Diverse recruitment strategies are needed to reduce digital divide: results from a workshop addressing digital divide and effects of pandemic restrictions

Norwegian Centre for E-health Research

HELSE NORD

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Introduction

In digital health research, those who lack resources or interest to engage in their health, or are unable to use available technology and services, are often excluded. Research recruitment methods may be one reason that certain groups are "un-reached". This contributes to the "digital divide" [1]. COVID-19 pandemic restrictions further increased the digital divide and recruitment challenges.

Therefore, we need to be more creative in our recruitment methods and channels in order to engage those who are un-reached in digital health research.

Results

Seven researchers from five academic fields (mHealth, library sciences, mental health, psychology, business and computer science) participated. The results of the two discussion prompts are presented in (Figures 1 and 2):

Methods

Virtual peer workshop to discuss challenges of, and possible solutions for, recruitment of those who are usually un-reached by digital health studies, especially during COVID times.
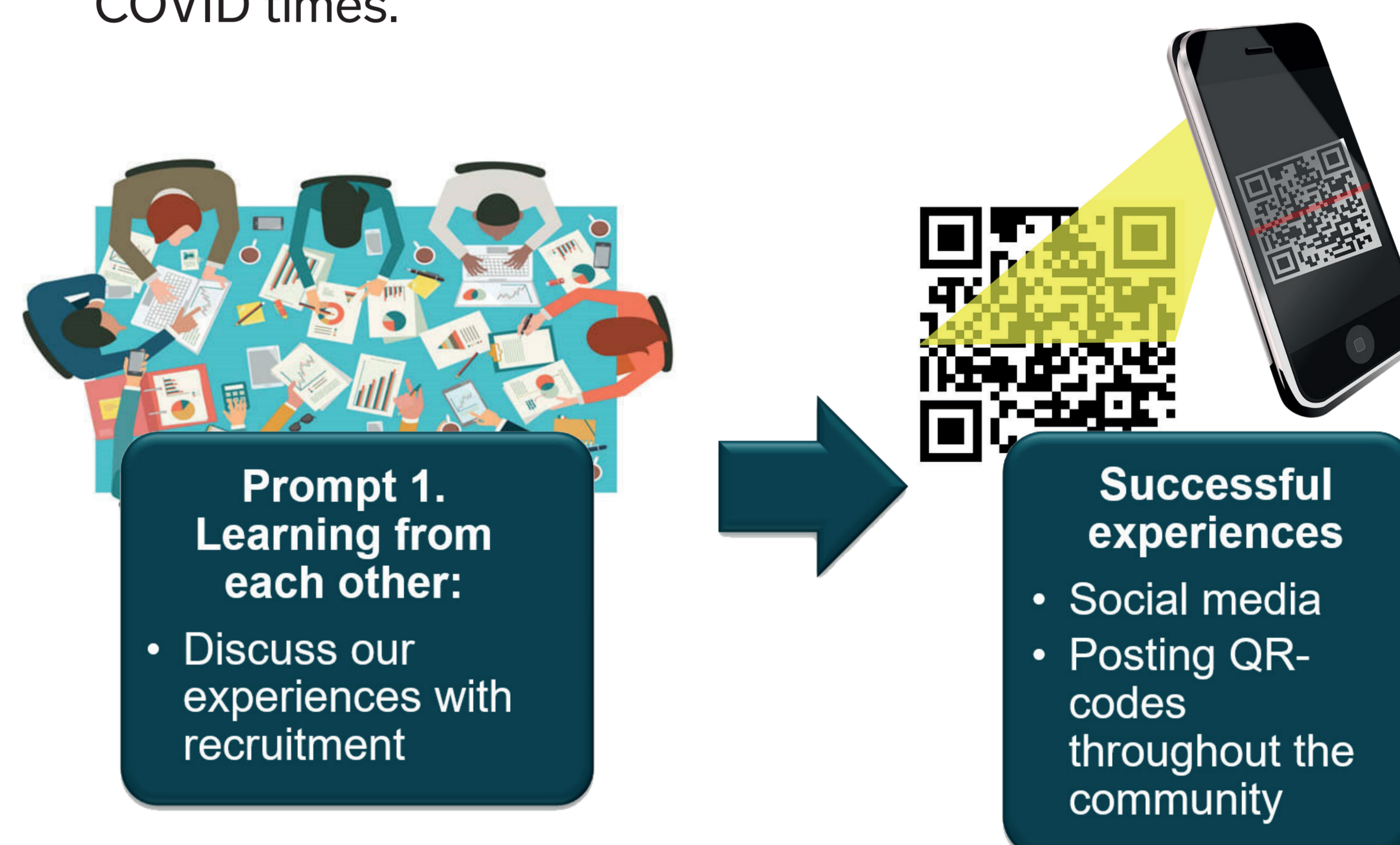

Prompt 1. Learning from each other:
• Discuss our experiences with recruitment

Successful experiences
• Social media
• Posting QR-codes throughout the community

Figure 1. Results of the first discussion prompt

Prompt 2. Problem solving:
• Discuss challenges and solutions to recruit a greater diversity of participants in research activities (especially during pandemic times)

Un-reached groups:
• Technology or health-management averse
• With substance abuse problems
• Without permanent homes
• With "alternative views" (e.g. conspiracy theorists)

Meet them → Where they are

Challenges to recruit: limited access to…
• Online recruitment
• Funds for mobile phone and data plans
• Ability to charge phone
• Personal security
• Correct information (misinformation fuels distrust)

Targeted recruitment channels:
• Churches
• Groceries
• Libraries
• Shelters
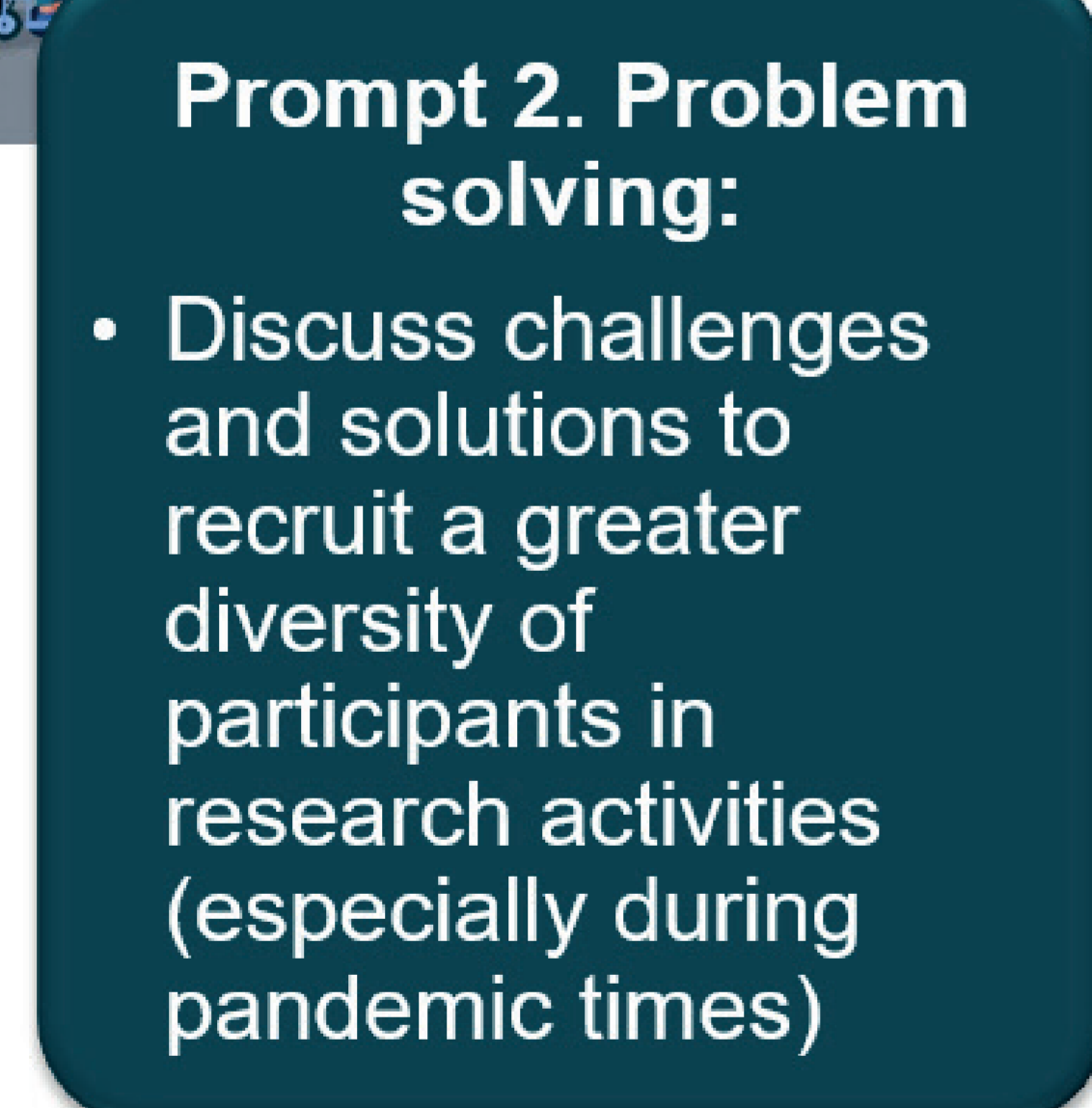• Closed Facebook groups for a specific groups' unique interests

Figure 2. Results of the second discussion prompt

Discussion

These solutions are not new. Simply not used often enough in digital health research. Even as pandemic restrictions are eased, we will continue to use the convenient online solutions that emerged in response to COVID. We must address this to avoid worsening the digital divide and lack of participation.

Conclusion

We as researchers have the opportunity and duty to adapt - to "go to the people" We would like to thank Helse Nord for funding these activities (HNF1444-19).