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Taking a HIT: Designing around Rejection, Mistrust, Risk, and Workers' Experiences in Amazon Mechanical Turk

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ABSTRACT

Online crowd labor markets often address issues of risk and mistrust between employers and employees from the employers' perspective, but less often from that of employees. Based on 437 comments posted by crowd workers (Turkers) on the Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) participation agreement, we identified *work rejection* as a major risk that Turkers experience. Unfair rejections can result from poorly-designed tasks, unclear instructions, technical errors, and malicious Requesters. Because the AMT policy and platform provide little recourse to Turkers, they adopt strategies to minimize risk: avoiding new and known bad Requesters, sharing information with other Turkers, and choosing low-risk tasks. Through a series of ideas inspired by these findings—including notifying Turkers and Requesters of a broken task, returning rejected work to Turkers for repair, and providing collective dispute resolution mechanisms—we argue that making reducing risk and building trust a first-class design goal can lead to solutions that improve outcomes around rejected work for all parties in online labor markets.

Author Keywords

Crowdsourcing; trust; risk management; design; rejection

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

On its ten-year anniversary in November 2015, Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) continues to thrive as an effective online labor market, but one that raises concerns about worker welfare. A layer of technology separates Amazon's crowd workers (Turkers) from the Requesters for whom they complete work. This separation makes it possible for Requesters to coordinate large crowd workforces, but it also means that each transaction with a worker is mostly anonymous [38, 34, 30], abstract [1, 3], and legally ambiguous [4, 16, 41]. These conditions raise concerns about fairness [27] and abuse [44].

These concerns are exacerbated by AMT's *hands-off* approach to the labor market. AMT's participation agreement[1] classifies Turkers as independent contractors, free to accept any task they qualify for (§3b). At the same time, Requesters have the right to reject a Turker's completed work without payment (§3a) while AMT, providing only the venue for an exchange (§2), is not involved in resolving any labor disputes (§3f). When a Turker's work is rejected, the result is lost pay, time, and reputation, and AMT's stance gives workers little recourse. These policies, and other aspects of the AMT platform we detail below, make the practice of crowd working risky.

In this paper, we focus on how Turkers manage the risks of rejected work. Based on 1,092 comments collected during an experiment asking Turkers to comment on Turker-relevant aspects of the AMT participation agreement, we identified 437 that dealt with challenges, experiences, and practices around the risk of work rejection. Although respondents realize that some work is legitimately rejected, many rejections are seen as unfair. Problems with task clarity, design, and implementation can lead to rejections; many rejections include little rationale; some rejections seem arbitrary or malicious. No matter what the reason, Requesters are often non-responsive to Turkers who question the rejections—a position they can adopt because of AMT's hands-off policy. These aspects of rejection lead to feelings of unfairness, to mistrust in Requesters and AMT, and to perceptions of AMT work as risky.

This, in turn, leads workers to adopt strategies to minimize risk: avoiding new and known bad Requesters, sharing information about their experiences with other Turkers, and choosing tasks with clear, concrete descriptions and evaluation criteria. These risk-averse strategies, though rational given the current structure of the market, affect both the kinds of problems AMT can solve and the quality of living and learning Turkers can gain. This in turn harms the long-term prospects for individual workers, Requesters, and the market as a whole to grow and innovate toward the "Future of Crowd Work" envisioned by Kittur et al. [29].

Our contribution is twofold. First, we present an empirical analysis of how AMT's design and policies affect Turkers'

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[1] https://www.mturk.com/mturk/conditionsofuse