Rationale for gift card incentives allowability

This rationale addresses the following concerns ETLS raised regarding providing incentives to participants:

1. The need for the information sought [via user research].
2. Why the incentives are necessary or will contribute materially to the accomplishment of the ARPA requirement.
3. Why paying each participant $50 is reasonable.
4. Ensuring that the agency and the Contracting Officer can track incentives.

The usability testing that we hope to conduct is a critical component of the project that cannot be satisfied via other research methods. Although the team is also conducting interviews with experts, they can only provide their perspectives on what users frequently struggle with. On the other hand, the individuals we would test with have experienced unemployment first-hand and can help us understand their mental models as well as how they read, interpret, and respond to user interfaces. This research will enable us to design and recommend solutions that directly address user needs.

Providing incentives to research participants will improve the quality of our research and mitigate equity concerns. The General Services Administration (GSA) notes that “paying incentives to test participants is standard practice in research and usability testing... Incentive payments help ensure people will take the time to travel to your office and give you 30, 60, or even 90 minutes of their time."[[1]](#footnote-1) The Technology Transformation Service (TTS) expands on how financial incentives improve the quality of research and address potential equity issues by enabling people from underserved communities to participate: “Offering compensation is critical to reaching the people most in need of government services. Without nominal compensation (or incentives), we're likely to hear only from the people who can afford to volunteer their time. Nominal compensation makes it easier to recruit participants, especially from underserved communities, and helps build trust that their input is valued.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The practice of providing incentives to participants is backed up by research: one meta-analysis conducted by the National Institute of Health (NIH) notes the positive impact of incentives on participant recruitment and retention, and data quality.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Additionally, providing incentives will enable the team to meet aggressive project timelines. This project terminates at the end of May 2024, and the latest the user research can be conducted is in March so that the team has time to create recommendations based on the findings. The Digital Services consulting firm Coforma states that “research teams can recruit participants more quickly with an incentive in place, allowing them to meet aggressive deadlines. Compensation also helps reduce ‘no-shows.’ Studies show that people who accept compensation take their appointments more seriously. Incentivized participation reduces the research team’s time spent rescheduling interviews or frantically recruiting more participants as deadlines approach.” [[4]](#footnote-4)

Finally, the team posits that an incentive of $50/hour is not only reasonable, but also at the lower end of the market rate for research studies. In 2022, the Technology Transformation Service set $75/hour as a starting point for compensation. 2020 research on third-party recruiters showed that the median range for incentives was between $50 and $70 an hour. [[5]](#footnote-5)

If the agency and CTR do proceed with providing financial incentives to participants, CTR will ensure that the incentive distribution is recorded and trackable. Incentives will be delivered to participants via email or text message (their choice). We will track and confirm that incentives are received by participants and provide this evidence to the agency.

1. <https://digital.gov/2016/02/10/paying-incentives-for-federal-user-research/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://handbook.tts.gsa.gov/18f/how-18f-works/research-guidelines/#should-i-compensate-research-participants> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9032371/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/4-reasons-government-should-compensate-user-research-participants-/?trackingId=s5SwT7GscTWKsHqY9aGn0A%3D%3D> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <https://handbook.tts.gsa.gov/18f/how-18f-works/research-guidelines/#how-much-compensation-should-i-offer> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)