

Research in the Workplace

An underlying principle of Federal regulations governing the use of human participants in research is that the subjects' participation is voluntary and is based on full and accurate information. Employee participation raises questions about the employee's free choice, even if it is only the employee's perception that this is the case. Employees are likely to view their employers as authority figures to whom they must show deference, which could undermine the freedom of their choice.

Federal guidelines require that investigators and IRBs must be vigilant about minimizing the possibility for coercion and undue influence. Coercion tends to be overt and therefore more easily identified. For example, an employee is told that refusal to participate may result in a loss of benefits. Undue influence can be subtle. For example, employees might feel pressure to participate in research if everyone else in the department is doing so.

IRB Guidelines for Workplace Research

In general, researchers should always take care to recruit participants from a broad base of individuals meeting the conditions for the study, and not recruit from any group solely on the basis of convenience. Recruitment of potential participants in the workplace must be designed to minimize the possibility of undue influence or coercion.

When studies propose recruiting in the workplace, research protocols must adequately address the following:

Consider displaying recruiting materials in the workplace where public announcements are permitted or using some other non-direct solicitation method of co-workers or subordinates.

Since workplace conditions may make it difficult for researchers to keep an individual's participation confidential, additional safeguards may be needed to protect the privacy of employees who are research participants.

If the research question under study could pose risks to employee-participants (for example, workplace activities, peer pressure, or a condition with an associated stigma) the steps that will be taken to

minimize risks must be stated. Consider conducting the research off-site and/or outside of regular work hours.

A description of how consent will be obtained from the employee, including specific protections for employee-participants' privacy and confidentiality, and acknowledgement of the limits of those protections in the consent form.

If research activities will take place during the regular work hours or using workplace facilities, a letter of permission must be obtained.