this participant fits)*

7. **If There Is an Open Slot for This Participant . . .**
   - Schedule the candidate. Write time and date here: 
   - Describe the forms you will send.
   - Deliver forms by: □ Fax □ Email □ Postal mail
   - Explain what participant is to do if they have questions.
   - Instruct participant to fill out forms in advance of session.
   - Get all contact information from participant in case of emergency. *(Phone and email)*

8. **If There Are No Open Slots . . .**
   - Inform participant.
   - Can you call if there’s a cancellation? □ Yes □ No

9. **If They Don’t Qualify . . .**
   - Would the participant be interested in future studies? □ Yes □ No

10. **At the End of Every Recruiting Call**
    - Ask if they know anyone else who would like to take part in a session
    - Record names and contact info:
    - □ Thank the candidate for their time.

11. **After the Call** *(if the candidate qualifies)*
    - Record the session time and date on your calendar.
    - Assign the participant an ID number:
    - □ Mark forms with participant’s ID number.
    - □ Send out forms.