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Organizational Belonging In The New Economy

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Organizational Belonging In The New Economy

Abstract
This dissertation investigates the effects of new economy employment relationships like gig work and tech work on worker identification with their employer, operationalized here as “organizational belonging.” Ethnographic and interview methods in two settings – a tech startup referred to as Watermark and a gig economy platform called Instacart – were conducted to generate analyses on how workers and organizations collaborate to produce context-specific professional identities (or not). New economy employment relationships were found to have variable effects on worker identity. At Watermark, workers were offered a wide variety of mechanisms by which to self-identify with the company, but the company's culture strained to accommodate diverse viewpoints as the company grew. In contrast, Instacart workers experienced little organizational attachment. Work tasks were managed wholly by an ambiguous algorithmic management system, and workers often found themselves slung between the organizational logics of their digital employer and the brick and mortar grocery stores where their work took place. In response to turn-of-the-century concerns about whether individuals can sustain robust identities without close ties to organizations, this dissertation suggests that 1) organizational belonging is a non-binary phenomenon, impacted both by organizational practices and by individual work history, and 2) not everyone seeks to be identified with their work.

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ABSTRACT

ORGANIZATIONAL BELONGING IN THE NEW ECONOMY

Chelsea Wahl

David Grazian

This dissertation investigates the effects of new economy employment relationships like gig work and tech work on worker identification with their employer, operationalized here as “organizational belonging.” Ethnographic and interview methods in two settings – a tech startup referred to as Watermark and a gig economy platform called Instacart – were conducted to generate analyses on how workers and organizations collaborate to produce context-specific professional identities (or not). New economy employment relationships were found to have variable effects on worker identity. At Watermark, workers were offered a wide variety of mechanisms by which to self-identify with the company, but the company’s culture strained to accommodate diverse viewpoints as the company grew. In contrast, Instacart workers experienced little organizational attachment. Work tasks were managed wholly by an ambiguous algorithmic management system, and workers often found themselves slung between the organizational logics of their digital employer and the brick and mortar grocery stores where their work took place. In response to turn-of-the-century concerns about whether individuals can sustain robust identities without close ties to organizations, this dissertation suggests that 1) organizational belonging is a non-binary phenomenon, impacted both by organizational
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Chapter 1: Introduction: Organizational Belonging in the New Economy

This project emerged from a theoretical interest in the relationship between work and identity in the new economy, which is characterized by a deregulated labor market, increased global competition, and more flexible work arrangements like contracting, all of which create an increasingly precarious position for workers (Kalleberg 2009). In particular, this dissertation investigates the effects of new economy employment relationships on worker identification with their employer, operationalized here as “organizational belonging.” I first became interested in the idea of organizational belonging when I head a Penn undergraduate say, after they had attended a recruitment event for Dropbox, a file hosting service and technology company, “I feel like I’m a Dropbox person.” This struck me as quaint, given the macro-level changes to work in the United States which have led many to feel weary of aligning themselves too closely with an organization that might not have their best interest at heart. But it also indicated that a sense of belonging and identity at work is culturally resonant among those entering the workforce, even as work arrangements change. Along with other scholars of organizational sociology, this work suggests the continued relevance of organizational studies even as employment relationships shift in the new economy (Grothe-Hammer and Kohl 2020).

A key characteristic of the new economy is the use of rapidly evolving digital technology to structure work tasks and employment relationships. While concerns about
the effects of emerging technologies on workers’ livelihoods has raged for hundreds of years (see Frey 2019), recent qualitative studies have revealed a wide range of dynamics in which people exert control over or buffer the effects of technology in the workplace (Christin 2017, Shestakofsky 2017, Ticona 2015). On the other hand, “just in time” technologies and scheduling techniques in the trucking industry contribute to over-work and other dangerous work conditions that plague an industry that is simultaneously reviled and economically critical (Snyder 2016, Viscelli 2017). This dissertation focuses less on the degree to which technology does or does not control workers, and more on the influence of that it can have on the production of organizational or work-based identity in the new economy.

Because emerging technologies impact work for knowledge producers and wage laborers alike, this dissertation takes a distinctive approach to studying organizational belonging in the new economy by comparing two different workplaces: a tech startup that I refer to as Watermark and a gig economy platform called Instacart. A key difference between tech companies and the gig economy is that while tech workers are typically closely enmeshed within the organization that employs them (Turco 2016), gig economy platforms act more like middlemen for the exchange of services and payment (Schor and Attwood-Charles 2016). In this dissertation, I present ethnographic data on these two workplaces to better understand how workers relate to organizations in the new economy. While these workplaces are not necessarily generalizable, they represent two emerging archetypes in the new economy – the startup and the gig.
A question this dissertation asks is, how do evolving digital technologies structure work in the new economy, and what implications do these new arrangements have for worker identity? By comparing two distinct cases, I argue that a key element for identity is a sense of belonging within an organization, and that organizational belonging may vary in the new economy depending on which side of the income spectrum you are looking at and on the employment relationship. The degree to which someone can craft their identity in contemporary workplaces may depend upon the degree to which that workplaces offers them the expressive tools to feel that they matter and that they belong. I argue that organizations play an important role in shaping opportunities for positive identification among workers, and that digital technology can modify those opportunities in important ways.

**Organizational belonging**

This dissertation is motivated by a concept I refer to as “organizational belonging,” which has theoretical roots in both sociology and management literatures. To foreground my research in those broader traditions, I will review how macro-level changes have driven a reconfiguration of work in the 21st century, leading scholars to question and investigate the nature of the relationship between individuals and the organizations who employ them. This section will close with my research questions.

Toward the end of the 20th century, broad economic restructuring transformed the typical white-collar employment relationship from one characterized by security to one characterized by market-driven insecurity (Cappelli 1999). Among sociologists and other
scholars, there was concern about how individuals would craft meaningful identities without ties to organizations. The centrality of organizations for our work and for ourselves in the United States was obvious in titles like *The Organization Man* (1956) and *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977). The idea that organizations are like our family, or an authoritarian parent on which one depends completely was one that was borne out in the post-WWII proliferation of high-quality, white collar jobs, strong unions, and a boomtime economy that encouraged new business ventures (Kalleberg 2000).

As the ties between organizations and their employees became looser and looser with the rise of contingent work (Kalleberg 2009), the expansion of global markets, and decreased worker protections, some scholars feared that a more impersonal relationship with organizations would lead to negative outcomes for workers, specifically, a loss of positive identity and greater economic risk (Edwards 1979, Sennett 1999). Changes in the American labor economy hold heady implications for modern identities. In contrast to the image of white-collar workers in full-time, lifelong careers described by C. Wright Mills (1951), many Americans now work in a context that is contingent, or otherwise precarious. Many available jobs in the United States are part-time or short-term, and even in prestigious fields like science and technology, contractors make up about 20% of the workforce (Kalleberg 2009, Cappelli and Keller 2012). Organizations are no longer able to guarantee benefits or retirement to the degree that they once were, and lifelong appointments have disappeared from all but a small handful of industries and professions (Smith 1997).
As a result of the decline in job security, workers are increasingly told to think of themselves as entrepreneurs, and their skillset as a self-contained business (Kunda and Van Maanen 1999, Gershon 2017). This can lead workers to take greater risks than they would in a more secure labor market, and to accept job insecurity as a result of personal failures (Smith 2001, Neff 2012). Some have described this as a breakdown of Fordism, the system of capitalism in which employers offered good, stable jobs and in return, workers offered their life-long loyalty and commitment (Sallaz 2015). Collectively, this restructuring of work and opportunity has been referred to as the “new” economy (see Grazian 2019).

Emerging technologies play an important role in the new economy, especially in fields where technology is both the means and the ends of the labor process. White collar workplaces where expert professional build digital products, often colloquially referred to as tech companies, often bestow upon their employees a “cool” or intellectually prestigious identity (Neff et al. 2005). In a sweeping study of changes in work ideologies and organizational practices in the new economy, Vicki Smith interviewed temporary employees at a high-tech software company, CompTech (2001). Unlike CompTech’s full-time staff, the temps did not have access to the benefits of secure employment. However, seemingly paradoxically, the temporary employees were deeply committed to their work at CompTech, and most hoped that by working hard and showing commitment, they would be offered full-time positions at the company. Temporary work was for them a “proving ground” for a potential future at the company, and being associated with CompTech’s knowledge base and prestige – even on a contingent basis –
was a source of pride. This suggests that feelings pride in one’s professional position may depend as much on symbolic incentives as they do on financial ones.

A feeling of personal identification with work or an organization is a common feature of workers at digital companies. In her study of a social media company, Catherine Turco spoke with many workers, especially young ones, who felt that their employer, TechCo, mimicked important elements of their own identity (2016). Emma, who worked in customer support at TechCo, had first learned about the company when she saw that a friend from college had taken a position there via the professional networking website LinkedIn. She then checked out the company’s other social media pages, including Facebook and Twitter. She reported that she “fell in love” with the company’s self-presentation, and told Turco, “it just seemed like a place I had to work” (2016:19). The capacity for “cool” organizations and occupations to inspire commitment can lead individuals to undertake greater risk than they ordinarily would (Neff et al. 2005). Especially for the generation of workers finding their way in the new economy, increased precarity and instability have made work that is risky but offers high status seem like a rational choice (Neff 2012). “Cool jobs in hot industries” may influence workers to trade some measure of job security in exchange for a more desirable self-presentation.

Another recent development in American work has been the rise of the gig economy. Gig economy platforms are on-demand labor arrangements which have become endemic to the service sector, particularly in American cities. Because this work
is on-demand, workers can choose when they want to work, providing autonomy in a wage band that includes retail and food service work, jobs that rarely provide choice over one’s schedule. Uber is perhaps the most notorious of these platforms, but the economic arrangement by which consumers can use their smart phone to summon the labor or capital of another person instantaneously has also sprung up around hotels and lodging (Airbnb), odd jobs (Fiverr and TaskRabbit), and food delivery (Caviar, Grubhub).

The expansion of the gig economy in the past decade reflects an increasing trend toward work precarity and flexibility, creating series of marketplaces that connect largely non-professional individuals as “sellers” and “buyers.” A report by JP Morgan Chase based on a sample of its users showed that participation in labor platforms like TaskRabbit was most common among those with the highest income volatility (2016). Thus, gig work – especially those gigs that require only labor and not capital, such as owning a car – is performed most by the most economically insecure. The proliferation of the gig economy reflects ongoing economic instability in the United States, especially among poor Americans. Gig economy platforms are most used in the western United States, especially in the Bay Area, but many are active across urban areas. Because gig economy workers function more like independent contractors than employees, gig labor offers corporate employers an obvious advantage over more traditional employment by obviating the need to provide benefits.

However, the gig economy is not a monolith of risky work. Gig work can be risky for workers since it is often based on contract employment, which lacks the protections
and benefits associated with regular employment, and because they cannot negotiate the terms of their labor. However, as of 2020, Instacart commands a workforce made up of both contractors and employees, the latter of whom are protected by federal and state labor laws and guaranteed an hourly rate of pay. Instacart’s duality of employing both independent contractors and employees within the same organization underscores the variety of gig economy platforms. There is significant cross-platform variation, and platforms contain significant internal variation over time (Griesbach et al. 2019, Schor and Attwood-Charles 2016).

While gig work can provide value to workers seeking to set their own schedules, it may also pose a challenge to the formation of worker identity since organizations like Instacart have far fewer obligations to their workers than companies like Kodak or Xerox did in their heyday (Leidner 2006). Work remains a critical source of identity formation, and scholars in organizational behavior agree that a sense of membership among organizational members is a critical component of the relationship between individuals and their employers (Masterson and Stamper 2003). Thus, I focus on the concept of “organizational belonging” to investigate the relationship between employment relationships and identity in the new economy.

Organizational belonging is a felt sense of membership that stems both from structural arrangements within an organization, as well as reflects individual work history and values. It reflects the emotional tenor of an employment relationship. Organizational belonging is sometimes referred to as organizational identification, a literature that
focuses on the degree to which employers seek to create a relationship with individual workers’ self-concept to secure commitment (Pratt 2000). Belonging, then, depends partly upon the symbolic and expressive tools that a job or work arrangement provides, and some work arrangements provide more tools than others. An example of an expressive tool is something like business cards, Slack profiles, a directory, an ID card, a uniform. Not all expressive tools express in the same way: a work uniform signifies high assimilation in an employment relationship, but it is constraining. In contrast, a no-collar workplace like a startup company often has no dress code whatsoever (although norms of dress arise, especially for women). In still other cases, like the American military, uniforms denote distinction and command respect in public places. Occupational dress is an expressive tool that varies depending on how it is deployed.

Likewise, not all workers in the same organizational context will feel the same sense of belonging. Organizational scholars have argued that meaning-making or “social valuing” on the part of workers can help us better understand how workers derive a sense of self from work that may be socially discredited (Dutton et al. 2016). This perspective emphasizes the interactional and organizational processes through which workers construct meaning or identity. It also indicates that workers’ perception of themselves and of their employer is important to consider when investigating belonging.

Organizational belonging also has important implications for inclusion and workplace equity. Previous work on the concept of belonging in an organization has showed that organizational practices may inclusive or exclusive depending on context
(Bryer 2019). My research will also investigate the degree to which organizational belonging overlaps with inclusion along gendered lines.

My approach focuses not on how organizations actively manage worker identity but on how varying conditions of employment relationships favored by certain types of organizations do or do not encourage a sense of identification or belonging among their workforce. As my research on Instacart will illustrate, not all organizations or employers seek to foster identification among workers. My focus bridges the gap between individuals and organizations, and asks how a sense of belonging is accomplished in the liminal space where organizations and individuals – with their professional values, preferences, and histories – meet.

This dissertation forges a new path by comparing two new economy work arrangements that have strikingly different implications for selfhood. While gig economy work lacks many of the social antecedents identified by organizational behavior scholars as critical for meaning-making – such as interaction with coworkers and managers (Dutton et al. 2016) or occupational community (Salancik and Pfeffer 1978, Schwartz 2018) – knowledge work in tech companies is often a site of intense identity construction (Smith 2001, Turco 2016). I propose that comparing these two diverging cases may throw into sharper relief the conditions and consequences of organizational belonging in the new economy.¹

¹ This approach is inspired by comparative qualitative field methods, as outlined by Bechky and O’Mahony (2015).
What are the identity stakes in the new economy? Richard Sennett asks the same question in a different way: “How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?” (1999:26) This dissertation suggests and addresses three key questions:

1. Are organizational supports critical for identity? Is disconnection from one’s employing organization necessarily problematic, or can work be equally dignified under new structural conditions?

2. How is organizational belonging “accomplished” by organizations and their members?

3. How does organizational belonging relate to inclusion in the workplace, more generally?

**Studying Work in the New Economy**

This dissertation is based on two separate ethnographies of work. The first, based on a digital startup company that I call Watermark, illustrates a “no collar” workplace where highly educated technologists worked on digital design projects (Ross. Work hours were flexible, and elements of leisure like video games and beer kegs permeated the office. The second focused on Instacart, a grocery delivery service in the gig economy. Instacart shoppers worked out of grocery stores and out of their cars to shop for and deliver grocery stores to customers. Their work was managed by algorithms within a mobile application on their smart phone. Many of them worked long, hard hours in
isolation. Workers in both settings strived to do a good job. But while Watermark staffers logged long hours in air-conditioned, industrial loft spaces, with a complimentary coffee beside their computer, Instacart shoppers dodged customers at busy grocery stores, wore their sneakers down to the soles over miles of linoleum flooring, and often went without meals or bathroom breaks to keep up with their algorithmic boss. Both workplaces incorporated emerging technologies like mobile apps, but while Watermark staff were creating apps, Instacart shoppers were working for one. Technological tools at work produce different results depending on their context, and I will argue, depending on the degree to which workers feel that they belong within the organization that employs them.

I will address the details of each ethnography in the sections that follow. In both settings, I conducted between 100 and 200 hours of fieldwork and supplemented observations with interviews. Except for Instacart and the store where I conducted my Instacart fieldwork, names of individuals and organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms.²

Watermark

Watermark was a relatively small digital design firm, located on the outskirts of a large Northeastern U.S. city, that employed fifty-four full-time staffers and had been operating for about eight years at the time of this research. I first visited Watermark in March of 2015. When I arrived at its sunny, open offices to meet Molly, a manager at the company, I wasn’t sure I was in a workplace. To my left, just past the entrance, there was

² Instacart would have been difficult to obscure, and unlike with Watermark, no one who works for Instacart’s core operations is implicated by my research.
a squat table covered with magazines and awards garnered by the company. Standing opposite the table, a full-sized arcade game bearing the text “Golden Tee” stood against the wall. The game screen blinked with top scores, superimposed over a digital simulation of a golf course seen from the air. Straight ahead, two men in sweatshirts sat at a long picnic table working on Apple laptops, bent forward in concentration. Beside them, a ping-pong table was doubling as an impromptu conference table as two men, standing, talked over a computer. The entire space was swathed in mid-morning sunlight that came in through giant windows on the far wall. Perhaps the most jarring feature for an outsider was the lack of a front desk, or any other symbol of a place through which to enter: I had stepped through the door, and directly into the inner sanctum of the office. Molly led me on a tour of the office, pointing out the brightly colored conference rooms, aptly titled “Green,” “Blue,” and “Pink”; the wall-height mural in the offices across the street, reading “Play Hard, Work Hard” in scrawling, graphic script; the keg installed in the kitchen. Watermark’s offices signified a workplace that fuses productivity with leisure.

Watermark is best thought of as a small contracting body hired by banks, universities, or pharmaceutical companies to design digital products like applications, websites, and other internet software. The central operations at Watermark were completed by the design department, which is responsible for designing digital products; Molly described designer output as “the core of the product.” Unlike traditional contractors, Watermark staff work together in teams at their own office, rather than
dispatching individual staff members to be on site with clients. The company was made up of five departments: design, development, research, engagement, and operations.

Watermark was a relatively youthful company, with staff ranging from ages 21 to 47, and an average age of 33. All employees except three were White at the time of this research. Almost all employees had at least a bachelor’s degree, and a handful had advanced degrees including MBAs and PhDs. Although male employees made up 61% of the overall staff, they constituted 75% of management (including the three company owners and two managing directors) and 75% of department directors. While most departments at Watermark had two directors, the design department had six, all of whom were male.

Watermark was growing quickly: in the year before my ethnography, the owners hired more than fourteen new full-time staff members. The company experienced 30% employee growth every year for five years, a figure of which the owners were very proud. Hiring occurred on an as-needed basis, to keep up with the work Watermark is contracted for; if a long-term client requested a project that demands more than their existing development staff can provide, for example, Watermark would hire another developer. Successful completion of a project usually led to more work from the client. In this way, staff and work, or “projects,” increased in tandem. As I will illustrate in chapter 2, this model of growth tended to result in unexpected cultural impacts in the workplace, since growth occurred as a consequence of the firm’s normal operations.
I gathered qualitative data at Watermark in two phases. The first, from March to August of 2015, involved in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation of company-wide events that were generally “public,” or large enough that my presence wasn’t noticeable. This included all-company meetings, happy hours, and team meetings. I was at the offices two or three times a week, usually for five hours at a time. After a couple months, I took on an unpaid support role within the research department to better understand their work. My duties included administrative tasks like taking notes at meetings, researching competitor design work, and accompanying the research team on client site visits. The second phase of research began again in January of 2016, after Watermark was acquired by a large consulting firm. I continued observations and interviews through August. Because employees at Watermark generally work by themselves at their laptops, in relative isolation, eating lunch with the staff was a crucial part of my observations. Lunch was the most frequent site of informal banter, which was often revealing. I ate lunch at the long, reclaimed wood picnic table in the common space every day. Sometimes I walked to a nearby café or restaurant with other employees to pick food up. Generally, if people were going to get lunch, I tagged along. In total, I completed 56 interviews with 37 employees (19 were interviewed in both waves) and logged about 300 hours of observation.

Watermark was a site of high organizational belonging and membership. Watermark workers were happy to be associated and identified with their employer, with a few exceptions. They were provided with an unbelievable array of technologically-mediated tools of positive self-expression, from the avatars of themselves they could
choose on internal communication tools to the selection of music that played over the office speakers. When I first started my observations there, I was sent an enormous PDF document that was a highly detailed seating chart, with each person’s name and photo in black and white superimposed over a graphical map of the office. The location and importance of Watermark staff members within the organization was unambiguous.

Instacart

Instacart is a gig economy platform founded in 2012 that provides on-demand, same-day grocery delivery. Instacart operates in many cities in the United States and Canada. Customers can order groceries from a local store on their phone or computer and get them delivered for a fee within 2 hours. Instacart employs “shoppers” who work in the store for set shifts of time, during which they receive orders from Instacart customers that then get sent to their personal phone. In-store shoppers then act like surrogate shoppers, picking up everything on the order and checking out like a regular customer, paying with a credit card from Instacart pre-loaded with the amount of money required for the order. Instacart’s value proposition for grocery stores is to increase their revenue by getting more groceries to customers, quicker. Instacart, in turn, benefits from its
access to grocery store facilities and profits from surcharges on grocery items, as well as delivery and membership fees.³

Apoorva Mehta, the founder and CEO of Instacart, had the idea for the platform at age 23, living in San Francisco.⁴ He was frustrated that there wasn’t an easier way for people like him, an urbanite without a car, to get groceries. Like many Silicon Valley CEOs, Mehta had tried his hand at a few ventures before he struck gold with Instacart. Instacart capitalizes on a bifurcation of the American labor market: jobs can be generally categorized into categories of “good” and “bad” jobs.⁵ “Good jobs” offer high wages, employment stability, opportunities for advancement, and substantial benefits, while “bad jobs” provide low or inconsistent pay, temporary or contract-based employment, few fringe benefits, and high turnover (Doeringer and Piore 1971). Instacart fits neatly into a work world divided into over-worked and highly-paid white collar employees, who readily take advantage of services that eliminate quotidian chores like grocery shopping, and over-worked, underpaid service workers whose work is to hustle on behalf of those paying for the service. Instacart was born partly out of a search for convenience, and it advertises that same convenience to its workforce by allowing Instacart workers to choose their own hours. Instacart is thus able to advertise itself both as a time-saving service for customers and an ideal labor-creating platform for job-seekers.

³ There are few reputable sources to verify Instacart’s business model, but mountains of tech blogs assert that this is Instacart’s model (often with copy/pasted text). Comparing those posts with news articles, the experience of interviewees, and my experience lead me to believe that this is a fair representation of Instacart’s business model. For an example of one such blog post, see Feedough 2018.
⁴ Huet and Chapman, “Instacart’s Frantic Dash from Grocery App to Essential Service,” 2020
⁵ This is also known as dual labor market theory, which was originally formulated by Doeringer and Piore 1971. See also Kalleberg 2011.
Instacart employs two kinds of workers: in-store shoppers and full-service shoppers. Full-service shoppers are independent contractors, and they both shop and drive for Instacart. Their workflow process begins with receiving an order to their phone, which prompts them to drive to a nearby store, “pick” the requested order, and the process ends when they leave the order at the customer’s house. “Picking” is a word Instacart shoppers often use to describe the process of shopping for customer groceries. All Instacart shoppers were full-service until they introduced the in-store shopper role in 2015. In-store shoppers are Instacart employees whose work is localized to one store; they arrive to the store when their shift starts and leave the store when their shift ends. Their workflow process begins when they receive an order to their phone in the store where they work; they get all the items in the order, check out, and then “stage” the order for pickup by a full-service shopper. Thus, this new role expanded the full-service role to include picking up already-completed orders to deliver to the customer. This process is referred to internally as the handoff model. A critical difference between full-service and in-store shoppers is that in-store shoppers are W2 employees who are protected by state and federal labor laws.

The process of picking groceries for customers entails finding the desired item, scanning its barcode using the Instashopper app, and then placing it in a bag in the cart. In this way, Instacart shoppers need only touch an item once: because the barcode has been scanned into their phone, when they arrive at checkout, rather than placing all their items on the conveyer belt, they simply present their phone to the cashier who uses a handheld scanner to “ring up” all the items in the order. After checking out, Instacart
shoppers head back to the staging area. At my store, this area was at the end of a long line of checkout aisles, nestled among the pet food. The staging area contains storage for grocery orders, a filing cabinet, a tall storage cabinet, and a small printer that created stickers for the orders; the entire area stands against a wall, and takes up about the same amount of floor space as a large sofa. Staging is a process whereby all bags of groceries in an order are given a sticker that bears the customers last name and placed in the appropriate storage area. For example, bags containing dry goods were placed on a tall set of metal shelves, cold items were placed in large refrigerators, and hot items were placed in an insulated bag at the bottom of the metal shelves. Once all bags have been stickered and placed, their shelf location must be entered into the app so that the full-service shopper who comes to pick up the order knows where to look for them.

Like many of its gig economy peers, Instacart uses an app to supervise its legion of workers rather than employing managers. While most low-wage workers have coworkers and managers, gig economy workers rarely have either. Instead, algorithms housed in mobile applications match workers with customers, guide them through their assigned tasks, and present them with feedback and customer ratings. Instacart operates through two related but distinct mobile applications. One, an app called “Instacart,” is used by customers to order groceries. The other, an app called “Instashopper,” is used by Instacart employees to complete basic job tasks like accessing customer orders, scanning grocery item barcodes, checking out, and staging completed orders. The Instashopper app also contains the digital pathways by which shoppers set their schedule availability, access online help forums, and view their earnings. Because
the mobile app contains services that are typically the province of HR or management in brick-and-mortar workplaces, the Instashopper app is a critical (and sometimes singular) job resource for Instacart shoppers. Put simply, the app is not just instrumental to the job, it contains the job. While working without human managerial oversight is something many gig workers enjoy, the mobile app that directs their work can often feel arbitrary or incompetent, directing workers to operate in nonintuitive ways. This results in a work experience that generates autonomy and constraint in almost equal measure.

A significant component of Instacart work is making replacements for requested items that may be out of stock or unavailable at the store. Instacart shoppers are discouraged from simply refunding an out-of-stock item to the customer because it drives down Instacart’s profits. They discourage shoppers by sending notifications reading, “Are you sure? Our customers strongly prefer replacements over refunds” when you attempt to refund an item in the app. Further, rate of shopper-driven returns (or SDR) were one of the metrics used to measure performance at the store where I worked. If a customer requested a refund, it would not impact a shopper’s rate of return, but if the shopper refunded the customer without asking them, it increased their SDR rate.

Managing work algorithmically rather than via human manages benefits platforms like Instacart in at least two obvious ways. First, it precludes the staffing of an entire organizational layer of workers: managers. Though Instacart has employed managerial employees at earlier points in its history, many managerial positions have been phased out or are inconsistently held. One of my interviewees, Jake, had worked for Instacart in
Denver in 2016 with hopes of becoming a regional manager, but the managers were let go en masse before he could rise to their ranks – the removal of this hope for upward mobility through Instacart led to Jake seeking a new position with Postmates. When I was hired as an in-store shopper in 2018, I was interviewed and trained by someone who was employed as an area shift lead, but she left her job a week after I started. A new shift lead was hired a few weeks before I quit, but most of my work at Instacart was free of any human supervision. A few of my interviewees reported undergoing algorithmic job training for Instacart through the app on their phones and never meeting a supervisor or shift lead at all. Managerial positions at Instacart seemed tenuous and inconsistently held; the app was clearly designed to bear the bulk of the managerial work.

Second, algorithmic management facilitates hiring new workers. When I began work for Instacart, I Googled “working for Instacart” and found the Instacart Shopper landing page, which cheerfully suggested, “get paid to shop!” The banner shown below, found on the Instacart website, advertises the perks of being an Instacart shopper, all of which are common tropes used by gig economy platforms in order to attract workers (Rosenblat 2018): assisting others, flexibility, and autonomy.
I was prompted to enter my name, email address, phone number, and zip code. Once I had done that, the next page showed me available jobs near my zip code. I chose an in-store shopping job at a Wegmans store in the suburbs of Philadelphia. Then, I was sent an email that prompted me to choose from a number of appointments for my in-person interview. The email arranging my interview congratulated me for “making it to the last round of the application process,” though only fifteen minutes had passed since I had sat down at my computer to sign up for this job.

Instacart bears resemblance to other gig economy platforms, but the ways in which it is different warrant attention. Specifically: 1) Instacart work resists clear categorization or understanding because a) it employs part-time employees in addition to independent contractors, and this fact is consistently downplayed in the press. It matters because employees and independent contractors experience different challenges at work. And b) the app changes so frequently that workers in the same position 6 months apart can have had dramatically different employment relationships. 2) because it closely
partners with brick and mortar stores, Instacart puts its workers in an unusual
organizational position that has not been sufficiently studied.

My ethnographic data on Instacart is drawn primarily through four months of
ethnographic participant observation. I worked at a Wegmans store outside of
Philadelphia for about 10 hours per week, with shifts ranging from 3 to 6 hours in length.
Ethnographic data are buttressed by a small interview sample of six Instacart shoppers.
This collection of perspectives is critically important to my study. They serve as
important empirical counterpoints to the particularity of my experience. Though working
for Instacart is the same in most locations, it has varied greatly over time. I am indebted
to my interviewees for illustrating what my own ethnography could not: that longitudinal
variability in the employment relationship is a critical source of precarity for Instacart
workers. The richness of the small number of interviews conducted on this topic suggest
that a full-fledged interview study of Instacart shoppers would be a welcome addition to
ongoing gig economy scholarship. In total, I conducted six interviews and logged 100
hours of participant observation.

In stark contrast to Watermark employees, Instacart shoppers had very few
avenues of positive self-identification with their employer. The Instacart shoppers I spoke
with did not feel a positive identity association with Instacart, with one exception. The
app used to organize Instacart was purely managerial and contained no community
aspect, so the job presented workers with few symbols or rituals of positive identification.
This was compounded by relatively low or inconsistent pay. Instacart shoppers had no
way of knowing their organizational location – most met a few other shoppers during their time at Instacart, but some never met a single person during the job. Others had met area managers or shift leads, but had no sense of an organization chart, or who oversaw the app that directed their work. There was a felt sense among Instacart shoppers of impermanence.

Mine is one of the first ethnographic accounts of working in on-demand grocery delivery. The ethnographic perspective is a critical tool for understanding platform labor because the work is generally fast-paced, undignified, and lonely. Even for experienced gig workers, it can be difficult to convey in great detail what goes on when working for an app like Instacart or Uber. Events that are important for understanding one’s position happen quickly and in a haze of hurry. While most of my interviewees were able to recall some specific events from their time working with Instacart, they frequently responded to my questions with only vague details, often ending by saying, “I don’t remember,” with a tone of voice that implies that they didn’t care to remember, either. It was only through doing the work myself, and jotting down as much as I could between orders, that I was able to learn how Instacart’s managerial algorithms are able to elicit labor, and the conditions under which that labor becomes exceptionally strained.

To show how Watermark and Instacart fit into a larger organizational ecosystem, Figure 2 illustrates some new economy employment relationships where one might find high levels of organizational belonging, arranged by the relative income workers might

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6 I can say from experience that the last thing an Instacart shopper would like to do after a long shift is write about what happened.
expect in those employment relationships. Watermark was a site of high organizational belonging, and the technologists who worked there could expect relatively high salaries. Entry-level designers were offered salaries between $65,000 and $70,000, and senior designers made well over six figures. In contrast, Instacart shoppers I spoke with earned less than $50,000 per year while working for the platform, and most were working other jobs, as well, which indicates that Instacart made up only a portion of their yearly earnings.

Figure 10: New economy employment relationships with higher and lower levels of organizational belonging by income

7 These figures were shared by individual Watermark staff members. I was discouraged from asking about salaries in my interviews by the staff member who facilitated my study, but on a few occasions, staff members would share salary information with me of their own accord.

8 See Appendix for more information about Instacart interviewee incomes.
Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation will focus on two work worlds that offer very different levels of organizational belonging. As a small startup company built around a group of friends, Watermark offered its workers a high degree of organizational belonging. Belonging was explicit, as when staff members designed a wall mural with their names on it for the company’s new office space. They had a handbook that clearly illustrated the organization’s structure. They had a high-resolution digital seating chart that was created to scale and had every employee’s photo posted above the icon of their desk. Watermark employees were seen precious members of the group. Owners cried and threw tantrums when employees quit or were fired. In the office bathroom, there were towels and toiletries in case employees wanted to shower after running or biking in to work.

As I show in chapter two, a high degree of organizational belonging among workers was accompanied by resistance to change. Watermark was growing quickly at the time of my research, and its hip, anti-corporate culture – established by a core group of men – was struggling to remain salient as the organization became more formalized. Though nearly all Watermark members spoke highly of their employer and were happy to be identified with it, the founding culture of the company was hyper-masculine and made women in the office feel unwelcome or unimportant. This chapter sheds light on the challenges of maintaining democratic office cultures in high-paying startup work.

On the other hand, shoppers who work for Instacart experience a comparatively low level of organizational belonging. Instacart shoppers are unable to locate themselves in a larger organizational structure, aware only that there are other shoppers, there may be
an area shift lead or manager, and maybe that there is a CEO who works in San Francisco. Instacart shoppers often worked alone, managed by the app on their phone, and some never met any coworkers or peers. Organizational processes were obscure to Instacart shoppers. They had inconsistent access to a bathroom. As an indicator of how little Instacart shoppers are immersed in the organization, when it was time for me to end my ethnography and quit the job, I didn’t know how; I did a Google search for “how to quit Instacart.” One of my interviewees simply stopped signing up for shifts. Instacart shoppers are such tenuous members of the organization that employs them that the company does not even know if they are there or not. Shoppers were, to the organization, anonymous and interchangeable – if one Instacart shopper did not accept an order, another one would.

Chapters three and four consider the organizational position of Instacart shoppers. Chapter three addresses a common claim about gig economy work, which is that it is despotic or tyrannical in nature (Griesbach et al. 2019, Rosenblat 2018). In these accounts, work is governed by faceless algorithms (even when facilitated by humans), resulting in non-negotiable decisions about tasks and punishments – the work relationships seems “without regard for persons” (Weber 1946). While my work experience with Instacart was almost entirely managed by a disembodied algorithm, managerial dictums were not accompanied by any meaningful penalty or reward, which eventually rendered those dictums toothless. Further, Instacart’s algorithms often seemed to have poor inputs. Thus, I argue that Instacart’s brand of algorithmic management generates ambiguity more than it generates despotism.
Chapter four addresses the question, how does Instacart interlock with grocery stores in ways that tell us something new about the gig economy? Unlike most of its gig economy peers, Instacart’s business model relies on close partnerships with brick and mortar retail stores. Platforms like Uber and TaskRabbit feature peer-to-peer transactions and marketplaces; no organization other than the platform is directly implicated in the service. Instacart’s most similar peers in the gig economy are food delivery platforms like Caviar, GrubHub, and UberEats, whose workers must go into restaurants and interact with food workers in order to deliver the service. However, a GrubHub delivery driver is likely to only spend a few minutes inside a retail location picking up food that was ordered. In contrast, Instacart shoppers – even those who spend a significant amount of their working time in their car, delivering groceries – must use the grocery store in the same way any other customer would in order to do carry out job tasks. Thus, while most platforms ask workers to render a service for a paying customer, on no other platform are workers so indistinguishable from their service recipients. Instacart shoppers encounter the same struggles or irritations that an average customer might, but their earnings depend on navigating around them. Instacart produced for its workers an ambiguous role within the various organizations they interacted with, and placed them in an organizationally liminal space I call “no man’s land.” To conclude, I will revisit the research questions posed at the beginning of this chapter I will also discuss the implications of my research for the concept of organizational belonging, as well as suggest avenues for future study.
Chapter 1 References


Chapter 2: Growing Pains: How Organizational Tastes are Instituted and Disputed at a Digital Startup Company

In this chapter, I will illustrate how Watermark, a small digital design company, created a organizational identity based on the tastes and preferences of its founding members. I will then illustrate how those identity claims became challenged as the company grew and began to resemble a “real” company. My research offers a unique account of how nascent companies deal with the growing pains associated with running a business. A key characteristic of Watermark at the time of this research was that very few of the normal changes that occur within profit-seeking organizations – turnover, succession of leadership, acquisition – had not happened yet. While most organizations or groups have ready-made plans of action to employ during times of turmoil, Watermark and its leadership had none (Summers-Effler 2010).

At the time of this research, Watermark was at an unusual juncture. Having been operated successfully for eight years, it was not quite a startup anymore; owners got offended when people referred to the company as such, because they felt it made Watermark seem illegitimate. But, unlike most large corporations, Watermark had not undergone any succession of leadership. The men who founded the company, and the group of friends they recruited to help get it off the ground, were still at the helm. In firms that are run by their founders, how does growth impact interpersonal relationships at work? Or, what happens when a startup becomes a “real company?”

At their outset, startups have a social structure that more resembles a small group than an organization. Though a small group structure offers advantages, like quick
decision-making, small groups do not have ready-made action plans for events that organizations typically experience, such as growing, losing a member, or in the case of tech companies, undergoing corporate acquisition. This means that early members have a strong impact on how the organization makes decisions and self-identifies, whether they are aware of it or not. The first images and artifacts are the ones that stick – in this case, narratives about being “family” and an affinity for leisure activities in the workplace became hallmarks of Watermark’s organizational identity. As the group became more like an organization their members became more diverse in their tastes and values. The original frame strained against the group’s evolving reality. New generations of organization members brought with them different values and expectations. Jane Dutton and Janet Dukerich have proposed the idea of a mirror into which organizational members look in order to evaluate how they feel about their role in their organization (1991). When the founding members of Watermark held up the mirror, they saw an innovative, forward-thinking organization, in part because they compared it to their own work histories and self-image. But when newer members held up the mirror, they saw something stagnant and myopic. As new members began to outnumber old ones, the company’s most bedrock elements of identity started to lose resonance.

Senior members of the organization had worked to create a “hip” workplace by explicitly eschewing “corporate” norms and symbols but this was tantamount to a kind of conservativism because it mirrored the organizational and personal tastes of the founders. Members outside of the core founders and their direct networks – having different work histories, interests, and values at work – often felt isolated from the most high-status
members of the group. They were more likely to clash with the values of the founders that had been instantiated in the company’s culture.

Companies like Watermark can develop a highly detailed self-image via digital technologies, which make employer branding easy and affordable to accomplish. Because companies like Watermark engage in similarly conspicuous self-branding, we can assume that Watermark’s employer branding is partially an effort to claim legitimacy as a digital startup (Meyer and Rowan 1977). But I argue that Watermark’s efforts at branding themselves is more than just institutional isomorphism. For Watermark founders, constructing a corporate self-image based on the idea that the company is a family accomplishes building a culture that is contrast to one they experienced previously. It also can be used to elicit higher levels of dedication from employees. All companies project an identity, whether they intend it or not – the self-image that Watermark leadership chose for themselves was that of a family.

But not everyone had equal say in how the company’s identity would be created. Watermark’s key cultural artifacts were the ones that had been established at the start of the company’s life, meaning that members who arrived after the company’s first few years of operation were effectively unable to create or weigh in on important aspects of Watermark’s identity. For as much as founding members emphasized the importance of transparency and community, Watermark’s culture was established from the top down, with little to no input from anyone after the first ten employees. The senior members of the organization had the most power to create and maintain organizational culture. This had particularly noticeable effects on the gender dynamic of the company; a company
culture established by men need not be hyper-masculine in a way that makes women feel excluded, but this one did. Further, an organizational identity that reflected only a small proportion of its members’ values and preferences made change difficult. As Gioia and collaborators have pointed out, a fluid organizational identity can help companies navigate change because fluid identities are adaptive to changing conditions (2000). An inflexible and traditionalist frame for Watermark’s identity made it challenging for the young company to adapt and grow.

Throughout this chapter, I refer to the people who worked at Watermark either as employees (unless they are one of the three founders), staffers, or members. All descriptions of events are from my field notes. Names, ages, genders, and positions of Watermark staff members mentioned in this chapter, as well as methodological reflections, are provided in the appendix.

The Looking Glass Company

At Watermark, a great deal of time and energy was spent by members on visual representations of the company. The rise of social media and expansions in digital technology allow individuals and groups to “see” themselves in increasingly new ways. One mechanism by which organization perform their identity is through employer branding, the name given to the large and small ways that companies self-brand (Lievens and Slaughter 2016). This includes having consistent branding elements throughout all company artifacts, and the production of goods like coasters, umbrellas, or apparel that
shows the company’s name and logo. Many aspects of organizational identity are visual, and as a design firm, Watermark was especially focused on visual representations of the company.

For example, many staffers in Watermark’s creative teams spent working hours on “internal projects” that were largely employer branding efforts, serving only to sustain the company’s image to itself. In preparation for Watermark’s yearly St. Patrick’s Day bowling tournament, a member of the design team, Rosie, volunteered to create a digital image to be printed on t-shirts that the company was having made for the event. However, another member of the design team, Brett, decided that he wanted to create the design, too. The two argued over who would create the design for a couple days until Rosie capitulated, not wanting to compete over a t-shirt logo. Adrien, a developer at Watermark, also served as the staff photographer, and “worked” almost all company events taking photos of other staffers looking happy and engaged, at panels, conferences, and year-end picnics. His photos were then used on the website to go along with staff-penned blog posts about company culture, or on the company’s Twitter page. Bugs on the Watermark website were a common topic of discussion on the company’s Slack channels, taking up hours of developers’ time to edit their code and ensure the website looked perfect on any screen. The organization’s identity – both visual and cognitive – was critically important to Watermark members.

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9 Slack is an instant messaging platform used in many workplaces as a supplement to email. Slack filed for IPO in April of 2019, and at that time, the service was being used by 10 million daily users, across more than 6,000 organizations, in over 150 countries.
On one Tuesday during my field work, Watermark held a panel at their offices that was open to the public. The purpose of the panel was to showcase a mobile app that two Watermark staffers had developed in advance of an upcoming local election: the app showed users which candidates were running, their major platform issues, and nearby polling locations. Joe, a researcher at Watermark who I became friends with, had hinted to me earlier in the day that the event would be purely to “showboat” the company, so I knew I had to be there. When I arrived for the panel at around 5:45, the offices were buzzing with activity. Joe ushered me toward a table covered in food catered by a nearby farm-to-table restaurant, featuring a variety of hummus, tapenades, and charcuterie. He also showed me to a cooler full of ice and bottles of beer. I passed by Chris, a senior member of the research team who was presenting on the panel, and by way of greeting me, he raised his eyebrows and said, “Ready for the big show?” I surveyed the room – of the thirty people in attendance, only about ten were not Watermark staff members.

At 6 PM, Mark, head of sales, started the event. He welcomed everyone to the panel, thanked the nearby restaurant that had catered the event, and then clapped his hands together and said, “uh, we have openings!” Some staff members emitted a quick chuckle, and Mark mentioned that Watermark was looking to hire more designers. He then pointed to the screen behind him, which displayed the guest WiFi password and hashtags that had been created for the event. Tweets with these hashtags, he explained, would show up on the wall above the stairs to his right, where a projector displayed a
scrolling Twitter feed exclusive to those hashtags. Mark introduced the panelists: two Watermark members who created the app, Chris and Dan, a local policy analyst, and a staffer from the local city commissioner’s office. There was polite applause for each panelist – Chris even clapped for himself – and when Mark announced himself as the moderator, there was loud clapping and whoops from the Watermark staff.

Chris began the presentation on how the idea for the app came about. Dan, on the other side of the panel, sipped a beer while Chris presented. His jokes earned laugh-groans from the audience; at one point he said, “America is one of the most technologically advanced countries, perhaps in the universe.” The doors and windows on the west side of the room were open, letting in cool, almost summery air and the last light of the day. Dan said his piece about designing the app, saying things like, “We really went clear blue sky with our concepts, y'know, how far can we push this?” All throughout the presentation, while Chris and Dan used a PowerPoint to supplement their presentation, the Twitter feed featuring the event’s bespoke hashtags scrolled on the wall beside them. The wall projection was enormous, covering a space of at least 25 square feet of the exposed brick wall. Most of the Tweets that placidly scrolled by came from Jesse, one of Watermark’s founders who was in attendance. Other Tweets showed photos – Adrien was in the audience with his DSLR camera, capturing the event. The digital photos Adrien posted of the room had a yellow-gray tone that paled in comparison to the golden late-afternoon light we were actually sitting in. Watching the Twitter feed, I had the odd sensation of watching the event I was attending being recreated digitally right in
front of my eyes, seemingly only for the benefit of the gathered audience, which was itself made up almost entirely of employees of the company that was being advertised.

Watermark had a looking glass company culture: their rituals and artifacts were carefully designed to portray their desired appearance to others, but mostly to themselves. Charles Cooley’s concept of “the looking-glass self” is a founding idea of the symbolic interactionist perspective in sociology; it suggests that we evaluate ourselves based on the perceptions we give off to others (although we may rarely, if ever, have access to the actual perceptions that others have of us) (1922). Thus, identities are flexible constructions that are produced through interaction. We partially construct our identity based on the images of ourselves that we see others reflect back to us. It is as if every person is holding up a small mirror and we want to like what we see in the reflection. I argue that Cooley’s concept of identity can be fruitfully applied to organizations to understand the identity-sustaining function of some rituals and artifacts.

However, unlike in Cooley’s formulation, there are many individuals involved in the production of an organizational self-image. Especially in small startup companies, where the line between social movement and organization is thin, the actions of individual organization members can quickly rise up to the level of organizational behavior.10 Thus, the behavior and preferences of a small but powerful section of a group can come to represent the whole. As Dutton and Dukerich have argued, we “might better

10 Randy Collins once remarked to me that many things (companies, clubs, groups) resemble social movements when they are just getting started.
understand how organizations behave by asking where individuals look, what they see, and whether or not they like the reflection in the mirror.” (1991:551) The remainder of this chapter will examine how Watermark staff dealt a decoupling of the company’s proclaimed identity from the day-to-day functioning of a growing company, reconciling their own feelings about the company with what they saw in the organizational mirror.

**Family Matters**

A common identity claim put forward by high-status members of Watermark was that the company was like a family. However, this claim was often challenged by the realities of operating a growing company. Though profit and growth are the de facto goals of any company, they must be carefully balanced with company culture. This is especially true for high-tech startup companies, who often rely on their “company culture” to attract and retain talented employees (Turco 2016). In this section, I will illustrate the tightly knit personal and professional networks through which Watermark was founded. Then, I will show how the normal growth of Watermark as a service agency created structural conditions that threatened its identity as a “family.”

In many ways, but in not so many words, Watermark’s organizational culture was a direct repudiation of classic bureaucracy. Like many of its peer companies, Watermark was a no-collar utopia (Ross 2003). There was no dress code. Employees enjoyed unlimited vacation days, flex time, and the freedom to work from home whenever they
liked. There was a beer keg in the kitchen. Unlike bureaucratic offices, which can be held by almost anyone and thus render individual office-holders replaceable, Watermark’s founders were more like folk heroes. Behind each of their desks, a zoomed-in, hyper-realistic painting of their faces was hung, as if to more concretely fuse their identities with the company. The symbolic function of infusing leisure in new economy workplaces has been taken up repeatedly in sociology as well as management, most notably by Catherine Turco (2016). As Turco explains, high-tech startup companies like Watermark set out to build workplaces that improve on their corporate predecessors, often by purposefully eschewing characteristics of bureaucratic organizations. While companies like Watermark and Turco’s TechCo are not able to entirely do away with bureaucracy, they can successfully create new organizational forms that are radically different from that which came before.

Another major distinction between the operations of nascent startups and bureaucracies is the mode by which appointments are made. Relationships among group members in startups resemble honorific arrangements, the chaotic counterpoint to bureaucratic appointments. Honorific arrangements, “less bound to schemata and being more formless,” are more personal but less efficient than bureaucratic ones, since they allow for appointments based on personal characteristics. This, Weber writes, can be their downfall: “work organized by collegiate bodies causes friction and delay and requires compromises between colliding interests and views” (1958:214).
However, for the first few years of its operation, honorific arrangements produced success for Watermark. While Watermark was founded by one person, George, the early staff was made up of close friends and coworkers. This group of male professionals shaped the norms that characterized the young company for years. George started the company that became Watermark as a solo venture between jobs, working for a client that he’d met while with his previous employer, a pharmaceutical company. After completing a few successful projects, George realized he would need help to keep the business solvent. To support his fledgling company, George recruited Ted, an old co-worker and friend, over a leisurely game of golf. As Ted tells it,

“George and I were golfing one day and I said, how are things going? And he said, really well, they’re actually really busy. I half-jokingly but mostly seriously said, do you need some help? And he said, actually, I do. And that started about three months of strategic discussion around starting our own company.”

Ted is passionate, career-minded, and covered in tattoos; his signature accessory is a huge, silver wristwatch. He speaks with obvious affection for the company; I witnessed him crying at multiple staff meetings where big announcements were made, and while the staff sometimes joked about it, they took it as a sign that Ted really cared about them. A couple years after Ted was hired, the pair reached out to Jesse, a designer from the same previous workplace, and brought him on as a third owner. The next seven hires, over the next two years, were all friends of the owners from that same digital design agency, slowly recruited to Watermark as their non-competes expired.11 In fact, the co-owners of

11 A “non-compete,” or non-compete clause (NCC), refers to a clause of an employment contract in which an employee agrees not to enter into a similar position with a competing employer for a certain amount
Watermark didn’t hire someone from outside their personal, professional network for the first four years and ten employees of its operation.

Ted explained that hiring people who were both trusted friends and previous co-workers was a risk-minimizing strategy. When I asked how the early company was staffed, he responded, “[We hired from] our network of coworkers… we were trying to limit our risk. That was really a comfort level of not bringing people in early on that we didn’t know personally, and know professionally.” This hiring style represents a kind of “mutual recruitment,” which typically results in quicker integration of new employees and increased productivity (Zelizer 2011, 251). Further, there was significant financial incentive for Watermark staff to refer their friends or old coworkers to the company in the form of a $3,000 referral bonus.

Watermark and its identity were constructed in direct reference to a shared work history among founding members. While early hires may have been attracted to working for George, Ted, and Jesse, they were more powerfully repelled by common, negative experiences while working for their former employer. Many colloquially referred to this other design firm as “the Death Star,” a reference to the spacecraft belonging to the villainous Darth Vader of the Star Wars fantasy film series. Staff who had worked at “the Death Star” recounted long days, hard work, and a corporate environment where work-
life balance was not a priority. Those who left that oppressive work environment were like white collar expats, in search of a more supportive employer. Ted, George, and Jesse had created a firm in direct opposition to “the Death Star,” which attracted many of its survivors. Tommy, a 35-year-old design director, said that the previous firm was “like a churn and burn shop, they work you to death.” Mike, another design director at Watermark, said that working there was “so awful that it was a little like being gone at war with people. You feel like you survived something traumatic and awful.” Founders and early hires at Watermark sought to establish a workplace in opposition to their previous professional experience. Most were senior in their field, and almost all had just begun raising children. Watermark, then, was a place they hoped to lay down roots.

Indeed, in its early years, Watermark functioned more like a home or a clubhouse than an office. George, Ted, Jesse, Mike, and Tommy all described working short hours in George’s house, often taking breaks to play video games or go golf. They would begin and end their workday whenever they pleased. Sheepishly, Mike told me, “I almost felt like I had no job.” Tommy and Ted provided similar accounts when I asked them to describe what it was like working at the young company:

“I would come into the office around 9 o’clock and we worked ‘til about 11:30, 12 o’clock, all my work would be done, and we’d play video games for a few hours and go home. It was very laidback.” – Tommy

12 These descriptions are borrowed from my interviewees. Since I did not do research at “the Death Star,” I can’t make any claims about its culture apart from the reports provided to me. I mention it here to highlight that the differences between the two firms were salient for my respondents.
“We sat at George’s kitchen table. It was like, if we want to go play golf, we
go play golf. If we want to work until 11 o’clock, we work until 11 o’clock. It
almost didn’t feel real.” – Ted

Ted added, as an afterthought, that work “almost felt like college.” Penny, a project
manager and one of the first women hired, recalled during our interview with an air of
fatigue, “When I first started here, we played beer pong regularly.” Watermark resembled
a real company, given that people came together and completed work for a profit, but it
also resembled a home, given the close relationships among the small group and the
leisurely nature of the environment.

Emerging or nascent companies must choose their organizational plan or
“blueprint” carefully at the outset, because the risks of changing that plan can be costly.
Baron, Hannan, and Burton argue that changes in “organizational blueprints,” or the
logics by which the organizations are run, result in higher employee turnover, which in
turn negatively impacts revenue (2001). The paper makes use of an unusually rich
dataset, the Stanford Project on Emerging Companies (SPEC), which tracked the
progress of over one hundred young companies in Silicon Valley in the 1990’s. The
authors identify four types of discrete organizational blueprints, and illustrate how
changing between “blueprints” is sometimes necessary, but always results in increased
attrition and decreased revenue. Given the disruptive impact of shifting organizational
blueprints on employee turnover, Baron et al. conclude that “origins matter” (2001:1009).

Once a blueprint, or organizational plan, gets implemented, it is costly and risky to
change it.
Watermark closely resembled the commitment model identified by Baron et al., drawing heavily on “family imagery” (2001). Early employees and cofounders frequently referred to the company as a family, and while they earned a salary there, they did not see their position there as economic. For example, Tommy explained his relationship to his coworkers by saying, “It’s like a family to me. To me, it’s not even a job.” Maureen, George’s wife, oversaw the company’s administrative operations. After helping her husband manage the company behind the scenes for the first few years of its operation, she left her job at another firm’s human resources department for a position at Watermark in the first few years of its operation. Energetic and stylish, Maureen held close relationships with Ted and Jesse, whom she calls “the guys.” She reflected that while she is a professional, Watermark’s founding staff seemingly transformed into an extension of her family. Being able to provide for her “family” was what made work meaningful:

“We always thought of the guys as family, so the reward [of my job at Watermark] was taking care of my family. I was definitely one of those people who tried to keep things business, but this just happened.” – Maureen, 46, operations director

For some staff members, especially those who had been closely involved in the company’s development, Watermark was as much their home as it was their workplace.

Watermark’s dual function as a home and a workplace was a repeated motif. When the company outgrew its original office space, rather than moving, they rented additional space across the street. The original space was dubbed “Home.” Sometimes the domestic metaphor became reality. Like many digital companies, Watermark’s disciplinary teams were strongly gender segregated. There was only one woman on the
development team, and the only women on the design team were at the junior level. The operations team was made up entirely of women. I repeatedly observed the four-woman operations team cleaning up after staff meetings and lunches, clearing food and plates from common spaces, running the dishwasher, and wiping surfaces. That Maureen was head of the operations department and married to George, the founder, only amplified the degree to which Watermark’s offices mirrored the gendered division of labor in the home (Hochschild and Machung, 2012).

Not all employees agreed that Watermark could be identified as a family. During a speech at the company holiday party, held at a cocktail lounge in the city, Jesse gave a heartfelt toast to the large, assembled crowd of employees and spouses. At the end, he raised his glass, surveyed the room, and toasted, “To the family.” Many raised their glasses and repeated him. A short while later, I was talking with Al, a member of the development team. Al was known as something of a lone wolf at Watermark. His work was well-respected, but he often opted not to attend after-work happy hours with other Watermark members or go for coffee runs with coworkers. I asked Al what he thought about the idea that the company was like a family. He rolled his eyes and said, “That’s bullshit. Family doesn’t lay each other off. Family doesn’t evaluate each other. Come on!” Some family members of Watermark staff felt the same way. I became friendly with Dan’s spouse during my field work, and she once remarked to me how irritating she found the idea that the company was a family. “Dan and I already have a family!” So even though claims that Watermark was a family went publicly uncontested, this image of the company was not universally accepted, even by early hires.
As Al suggested to me, the projected self-image of a family was often belied by the processes inherent in a profit-seeking organization. Early on in my field work, I attended a staff meeting during which it was announced that Joe, a staff member in the research team and a close friend of many, would be let go. Ted made the announcement in a rambling, emotional speech, choking back tears the whole time. He started by speaking about how Watermark was experiencing lots of growth, but that it was also experiencing change, and that change came in the form of “family members, and friends. We’re not used to people leaving.” He then explained that although Joe was cherished by all, he had not been performing up to Watermark’s standards, and that the decision was not a personal one. Many members of the gathered staff had tears in their eyes. George followed up Ted’s announcement and segued to the rest of the staff meeting, saying, “it’s tough to lose family members.”

Joe was indeed a special member of Watermark’s ecology: before his dismissal, almost everyone spoke positively of him or mentioned him specifically as a close friend. Like almost everyone else at Watermark, I had a close relationship with Joe. When my field work began, Joe had been tasked by the owners to help facilitate my entry into the organization by helping me to coordinate interviews with the rest of the staff\textsuperscript{13}. Beyond his instrumental role in my research, he was also a friend. However, in creative agencies, turnover is an unavoidable outcome of doing business. Employees leave for greener pastures, lags in new work result in layoffs, and underperformers get cut: these are all normal events for a project-based company. Though Joe was a special person at

\textsuperscript{13} In retrospect, that Joe was tasked with helping me accomplish my research objectives reflects the ambiguity of his role within the organization.
Watermark, he was also an employee whose role was no longer needed, and small companies cannot afford to keep friends on the payroll. As the firm grew older and the staff grew larger, the family metaphor strained to mirror the logistic reality.

**Growth and its Discontents**

Further straining the organizational image of a family were the impacts of growth, which often resulted in structural changes that made Watermark feel more like a “real” workplace and less like someone’s living room. At the time of this research, Watermark was growing rapidly. In the year preceding my field work, the owners had hired fourteen full-time staff members. The company had experienced 30% employee and revenue growth every year for the past five years, a figure of which the owners are very proud.

Growth in service agencies depends primarily on successful client relationships, and Watermark was no different. Just as staff was hired through existing relationships, new client work was the result of far-reaching personal and professional networks. Jesse, one of the company owners who also served as the creative director, explained,

> “Our company grew through relationships. You do a project here, someone would hear about it, you work for this guy, he recommends you to that guy, you get out there, you do that work, and it would just blossom from there. Very few projects in our history come out of nowhere.”

Hiring, which Ted explained was undertaken in a similarly networked way, can be understood as the result of successful client relationships. Revenue from completed projects funded new hires, which in turn could support new projects. In Ted’s words, “we
would basically build revenue and then revenue would pay for investing in employees.”

Likewise, Jesse told me that hiring was the result of successfully completing client work:

“We slowly hired senior people. We started to dot each one of our disciplines: more designers, then a researcher. A technologist. Another technologist. [We] started to grow that way as our work would afford us. So, we hired to meet demand.”

A wide network of client relationships and increases in staff are the most obvious signs of firm growth. These factors increased in tandem at Watermark, resulting in a growth pattern that happened incrementally over time.

But growth can have negative impacts on company culture, especially in firms as collegial as Watermark. The company co-owners understood that maintaining success while retaining Watermark’s culture was crucial to keeping everyone happy. Ted explained how balancing success and culture was made much more complicated by growth. In particular, he highlighted that business decisions were easier to make before the staff grew to its current size because the company was small enough to manage carefully. Thus, owners found themselves in the uncomfortable position of needing to make more consequential choices in a less manageable situation:

“When we started this company, we had this very specific goal of building a place that we wanted to be at, on a daily basis, and sort of – and I don’t mean this in an unplanned and loose way, but, invent it was we go. And when we were smaller, it was easier and okay to do that. Because you were still manageable. We have to be way more planful and – not that we weren’t before, but it’s required now. Planful and methodical about the growth of the company. So it’s this constant blend of – let’s stay [close] to our roots when it makes sense to do that, but let’s not be afraid of growth.”
Growth placed increasingly difficult decisions in front of Watermark’s owners, and often ones that had ramifications for the company’s culture. A common industry axiom that George related to me during an interview is, “when the company grows, everything grows.” This includes things like revenue and staff, but it also includes things like attrition, risk, and rules. Thus, growth demanded the very bureaucratic processes that Watermark founders sought to avoid implementing. For example, firms employing over fifty people in the United States must implement standardized health care benefits, which usually means that a human resources expert must either be consulted or hired (U.S. Small Business Association). Watermark’s owners decided to hire a human resources specialist, Alex. But even though Alex’s previous experience was with a music recording studio, and she was by her own account “the least HR person”14 she’s ever met, the very idea of having an HR specialist felt like a corporate invasion on Watermark’s casual, oasis-like environment. In Ted’s words, “the idea of standards, related to HR, ugh. Like, ugh. Acid in our mouth.” Watermark’s handbook, instituted when the company hit 50 employees, displayed a similar reticence to imbue the company’s culture with bureaucratic rules and processes. The first paragraph of the employee handbook began saying, “We know what you may be thinking – this [handbook] is going to lay out rules, procedures, and legal stuff that will ruin everything cool we’ve got going on.”15

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14 Working in human resources departments often carries stigma within firms, since it involves the “janitorial” work of keeping the firm’s backstage neat and tidy. See Rivera, 2015, pg. 131.

15 Gideon Kunda quotes a “culture handbook” from his fieldwork at a company he called Tech, which describes the ideal Tech employee as “someone who is innovative, enthusiastic, willing to work hard, who isn't hung up on structure, and who has absolutely no concern with educational background. … The
Distinct institutional aversions to bureaucracy, as classically defined by Weber, are common to tech companies (1958). In a promotional video for Google, an employee explains, “We always really try to avoid bureaucracy so that people can really do what makes sense in their project.” Bureaucracy, here, is shorthand for unnecessarily rigid guidelines for work, and is suggested as a contrast to a healthy workplace. Catherine Turco documented a similar pattern of founder resistance to human resources processes in her study of a large tech company (2016).

Unfortunately for many of Watermark’s senior staff members, increased managerial oversight went hand-in-hand with the company’s growth. As Watermark grew, it became harder to communicate, and the co-owners found it nearly impossible to directly manage fifty people. As a result, the owners instituted managing directors, a position for which George, Ted, and Jesse hired internally. The two managing directors, Molly and Tyler, functioned like team leaders. For Tommy, a senior design director, this new position was an unwelcome intrusion. While Tommy’s managing director, Molly, was someone he already knew, it represented a new level of managerial oversight that he resented. Accustomed to working directly for the owners, his friends, Tommy was annoyed that he suddenly “had a boss.”

“I’ve never had a boss here. Just the other day I was yelled at for not saying I was working from home. But in the past, I’ve always just – if I need to work from home, [I] work from home. We have employees in San Diego, do they report that they’re working from San Diego every day? No, I’m just working. There’s this checking process now that’s kinda like, what the fuck? It’s just expectation is that everyone is going to work hard, not for hard works sake, but for the fun of it, and enjoy doing what they are doing, and show commitment no mater what it takes” (1999:68).
another thing I gotta remember to do in the morning, tell people where I’m at. I don’t think that’s necessary.”

The subject of Tommy’s irritation is the new “checking process,” which he finds inconvenient, and even infantilizing. He spoke about having a boss as if it were tantamount to having a babysitter.

Molly was well aware of these challenges, and spoke frankly about the difficulties of managing “stubborn, long-time employees of the company who don’t like change.” A petite woman of boundless energy, Molly’s hair was short and tightly curled, and she wore tortoiseshell glasses. She held a PhD, and was a research director before being promoted to managing director. A big part of Molly’s new job was “resourcing,” or allocating employees to client projects. When Watermark was a smaller firm, resourcing occurred as needed and with little fanfare. But with as many as ten projects at once and nearly twenty employees in the design department alone, growth at Watermark demanded careful resource allocation. Senior designers chafed at being assigned to projects by a manager, and Molly knew it: “There’s still a lot of pushback on my team from our designers… they’re just used to being able to horse trade among themselves [for resourcing] and not having to involve other people.” Molly echoed Tommy’s statements of discontent. Molly and Tommy’s relationship had changed from one of coworkers to a manager-subordinate relationship, and both parties acknowledged that this caused tension.

Employees at Watermark also reported that growth had resulted in feelings of distance or alienation from others. Mike, a design director and the first official hire at
Watermark, told me, “I have some challenges with not being able to work closely with people that I really enjoy working with.” Mike, as the first hire, had been responsible for recruiting many Watermark staff over the years. As the company had grown, he saw these people less and less, by virtue of a larger staff and office space. Growth, in his opinion, had taken away some of his favorite things about the firm because there were too many people. He explained, frustrated:

“I really do miss when we were twenty people. It was enough work, the work was good, we were able to really buckle down on quality, happy hours were the right size… Why’d you get so big?”

Mike’s comment reflects a firm that, in some ways, doesn’t exist anymore. As another designer commented when I asked about how growth has changed the company, “You can’t take 500 people bowling,” referring to Watermark’s yearly St. Patrick’s Day bowling tournament.

Growth also resulted in the feeling of a generalized shift in Watermark’s culture. Most of the staff that I interviewed felt that Watermark had changed. This resulted in feelings of alienation, and in discord among employees. This feeling was particularly strong among senior staff. Tommy indicated in our interview that firm growth had resulted in a sense of loss and distance. He felt like the firm had outgrown him, despite an underlying sense of ownership over the company’s culture. He compared firm growth to parenting a rebelling child; he felt, as some parents of adolescents do, the sadness of being pushed away from something you helped to shape:

“I was there from the beginning. I watched it. It’s like a child you watch grow, and now the child’s getting out of control, and you don’t have control
over it anymore. And you just gotta ride it out, see what happens, or go find another job. It is a lot different than it used to be. We try to say the culture’s the same, it’s not.”

Senior staff and owners seemed to recognize that the company had undergone definite change through growth. Ted remarked to me during our interview, “it’s completely unrealistic to expect to have a company operate and function the same way from fifteen to fifty to seventy-five staffers. It just won’t happen.”

Despite their open disdain for bureaucratic procedures in their company, human resources was sorely needed at Watermark, in part because as the company grew, it became more difficult to “see” everything that was happening. After a certain level of growth, more oversight was required. Consider the perspective of Nick, a remote digital design director for Watermark who lived on the West Coast.16 With ample experience in the field of digital design, including having created his own successful digital software and spearheading multiple start-ups, Nick was something of an expert, and unafraid to show it. Nick explained why growing startups need more bureaucratic oversight, and foreshadowed an important finding from my research: the bureaucratic results of firm growth tend to disproportionately and negatively impact senior employees because of their relationship to the firm.

“Any company that’s growing and reaches a certain size is gonna require a certain amount of bureaucratic oversight. There’s a lot of long-tenured people here. They’re not used to that, so they’re used to being more in charge. So I think there’s a cultural conflict, and this is actually a conversation I’ve had with Jesse, about how as they move towards this 50-person mark, I said,

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16 Remote staff at Watermark usually visit the office once per quarter. I was able to interview Nick during one of his trips to the office. At the time of this research, seven employees worked remotely.
you’re nearing a point where there’s gonna be an inflection, and you have to figure out what you want to become as a company. You either have to grow quickly through the next 150 people or you have to stay small. But you can’t be both.”

Nick echoes the findings of highlighted in the literature: senior staff at Watermark were likely to bear the brunt of changes brought on by growth. However, he indicated an important finding of my research: old guard resistance to change is an artifact of firm growth, not a characteristic of a group of individuals.

**Generational Strain**

Growth revealed that there were striations within the otherwise fairly homogenous group of workers at Watermark. While founding members of the organization enjoyed those norms of the company that made it feel like home, other, newer members to the organization found these same conventions exclusionary or uncomfortable. The founders and early members of Watermark formed a core of influential gatekeepers of company culture. A distinction between the core members of the organization and those who came after them was observed in two major categories. First, junior members of the organization tended to appreciate those bureaucratic elements that brought more structure and accountability to their work. Second, women at Watermark noted a distinctly masculine company culture that often made them feel personally and professionally discounted.

Junior staff were equally aware of the logistic challenges of having a 50-person company, but it did not bother them in the same way it did senior staff. Because they only
knew the company at its current size, they did not share Mike’s nostalgia for “the good old days.” Brett, a junior designer, had been at Watermark for less than a year when I interviewed him, and he was thrilled to be working there. He described working in technology as “breathing fresh air constantly.” Brett talked fast, and had a self-deprecating sense of humor. His dark hair was cut in a modern style, short on the sides and long on top. As he explained to me,

“[Growing pains] are just a symptom of having a growing company. It is how it is. And I don’t need to talk to all fifty people, you know what I mean?”

Later, he summed up his feelings saying, “As long as I still have a job, if you can keep growing, that’s fine. If we blow up, I don’t mind.” Brett was along for the ride, and trusted that the company was growing in a positive direction. He wasn’t worried about any negative impacts of “blowing up,” presumably because he had only been at the company for about a year. Interpersonally, he had little to lose, but professionally he had much to gain. His comparative lack of experience with changes in organizational culture made him far less wary of change than his more senior coworkers.

In contrast to Tommy’s complaints about “checking processes,” junior staff found increased managerial oversight helpful. It clarified their responsibilities and provided a clear authority in a firm that felt disorganized at times. Leanne, a 23-year-old designer who had been at Watermark for 10 months at the time of our interview, expressed gratitude for Tyler, her managing director: “It’s more comforting knowing that you can go to one direct person for questions, rather than like, who do I ask about this?” For employees who were newer to the company, having greater oversight was an asset, not an
annoyance. It also shortened a previously arduous process; instead of having to ask around for answers to a question, Leanne only had to talk to one person. In this case, increased oversight made work easier but prompted less interaction with coworkers.

Cameron, a junior designer, also felt that the company had changed, but not in a bad way. She acknowledged that Watermark’s culture had undergone a shift, but her concern was that senior designers had handled growth poorly, and were unwilling to embrace change to facilitate work. One Monday afternoon, I was having lunch with Cameron and a few other junior employees at a restaurant down the street from the Watermark offices. Joe joined us for lunch – even though he had been let go a few months prior, he was still close friends with many staff members. After we’d been eating for a while, Cameron complained that Tommy, her mentor, is “always on vacation” in the summer, and that he never tells her when he’ll be gone. This is a problem, because Cameron relies on Tommy’s input before she shares designs with Molly or her client team. It affects Cameron’s work when Tommy is gone. She said that Brooke, another junior designer, has the same problem with Mike, her mentor. Cameron said multiple times, frustrated, “I just don’t understand why.” Joe shrugged and said, “I worked across from Mike, and I wouldn’t know when he was going on vacation until a day before. They’re just not used to having to hand off information.” In an attempt to justify how Mike and Tommy saw the situation, I offered, “The company they started was just ten people around a table, so you’d know when someone was going on vacation.” Cameron slammed down her fork in frustration and said, “But it’s a different company now, and I just don’t know why they don’t get it.”
In this case, Tommy and Cameron are seeing different things in the organizational mirror (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). Tommy sees Watermark the way he always has: as a second home, not as a job. He helped to build Watermark, but the results of its growth left him feeling alienated from his creation. From Tommy’s view, growth and its accompanying changes are a betrayal. On the other hand, this was Cameron’s very first job out of college. She saw the benefits of growth, and appreciated the work that senior employees put into the firm. From Cameron’s view, Tommy is refusing to see the company for what it has become.

One aspect of Watermark’s culture that founding members were particularly proud of was the way leisure had been infused in their workplace. Games ranging from a dart board, an arcade game, a ping pong table, and an Xbox were regularly used by employees to take a break from work. Often, these games were described as productivity aids. Mike, a senior design director and the first employee of the company, explained to me that “I think it’s a sign that the company trusts you. It’s not like this oppressive state. You can’t be heads-down and productive all the time, cuz I mean frankly that’s just not possible for people like in a creative field, to always be producing. People need a place to sort of step away from their work.” For Mike, the games are a sign of company trust that the work will get done, and allow employees who do the draining work of designing or developing code a space to take a break from producing work.

Beer was another leisurely element that was a regular part of many office functions. It was normal to observe male employees drink a can of beer with their lunch.
There were frequent happy hours in the office, and one of the conference rooms was dubbed “Tavern” because its windows overlooked a bar of the same name, popular among the staff. Beer was so common at Watermark that it seemed to stand in for coffee; the keg and the coffee maker sat beside each other on the kitchen counter. In a post to the company’s social media account, a photo of a glass of beer next to a cup of coffee at a conference room table bore the caption: “Two great tastes that taste great together: it’s how we do meetings.” Posts like these acted as declarations of the collective tastes and interests of the company to stakeholders, clients, and employees themselves. Beer was elevated to the same, symbolically productive status typically attributed to coffee. Molly explained that on Fridays, most people drank a beer while they work, and that I could help myself to the keg installed in the company kitchen. Happy hours or office parties are common functions in many workplaces, but beer consumption was not limited to these events, and beer appeared to be the only alcoholic beverage staffers like because it was the only alcoholic beverage around.

From very early on, the offices of Watermark were places of both work and leisure, and that attitude was present in the way the employees relaxed and socialized. However, as the company grew, things that appeared to represent everyone’s tastes turn out to only represent the tastes of a small, unrepresentative group of employees. The fun, laidback culture sometimes had the effect of excluding rather than including others in a sense of collective company culture.
The projected image of a “family” often read more like a rambunctious boy’s club, especially to women at Watermark. The following field note excerpts illustrate the persistence of founding norms, even as the staff and workplace had changed. At the time of these field notes, Watermark boasted 54 full-time employees and two spacious offices – a far cry from the small group of friends at George’s kitchen table. Nonetheless, a spirit of friendship, leisure, and even collegiate immaturity pervaded the scene during an unusually animated lunch hour:

Lunch today was a flurry of activity. Seven employees were gathered at the ping-pong table watching two men play a game of FIFA\(^\text{17}\), and at least ten were at the picnic table, with some facing the TV mounted to the opposite wall. Cameron and I walked in with our lunches, and she commented to me, “Full house.” We found seats at the picnic table. Jesse, Ted, and Mark were watching a golf tournament with rapt attention, barely noticing when Cameron and I passed in front of the TV mounted to the wall opposite the table. After we sat down and began eating, Ted and Mark began joking about a client group with whom they’d gone golfing last week. Ted said to Jesse, laughing, “The one guy doesn’t play so he just got drunk in the cart.” Mark added on, grinning broadly, “We got him to sign a lot of contracts,” elongating the “o” in “lot” for comedic effect. They laughed.

There was a good deal of discussion about a white-water rafting trip the design team was taking the next day. Ted joked that Jesse’s odds of falling out of the raft were one-to-one and did an impression of Jesse, saying, “Oh, I’ve lost my glasses,” in a nasal, high-pitched voice; I’ve heard him do this impression before. Again, Mark laughed, and Jesse nodded good-naturedly.

Philip, a recent hire in the development department, walked in at around 12:30 with a six pack of beer for that evening’s “bring your own” happy hour event. As he was putting it in the fridge, Mark said, “Is that your lunch? Is that your lunch box?” Then, after a beat, he added, “Check his code, people!” to joke that Philip was working – writing code – while intoxicated. Philip smiled, and was a good sport about it. Between Mark and Ted’s ribbing, the beer, and the men playing FIFA, I started to feel like I was in a frat house.

\(^{17}\) FIFA is a video game that simulates the sport of football.
As illustrated above, the friendly, laidback atmosphere described by the founders and early hires at Watermark remained visible long after its early years.

But this work environment was not comfortable to everyone. Limits to participation in the leisure activities favored by core members of Watermark’s staff were felt particularly among women at the office. When I asked Leanne how the offices would be different without the games, she responded hesitantly, “Uh… Xbox is a distraction.” A few moments later she shared, “Not a single woman plays that Xbox. I’ve never seen a girl play ping pong up there, either.” When I asked her why this might be, Leanne said, “Some of these guys that have been here for a while play the Xbox together, and then when someone new starts, like a younger guy, then like,” she begun to speak in a stage whisper, “is he welcomed? Can he play?” The Xbox and ping pong tables function not as universal locations of staff recreation but as a staging ground on which new male employees are welcomed (or not) to an informal club of older male employees.

Penny, whose seniority in the company offered unusual insight on its growth and identity, asserted clearly, “it’s a male culture.” Penny identified a small group of employees who shared interests, but didn’t share them with others. “There’s the whole boys club things that’s definitely palpable,” she explained to me. “There was the designer boys club where like they would all go to coffee at two o’clock in the afternoon and never ask anybody else to come. It’s like, I drink coffee at two o’clock in the afternoon. I see you there sometimes when I’m getting coffee.” Senior designers, like Mike and Tommy, had activities they share with other male designers, but not with other staffers.
Like Leanne, Penny identified the small group of male employees who’d been at Watermark a long time as the center of this clique.

Beer, though it was ubiquitous in the office, also created gendered boundaries. Happy hours and monthly beer swaps, for example, were of little interest to pregnant staff members. During my conversation with Leanne, she told me about the regular debate regarding what to put in the keg in the kitchen. Leanne was frustrated about getting shut out of the conversation about beer on the bases of either her age or her gender:

“If I say I don’t like an IPA, they act like, of course a woman doesn't like an IPA. There was a comment made like, ‘what do you like, Miller Lite?’ I turned around and was like, ‘actually, I don’t, thank you.’ I was like, why are you saying that?”

Leanne is a young, pretty woman; asking if she likes Miller Lite because she objected to an IPA implies that she must not know anything about beer. She didn’t disclose who said this, but she said the person was much more senior than her. As with the designers who went to get coffee together, activities that can unite some people in a growing company have the dual effect of isolating others.

Penny, reflecting on an earlier time in the company’s history, noted similar feelings of exclusion around beer. She recalled a time in the firm’s history when beer pong was a regular afternoon pastime at the office. She said, “It didn’t bother me, per se, but beer pong’s not how I spend my free time, y'know? And I hadn’t played it since college. And Ted made fun of me for my technique, which was not a technique, because I

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IPA is short for India Pale Ale. IPA beers tend to have relatively high alcohol content and have a noticeably hoppy flavor profile.
did not take pride in it in college!” As if at a college party, Penny was teased by her boss for her beer pong technique.

For some employees, Watermark’s apparent fixation on beer was not just exclusionary or juvenile, it was a health risk. Karl, a researcher at Watermark, wrote a highly personal blog post during my time there, disclosing his personal battle with alcoholism. He described years of binge-drinking at professional events where beer flowed freely. Intervention from a loved one drove him to seek help, but temptation persisted in the workplace. He called for a proactive approach to de-glamorizing alcohol abuse in the industry and intended to shed light on the dark side of a company culture that might otherwise seem fun, or harmless.

Though Watermark’s owners praised the important message of Karl’s blog post in an all-company email, alcohol remained central to company leisure activities. Watermark held a happy hour event in honor of two new employees shortly after Karl’s blog post was published. After briefly introducing the new hires, Tyler said, as a way of kicking off the event, “If anyone has too much to drink, call an Uber.” Tyler’s comment made it clear the company would not take responsibility for possible negative effects of its beer-loving culture.

What first appeared to be an inclusive company culture was, upon further inspection, a hyper-masculine culture. The wrought iron staircase in the Home office was emblematic of the taken-for-granted maleness at Watermark. Custom-built for their offices, the iron staircase was the centerpiece of the bright workspace. When I started
conducting research, a female employee recommended that I not wear skirts to the office, since the slats in the staircase are see-through and people’s desks are right below. During our interview, Penny added that “people in heels have been really uncomfortable on that thing, too. They almost fall because [their heels get stuck in] the slats.” This design oversight is particularly relevant when clients come to the office for meetings; one must go downstairs to reach the conference rooms on the lower floor. Dan expressed to me that sometimes he felt uncomfortable bringing female clients to the conference room if they were wearing a skirt. To women visiting the Watermark offices from a workplace where skirts and suit dresses might have been the norm, the space was decidedly unfriendly. Anyone in a more informal dress code of jeans and sneakers, however, would have had no problem. The iron staircase, much like the beer keg and the video games, was emblematic of the tension that lived at the heart of Watermark’s culture: in a well-intentioned effort to replace staid workplace norms with personalized symbols and activities, the pendulum swung too far at times and resulted in an overly particularized culture that was not welcoming to all.

Watermark owners succeeded in creating a culture that was their own. In our interview, Ted told me that he felt a great source of pride when he surveyed the office, and said, “This is our house.” But one person’s home may be a hell for someone else.

In this chapter, I have argued that growth produced cultural strain in an organization characterized partly by the idea of a family system. Watermark founders institutionalized
a set of preferences and tastes that clashed with the values of the diverse and skilled workforce that they sought to attract. Employees who valued the company’s financial success and creative energy felt left out due to the tastes and values held by founding members. Further, founders couldn’t help but institutionalize their own work history. Since many of them came from the same design firm where they had experienced overwork and burnout, their priority at Watermark was to establish a culture of trust among all staff. In practice, this meant that employees were allowed to work from home, adjust their hours, or even take a temporary leave of absence from the company.\textsuperscript{19} Coworkers trusted each other to show up to meetings on time and to get their work done without constant managerial oversight.

However, trust often looked like chaos, especially from the inexperienced perspectives of junior employees, some of whom had been hired directly out of college. New generations of workers, informed by the social media revolution, want and expect a different kind of workplace from the ones their parents had (Turco 2016). They want to have a say in decision-making, and they want transparency. But they may also want clarity.

Watermark was not so much a “new” workplace insomuch as it was a boutique one, built very specifically to the desires of its founders. In a sense, what senior members of the organization were unhappy with is the normal ways in which companies formalize. The data presented in this chapter illustrates that startup companies struggle to maintain a corporate identity that is both coherent and stable over time, as well as reflective of its

\textsuperscript{19} One designer took a temporary leave of absence during my fieldwork because the indie rock band he played in was doing a national tour.
growing and changing membership. It also contributes to a better understanding of how organizations can become gendered (Acker 1990). We know that tech companies often have hyper-masculine cultures, but we don’t know much about how they get this way (Mickey, 2019). Based on my research at Watermark, I want to suggest that gender gets “smuggled” into organizations under the guise of “hip” or anti-corporate culture.

Of course, Watermark is not the first or the last company to employ the image of a family. Another way we might think about the function of the “family” image is as a symbolic means of securing greater commitment from workers. Research on garment factory workers has shown that familial ties, when imported into labor settings, can support high work standards (Hareven 1982). But if familial themes are not resilient to organizational change, their power to enchant workers may fade, as it did with Al, the reluctant Watermark developer. Like almost all other profit-seeking organizations, Airbnb, the vacation rental platform, has taken a financial hit due to the coronavirus. Airbnb employees who were bought into the company’s philanthropic, commitment-based workplace culture were stunned by the massive layoffs that came in the wake of disappearing revenue due to COVID-19 (Griffith 2020). As at Watermark, Airbnb employees found that that the image of a family only extended to the four corners of their smartphone or computer screen, and that their membership in the group was contingent on profit, not love.

Tech companies like Airbnb and Watermark foster among their workforce a high degree of organizational belonging. Before the financial reality of the pandemic, new hires at Airbnb had been welcomed “home” when they were offered their jobs and told,
“You belong here” (Griffith 2020). Explicit mentions of belonging, like this one, belie the implicit messages of exclusion relayed by a male-centric leisure culture. As discussed in the introduction, organizational belonging encompasses the felt sense of membership provided by the procedural and expressive tools that organizations offer to their workers. What the Watermark case reveals is that mechanisms of organizational belonging may not be equally distributed across an organization. While aspects of high identification with Watermark like the opportunity to shape work practices and choose office design were available to early members of the organization, they were denied to newer members. A problem that any organization who worships their founding will have is that only founding members will have access to those belonging mechanisms. As organizations grow, they should expand opportunities for newer members to feel that they belong.

**Chapter 2 References**


Chapter 3: Algorithmic Ambiguity: How Instacart Relies on Labor to make Algorithmic Management “Work”

Instacart advertises itself an automated grocery service: the company’s website, t-shirts, and promotional materials tout its remarkable “same-day grocery delivery.” But shopping for someone else’s groceries under Instacart’s conditions – in a store, during regular business hours, not knowing the customer’s true preferences – is as far from automation as one can imagine. It is labor-intensive, subjective, and disorderly. To pull off this transformation, Instacart simultaneously hides the messy reality from its customers and secures the effort of its workforce via algorithmic management.

Algorithmic management is an employment relationship in which work tasks that might otherwise be handled by a human manager, like scheduling, training, or evaluating, are carried out by algorithms housed in computer or mobile phone software. Some Instacart workers, or “shoppers,” in Instacart’s parlance, never meet another human being while working for the platform: all managerial tasks are handled by a mobile application called Instashopper.

Processes ranging from matching shoppers with customers, instructing them on what to pick up, and evaluating their performance were all directed by the company’s mobile app. As I will show, the autonomy that the platform advertises in choosing work hours does not translate to work tasks. Instacart’s algorithmic management offers few

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20 Algorithms can be simply defined as a set of instructions that solve a problem or perform a computation, typically to be performed by a computer. Cathy O’Neil, mathematician and author of *Weapons of Math Destruction*, has pointed out that recipes are like algorithms: they contain a set of instructions (input) that result in a finished product (output).
choices to workers, and succeeds in getting work done quickly but not much else. Just as Instacart’s app withholds critical information from workers, it also hides an accurate depiction of the labor process from customers. Moreover, Instacart’s algorithms often relied on flawed data. Shoppers regularly encounter information gaps or errors while working that they must make up for using their own human knowledge.

While previous accounts of gig economy work have focused on the degree to which these apps can be coercive, controlling, or tyrannical, I focus instead on how Instacart’s app failed to provide clear, consistent information (Cameron 2020; Griesbach et al. 2019; Rosenblat 2018). I call this “algorithmic ambiguity,” a managerial schema that uses algorithms to manage work but counts on human effort to smooth over inefficiencies or unexpected events that are beyond the mathematical purview of algorithms. This analytic perspective allows for less focus on the character of algorithmic management styles and more focus on how workers make sense of them and build strategies to accommodate them.

Algorithmic ambiguity exacerbates an already-complex work arrangement for Instacart shoppers. Instacart’s customer service arrangement is significantly more complicated than the average retail worker’s, as shoppers must respond to the demands of the customer, the app, the ground conditions in grocery stores, and in some cases, traffic. Despite the complexity of the work, many Instacart shoppers work entirely alone, without managers or coworkers. This arrangement grants a great deal of autonomy, a key offering of gig economy jobs, but it also exposes Instacart shoppers to greater risks and challenges.
than they might have encountered with human managers. Apart from a largely ineffective 1-800 number, Instacart shoppers have little recourse for dealing with problems while on shift, and they may end up spending their own time or money resolving an issue.

Finally, because Instacart is as much a digital product as it is a labor platform, changes to Instacart’s employment relationship are rolled out as software updates. Critical features of the job, including pay structure and employee classification, are regularly altered without warning, often seriously impacting the earnings of Instacart shoppers. Instacart shoppers who work before and after these “turning points” experience them as clear declines in job quality and dignity. But workers who arrive to Instacart with no income at all, seeking the promise of flexible hours and easy work tasks, have no frame of reference for what the job was like before the most recent software update. Algorithmic ambiguity, then, does not just describe a management style that produces quick work but little commitment. It also describes an approach to employment that can change at a moment’s notice.

This chapter focuses not on the inner workings of Instacart’s algorithms, which are both proprietary and in constant flux, but rather on the work practices that emerge around them. The chapter will begin with an extended ethnographic vignette that explains the workflow of shopping for Instacart, the conditions of working in a grocery store for an algorithmic manager, and the regular sorts of problems one may encounter when their boss is their phone.
A Morning Shift with Instacart

On my second full day working as an in-store shopper for Instacart, I received an order from a customer named Dina, shown in Figure 3. Once the order arrived and until I accepted it, my phone made a soft, repetitive pinging noise and the green circle that enclosed the Wegmans logo counted down the three minutes that I had to accept the order.\(^{21}\) If I didn’t accept the order within three minutes, the order would go away and I would have to wait for the app to send me another order. If I failed to accept three orders in a row, I would be kicked off shift and unable to work that day. I had already prepared my cart for a four-hour shift by outfitting it with packs of plastic bags, and cardboard boxes where I could organize filled bags. I also affixed plastic clips to the cart so I could hang filled bags off the side of the cart in the event of a large order.\(^{22}\) Dina’s order marked the beginning of four hours of racing around a grocery store, grabbing and bagging items for strangers, and dodging customers (“human obstacles,” as I often thought of them), all while staring at my phone with my head craned at an angle of forty-five degrees.

\(^{21}\) Griesbach et al. have accurately compared this sound to that of a submarine (2019).

\(^{22}\) These plastic clips were provided by Instacart.
I took in what little information I could about this order before tapping the green “Accept order” button at the bottom of the screen. Dina had requested eight items and eighteen units, some of which are shown in figure 4. This meant that there were eighteen items altogether of eight kinds – I could expect to be picking multiples of the same item. I just hoped they weren’t heavy items. From this screen, I could only do three things: accept the order, take the paid ten-minute break that I was given for every four hours worked, or simply wait for the three minutes to be over and the order to go away. I was warned during training that taking a break at the start or end of my shift would constitute wage theft, and it wasn’t like I showed up at Wegmans to relax, so I accepted the order.

After accepting the order, the app’s interface changed to show me Dina’s requested items. At the bottom of the screen, an alert slid up that read, “Customer notified of start.” On first glance, I could see that two of the eight items were a fruit tart from the bakery and something called a “power meal” from the prepared foods section. Though the app informed me that the items were sorted according to fastest route, this was untrue; if I went to the bakery first and then the prepared foods section, I would retrace my steps. This would lower my overall seconds per item rate, which was one of the metrics by which the app evaluated my performance. I had been told during training to ignore the order in which the app presents items, and to rely on my own knowledge of the store’s
layout to plan maximally efficient routes for completing orders. I continued scrolling before setting out to get her items in order to plan the best route.

While I looked through the rest of Dina’s list, I came upon the item that would torpedo my ability to complete this order within the goal time: ten one-gallon jugs of distilled water. While I could fit all ten jugs in my cart, the cart would be difficult to navigate around the store due to the weight of the water, and I wouldn’t have room for any other items. Worse, though I could manageably fit two jugs into one plastic bag, each bag would need to be double-bagged to accommodate the weight, and this would take even more time.

Already conscious of the stopwatch running on the order, I sprang into action and began pushing my cart toward aisle 20. I decided to get all the water first, double-bag it, and then bring it back to the Instacart staging area, tucked neatly in the corner of the pet food section. I would then place the bags on the shelves where full-service shoppers would later pick up the order before re-setting my cart and going out for the rest of the items. While this procedure alleviated my concerns about carting all that water around, it took up a great deal of time.
After placing the water jugs on the shelf in their double-bags, I headed back out for the rest of the items. While leaving the produce section and heading toward the deli, I heard my phone make a ringing sound I didn’t recognize, but I was in the flow of picking items and decided to check it later. After I had picked the last item, I checked my phone and saw that the customer had sent me a message through the app.

As show in figure 6, Dina had asked for a roll of paper towels that wasn’t on her list. Remembering my brief training, I responded in a cheerful manner, despite feeling intense pressure to finish her order quickly because of how long it had taken to stage the jugs of water. I texted while wheeling my cart to the other end of the store, where the paper towels were located. Dina seemed appreciative and excited about her ability to make a last-minute adjustment. I felt compelled to agree that this process was indeed “awesome,” despite that walking all the way to the opposite end of the store and back again did not feel awesome.

After fetching the paper towels, I had picked all the items for Dina’s order, and I headed to the long row of cash registers to check out. When the cashier had finished scanning my barcodes and gave me the receipt for the order, I pushed my cart back to the staging area. I printed a sticker for each bag in the order so that the full-service shopper
who came to pick it up would know which bags went together. I found that after I had staged the order, I could no longer see the messages Dina had sent me – the app’s design did not allow shoppers and customers to interact after the order had been completed. Our interaction was over.

My rate of speed on this order was the slowest of all my orders thus far. I felt annoyed at the customer for placing an order that she might have never picked up herself. But I also understood that this capacity to leverage an unusual amount of human labor is what makes it a profitable consumer service.

Most orders I received asked for around twenty items, but orders of forty or fifty were not unheard of. Long orders, like Karen’s, which I received next, felt particularly intimidating due to their long goal times. During all orders, a running stopwatch (labeled “time”) and a goal time (labeled “goal”) could be seen at the bottom right hand of the screen. While training, I was told to attempt to meet or exceed goal times, but I was not told what would happen if I didn’t. During longer orders, I felt like I was constantly working against the clock. This wasn’t entirely true, since my time was per item, not based on the overall order; as seen in the screenshots above, the goal time for this order was over an hour. Shorter orders have a
goal time of closer to a half hour. However, just because of the sheer number of items, I always felt like I was behind. Particularly during my first few weeks of working, I lived in fear of missing my goal time. Between orders, however, there was nothing to do. I had a few minutes of downtime in between Dina’s and Karen’s orders, and it felt strange to just stand around after 25 minutes of sheer terror and running around.

After another order, it was 12:05 and I decided to take my ten-minute break by tapping the “take a break” button at the top left of the screen. I figured the icon of a hot cup of coffee shown in figure 8 was intended to be humorous, because ten minutes was not enough time to buy a cup of coffee, let alone drink it. I grabbed a granola bar from my backpack, stored in a cabinet in the staging area, and walked to the store’s café. I thought about sitting at one of the benches at the end of the checkout aisles, but I wanted to sit somewhere quieter. Further, in the café, there were outlets where I could charge my phone. Unfortunately for me, the staging area and the café were at nearly opposite ends of the enormous store. By the time I sat down in the café, two minutes of my ten minutes break had elapsed. I was ravenous, but I didn’t really have time to eat. A store like Wegmans is a hellish place to be when you are hungry, with mouth-watering scents of baking bread, rotisserie chickens, and oven-fired pizza wafting
in nearly all directions. I devoured down my granola bar and drank some water while scrolling through Instagram on my phone. The app alerted me that my break was over in what felt like the blink of an eye. I wondered if it would be better to work a three-hour shift with no break, so that I wouldn’t get a moment to realize that I was exhausted. I powerwalked back to the staging area to receive my next order.

While waiting, I thought about how tired I already felt. I noticed fatigue in my shoulder, my legs, and my knees – aches and pains that reminded me of working in retail after college. My eyes were strained from scanning for item and looking across crowded aisles. I could feel my face taking on a tired mask.

**Algorithmic Management**

As illustrated above, working for Instacart meant obeying commands from the app, and sometimes from customers, in an effort to produce speedy work. Algorithmic management is widely understood to be far more nebulous and disempowering than human management, and previous studies have found that workers are less likely to trust algorithmic managers (Lee et al. 2015). Kathleen Griesbach and collaborators, who conducted an interview study of Instacart shoppers, have concluded that Instacart exemplifies “algorithmic despotism” since it provides few avenues for workers to make informed choices about work tasks (2020). However, through my own work for Instacart and by discussing with others who worked for Instacart, I found that there was not sufficient punishment for the work to be accurately described as despotic.
The labor process created by Instacart’s app is more aptly compared to permanent pedagogy than to despotism. Jeff Sallaz’s ethnography of a call center has argued that post-Fordist firms manage their work force not by direct control or by despotism but by what he calls “permanent pedagogy” (2015). In sectors of the economy where the traditional Fordist promises of stable work and pay in exchange for effort and consent have significantly frayed, employers may rush workers onto the shop floor – “autonomous but woefully underprepared” – and allow workers’ discomfort to motivate them to perform (2015:5). As a result, workers in these arrangements are prompted to exert high effort over a short period of time in the form of “learning games” to regain control over the unpredictability or humiliation of their role. These companies cannot afford to pay competitive wages, so nor can they afford to micromanage their workforce and reduce lowering the number of “butts in seats” to carry out critical job tasks (2015:8). Workers complained not that they were over-managed, but that there was too little guidance:

“As a contractor within an outsourced supply chain, CallCo cannot use raises, promotions, or other substantive incentives to purchase commitment. So it leans on learning games to generate short-term effort. It thrusts new hires into the queue and counts on their sense of unease to motivate them. This works for some, but many others quickly drop out, while even those who do master the game of call control eventually realize that their efforts go unrewarded and they too depart. But no matter. By now, a new batch of agents is ready to enter the queue, and the system of permanent pedagogy continues to churn.” (2015:28)

The use of algorithmic management for Instacart does not so much represent a turn to despotism as it does a cost-cutting effort. The result is an algorithmic boss that gestures to
punishments but has no power to carry them out. The pay is too low and unpredictable to act as a meaningful incentive. The algorithmic manager is like an animatronic monster that seems frightening until you realize it always moves in the exact same way, and it cannot leave its track. Previous accounts of gig work have focused too greatly on characterizing gig economy platforms and not enough on the work strategies/styles they create. This chapter works partly to extend Sallaz’s analysis of permanent pedagogy to a different sector of the post-Fordist work world, the gig economy, and to suggest that permanent pedagogy may be far more widespread in the world of low-paying work.

The remainder of the chapter uses ethnographic and interview data to show how Instacart’s brand of algorithmic management works in practice. I argue that the primary product of Instacart’s digital management is an overall character of ambiguity and uncertainty. I will focus on three algorithmic processes contained within the app – receiving orders, goal times, and customer ratings – that perform basic managerial tasks associated with working for Instacart. Then, I will consider the pitfalls of these management schemes when they are applied, as well as the quandaries created by an oft-changing mobile app and pay structure. Overall, I show that Instacart’s algorithmic ambiguity succeeds in soliciting short-term effort but fails to generate commitment.

23 At the time of this research, in-store shoppers earned $10 per hour with an additional “service bonus” that was typically 5% of each order. Ay varied widely for full-service shoppers, and often depending largely on whether or not the customer elected to tip. One of my interviewees, Lena, estimated that she received a tip only 25% of the time.
Algorithmic Ambiguity

Receiving orders

Most gig economy apps use matching algorithms to connect consumer orders or “gigs” to individual workers. For example, when Uber drivers receive requests for rides, they are presented with a route, the length of the ride, what kind of ride was requested, and the rider’s rating. Though drivers may have assumptions about why they have been matched with a given rider, perhaps based on proximity or destination, they have no way of knowing by what metrics Uber has connected them.

Compared to its gig economy peers, Instacart’s matching algorithm is unusually opaque. As Griesbach and collaborators point out, the Instacart app “withholds vital information” from its workforce (2019:7). Figure 9 shows a screenshot of the Instashopper app when an order is received while on shift as an in-store shopper. If the shopper has already taken their ten-minute break, the app only provides one button as a pathway to proceed from this screen: “accept order.” There is no way to see if other orders are waiting in a queue “behind” the one on the screen. If the Instacart shopper does not want to accept the order, they must wait three minutes for the green circle wind down to nothing and the

24 For Uber, unlike Instacart, there is bilateral rating: riders rate drivers and drivers rate riders. This process gives Uber drivers greater control to police users who misuse the service.
order to disappear from their screen. There is no mechanism by which one can make an active choice about the orders they will or won’t fill, only a passive one. Unlike platforms like TaskRabbit where workers can bid for jobs, Instacart presents almost no information to shoppers about what their task will be before they must accept it.

The “petty tyranny” of the Instashopper app was all the more frustrating because the information it provided was often incorrect (Griesbach et al. 2020:9). Because the app is designed by a small cadre of software engineers, and because the service operates across a broad range of grocery stores and residential areas, many of the challenges faced by Instacart shoppers on the job are the result of uninformed technology.

Through four months of working for Instacart as an in-store shopper, I learned that while Instacart’s mobile application and website are designed to execute simple and linear decision-making pathways, the practical reality of grocery shopping on behalf of a stranger is often complex. As a result, shoppers must work creatively both within and outside of the mobile app to smooth over inefficiencies in an algorithm-driven workplace. Here, as elsewhere, human labor is rendered invisible by technology (Gray and Suri 2019, Shestakofsky 2017).

The Instashopper app often provided incorrect or insufficient information about the whereabouts of grocery items, which made the job difficult until I was able to learn the locations of most items after a few weeks of work. As shown in the screenshots above, the app provided an aisle location for every item in an order. Each aisle in the store was numbered, except for departments like produce, dairy, and deli, which were
labeled with their names. However, the aisle location was frequently incorrect. These errors could sometimes be minor, as when pasta sauce was said to be in 17b when it was really in 16a, or they could be downright infuriating, as when a particular kind of spice rub for barbecuing was said to be in aisle 13, which was a freezer aisle. These kinds of errors were routine, and after working for about a month, I had learned the locations of most categories of items such that I didn’t look at the location the app provided anymore.

Flawed data management within the app made work more difficult and prompted me to compensate by learning a workaround. While it was ostensibly simpler to pick items bearing the location label “meat case” or “dairy,” not all non-aisle departments were in discrete locations; at the store where I worked, the dairy department stretched all along the back wall of the store. At the ends of aisles 20 through 5, you could find yourself in the dairy section. An item labeled as being in “Dairy” was largely useless information. I had to learn that eggs were in the farthest corner of the store, while shredded cheese was quite close to produce, near the front of the store. Because the fastest way to complete orders is to never backtrack, routes needed to be planned with the sprawl of dairy in mind. My mental map for orders often went something like: aisle 20, eggs and milk, aisle 18, yogurt, whipped cream, aisle 17, hummus, aisle 5… and so on.

The narrow range of options presented by the Instashopper app, combined with the flawed algorithmic inputs, mandated that I quickly learn the store’s layout to compensate. This mirrors the “learning games” that Sallaz described among call center workers.

Designations a and b referred to whether the item was in the aisle segment closer or further from the cash registers, and the app even indicated whether an item was on the left or ride side of the aisle (r and l).
(2015), and illustrates that algorithmic management produces embodied, human
knowledge rather than automation. Algorithmic management may increase human
discretion rather than suppress or replace it (Christin 2017).

Goal time

Another algorithmic management tool contained within the Instashopper app is the goal
time. This management tool gives Instacart shoppers the impression that they must work quickly, or else, but Instacart does not specify what will happen if goal times are missed. As shown in the screenshot of Adriana’s order, every time I accepted an order, a timer at the bottom right of the app’s screen appeared to show how much time has elapsed since the start of the order, as well as a goal time. The stopwatch ran from the moment an order is accepted to the moment the order was finished. Like most of the tools used by the app to manage work, the goal time was both cryptic and compelling.

Much like the algorithm that matched me to customer orders, the inputs by which goal times were calculated were opaque. During my first few weeks of work at Instacart, the goal times were generous, as they were in the order shown in figure 10, and I would often finish minutes ahead of them. But as time went on, the goal times became impossibly short, especially for orders containing around ten items or less. A few months
into my work at Instacart, an order was sent to my phone requesting five items and seventeen units. Such an imbalance between items and units often signaled good news and bad news simultaneously. It meant I could grab multiple units quickly, but they could be multiples of heavy or unwieldy items. Unfortunately for me in this case, the latter was true: this customer requested two cases of bottled water and fifteen cases of canned soda. The app provided me a goal time of seven minutes and twenty-one seconds for this order. Given that it usually took me about five minutes to walk from one side of the store to the other, I doubted I would be able to get all the items, check out, sticker, and stage them in seven minutes. Sighing, I emptied my cart of the bags and boxes I typically used to organize orders, knowing I would need all the free space that I could get in my cart. I wasn’t sure if I would be able to fit it all onto one cart, but with the stopwatch running in the corner of the app, I didn’t feel like I had time to get another cart so I decided to take a chance.

I pushed my cart to the soda aisle, in the back of the store, and located the requested items. The customer had requested three packs each of Pepsi, Mountain Dew, and caffeine-free Coke, as well as six packs of Diet Pepsi. All of the soda I needed was stocked close to the ground, below my knees. I considered lifting two cases at a time, but I worried that I might injure myself lifting two cases off the
lower shelves and into the cart. I had learned that a small strain incurred on one shift
would make the next day’s shift miserable. Instead, I lifted one case of soda at a time,
which was easy but time-consuming. Once I had picked up all of the soda, I pushed my
cart around the corner of the aisle to pick the cases of water. I placed one of the cases in
the front space under the cart, the section closest to the cart operator’s legs, and the other
in the larger space toward the front of the cart. Once I had the water on the cart, it was so
heavy that I was practically dragged the cart to checkout. After checking out, I headed
back to the staging area and removed each case of soda from the cart, one by one, and
place them on the shelf. Then I printed stickers for the items. Typically, I would use one
sticker for a bag containing a few items, but because the cases of soda were too big to be
bagged, I placed a sticker directly onto each case of soda. I began stickering the cases of
soda and stacking them, two tall and three deep in the shelf, so that the order wouldn’t
take up all the space on the shelves. I continued like that until all the soda cases and the
two water cases were on the shelf. By the time I logged the location of the bags and
finalized the order, I had been working on it for twenty-two minutes, far longer than the
time that the app had suggested I would need. I chalked it up to bad luck, and to poor
algorithmic inputs – there was never going to be a way for me to load fifteen cases of
soda and two cases of bottled water into a cart, walk them to checkout, walk them to
staging, and unload and sticker them in seven minutes. Being short of my goal time
produced stress and negative emotions like irritation, even when I knew that the goal was
unreasonable.
The symbolic function of the goal time was to make shoppers feel as though they are in a race against time in order to produce faster work. My field notes – especially in the first few weeks of work – are littered with frustrated explanations of situations that resulted in me “missing my time.” The tyranny of the goal time impacted interviewees, as well. Eliot, a white man in this early 30’s who worked for Instacart for six months, reported feeling rushed by the “ticking clock” in the corner of his phone screen:

“[It] did not account for traffic, or problems at checkout, or things being out of stock, or bathroom breaks… so I felt like I was always trying to beat the clock. It was kind of like a psychological game to make you want to rush around faster. So even though it wasn’t like ‘you will be fired if you [are late]’ it still felt like that because of the ticking clock.”

Despite the anxious speed they produced, goal times set expectations with ambiguous outcomes. One week, I had not met the item per second goal set for me by the app. I received an email at the end of the week, shown in figure 12, with the subject line:
“Chelsea – let’s work on your metrics.” The body of the email informed me that my speed was “below expectations,” that my speed “must turn around quickly,” and that coaching would be coordinated by an enigmatic “we.” But at this point during my Instacart work, there was no manager or shift lead at my store. No one was able to tell me why it mattered for my speed to improve, and no one arrived to coach me on my

Figure 12: Screenshot of an email I received from Instacart informing me that my speed needed to improve.
speed. In this way, I learned that there was no material consequence to being a slow shopper. Of course, at this point, I had already been hustling to meet my goal times at work for about four months: the goal time, in its incomprehensibility, succeeded as a managerial tool by training shoppers to work quickly. The app’s design counts on workers’ familiarity with time-based work quotas without actually stating or providing a punishment for missing those quotas.

Customer ratings
Another mechanism of algorithmic management was the customer rating system. Customers were prompted to rate the quality of the service provided by Instacart shoppers at the end of every order, based on a five-star scale. They could also note whether an item they received was damaged or incorrect, which was associated with the shopper’s overall metrics. If a shopper received five stars, their order was considered “perfect.” Percentage of perfect orders was one tool by which the app evaluated a shopper’s overall quality, as seen in figure 13. I was able to review my customer feedback in a section of the app titled, “How am I doing?” This screen showed me the percentage of my orders that had been rated

26 Customers who reported that items were damaged or incorrect received refunds for the cost of the item.
“perfect” over time, as well as individual items that had been marked as damaged or missing.

Customer ratings were imperfect evaluations of shoppers because customers were largely unaware if more than one person had been involved with their Instacart order. As discussed in the introduction, Instacart’s workforce consists of in-store shoppers, employees who shop for orders in a designated store, and full-service shoppers, independent contractors who pick up grocery orders (either shopping for the order themselves or picking up orders already completed by in-store shoppers) and drive them to customers’ homes. So, one Instacart order could either be completed start-to-finish by a full service shopper working out of their car, or by two Instacart shoppers – one in-store and one full-service. Customers generally assumed that all Instacart shoppers were full-service. For example, while shopping an order, a customer messaged me through the app’s chat function to ask when the order would be delivered. I responded that I was not the person who would deliver the order, and that I didn’t know when their order would arrive. Exchanges like this, which occurred a few times during my work at Instacart, illustrated that Instacart customers envisioned a tidier

Figure 14: Screenshot of customer-reported issues with requested items I had picked.
process than what was really occurring.

Because all of the orders I shopped for were delivered by someone else, I was never sure whether my customer ratings were a reflection of my service, or the full-service shopper’s service, or of some other variable like flavor or condition of a grocery item. In short, there was no way to know if it was my fault if something had gone wrong. For example, while scrolling through my customer ratings one day, I noticed that a few items from the same order had all been marked as damaged, shown in figure 14. These items included a frozen loaf of gluten-free bread, a case of water, and a pound of ground bison. I remembered completing this order, and I felt confused – how did these items get damaged? Had I really overlooked significant damage to bottled water, or a package of ground meat? I wondered if maybe the items had been damaged on their journey from the store to the customer’s home. It was also possible that the customer had simply reported all these items damaged in order to get a refund, which Instacart had no way of policing. Even though customer feedback provided no constructive information for me to use in improving my service, it was used to evaluate my performance.

As with goal times, there was no clear incentive for maintaining positive customer service ratings. No information about the consequences of poor ratings were provided in training, and no email updates provided them either. One of my interviewees suggested that receiving low customer service ratings could jeopardize your ability to get the shifts

27 The order stuck out in my memory because of the ground bison, which I had asked an employee in the meat department for help locating.
you want, but was unable to remember a specific incident in which low customer ratings impacted him.

Yet, some of my interviewees reported exerting emotional labor to keep their ratings high. As a result of Instacart’s structural similarities to other forms of service work, a few of the Instacart shoppers I spoke imported customer service skills they’d picked up in other jobs to earn more tips and provide better service. In his first few weeks shopping for Instacart, Eliot remembered putting small post-it notes in his customer’s bags saying things like, “have a great day!” He said this tended to get him higher customer ratings, and better tips, as well. However, after a few weeks, the frenetic pace of the work and stress of driving in city traffic overtook his desire to provide extraordinary customer service. He also reported feeling “pissed off” whenever he received a negative review, especially given that he had a wealth of experience in customer service. He felt that Instacart customer ratings did not accurately depict the quality of his service.

Similarly, Flora, a Latinx woman who shopped for Instacart in the Bay Area in 2016, quickly realized that the more communicative she was with customers, the more tips she would receive. As a result, she prided herself on knowing not only how to pick the best avocado, but on remembering repeat customers and their preferences. “You can really read people based on their grocery list, you know,” she told me during her interview. She specifically mentioned knowing that one of her customers bought

28 Though Instacart had not trained them to implement these specific styles of behavior, in my brief training, I was encouraged to respond politely to customers via text message.
ingredients to make lasagna every week, and this helped her to make the right replacement if the canned tomatoes they requested were not available. Like Eliot, however, Flora found her capacity to communicate with customers hampered by the algorithmic demands of the Instashopper app. She wanted to text or call the customers she was shopping for, but the goal time often made her feel like she didn’t have time. Jake, who shopped for Instacart in Denver, reported calling every customer at the start of their order to let them know he had begun shopping for them, and that they could call or text him with questions. I asked if he had been trained to do that by Instacart, and he said no, that it was something he decided to do on his own. Although they skillfully imported customer service techniques that they had learned in other jobs to the novel Instacart context, my interviewees often found it at odds with the app’s demands.

Algorithmic ambiguity was felt by my interviewees as an arrangement that produced anxious work but didn’t result in meaningful punishments. Lena, a 27-year-old white woman who worked as a full-service shopper for about five months in the Seattle area, recalls an eerie feeling of surveillance and uncertainty while working for Instacart that made her work seem more consequential than it was. She told me that she worked hard to meet the expectations set by Instacart’s algorithmic manager, and when I asked her why, she replied,

“Well maybe it is the unknown of like, is someone like, monitoring me? If I get bad reviews? Like, what’s… kind of like a big brother thing, I was like, who is my boss? I just didn’t know and it was just so weird. I really only ever talked to [one other] shopper, no one was ever like a higher up.”
She recalled feeling nervous at first, wondering “what will happen to me if I get [the customer] the wrong turkey? Like, it just seemed like there was so much at stake. But in retrospect, it really doesn’t matter.” The overall meaninglessness of the Instashopper’s demands was echoed by other shoppers. Cody, a white college student who worked at Instacart as a summer job, recalled receiving emails like the one I described urging him to improve his speed, but never encountered any punishment or additional training. “There’s obviously not real consequences,” he said of the app’s guidelines.

Nor did good, consistent work seem to result in meaningful rewards. Lena told me, “I thought at first if you had a good rating there would be more good things coming your way. I couldn’t understand how the back end of the whole thing worked.” She found that algorithmic ambiguity made it difficult to discern whether or not there was any benefit to working hard. Jake was the only interviewee I spoke with who hoped that working as a shopper for Instacart would lead to a higher position in the company’s organization, so he took a more hands-on approach to his work than other interviewees.

In what seems to have been an under-the-table arrangement, Jake made a deal with the Denver Instacart managers to take on additional tasks for additional pay. For example, Jake would offer to train new hires if the managers were unavailable, or to pick up Instacart materials from the warehouse where they were stored. His hope was to be “the face of Instacart” at the Whole Foods where he worked, and that his demonstrated commitment to the company would lead to a promotion to the management level:

“I [offered to] be the Instacart, in-store facing person at the Whole Foods. There was nothing official with that. It was just, Hey, do you
need help with this, they would text me or call me. I would go for happy hours with them and some of the other, like managerial folks within there, because essentially, the goal was to become one of the managers of Denver Instacart. But then they changed up that structure and got rid of in-city management. So everything kinda like, all at once, just stopped leading to any sort of a future, and I needed to find a future outside of that.”

Not only did Jake’s effort not lead to a promotion, but the in-city management positions were eliminated entirely during his tenure as an Instacart shopper.

**Down Time, Down Pay**

Algorithmic ambiguity can also impact take-home pay. A few of my interviewees who worked as full-service shoppers reported significant down time while working that negatively impacted their take-home pay. Down time, or periods during which no orders come to shoppers’ phones, was normal for both in-store and full-service shoppers.29 However, it impacted them very differently. In-store shoppers are paid a flat hourly rate of $10 an hour for their work, regardless of how many orders they receive.30 Full-service shoppers, on the other hand, earn wages based on commission. Down time is far more consequential for the earnings of full-service shoppers than it is for in-store shoppers, and a few of the full-service shoppers I interviewed relayed this as a major issue. In a work arrangement where tasks are delegated by an algorithmic boss, there is no explanation or forewarning for days when demand for the service is low, and workers who count on

29 There may be many reasons why any given shopper receives few or no orders: increase in supply of new shoppers, decrease in demand from workers, and unexplained technological glitches all seemed likely but not certain explanations for down time.

30 This was the rate at the time of my research, but as I point out later, Instacart’s pay rates and pay structures changed frequently.
their Instacart wages may find that the time they’ve set aside to work yields them no income.

Eliot, who worked as a full-service shopper in the Philadelphia area for about six months, reported that, “I had down time, but it was never a break.” While at the start of his work for Instacart, he simply got in his car and turned on the app to start working, he shortly learned that waiting for orders could be an hours-long process:

“At a certain point, I would be like sitting in my car for so long waiting for gigs to arrive that I started waiting inside my house for the gigs to arrive and then I’d run out, jump in my car and go. It was a particularly cold winter, so I was just like not trying to be sitting in my car all day. There’d be long periods and sort of -- like unpredictable periods where there’d be no gigs. But also, like, unpredictable in a way where you couldn't go get lunch because what if one came in, like a minute later while you were eating, you know?”

Eliot found these periods of down time to be unpredictable and stress-inducing. In these waiting periods, his time was not his own, yet he was not earning any money from Instacart. Kate, a white woman in her mid-30’s who had worked for Instacart in its earliest days in Philadelphia in 2014, found a similar pattern of down time. Below is an excerpt from our interview transcript:

K: There was a lot of down time. I would have to sit around in the parking lot of stores, waiting for my next order. So now I’m sure it’s like (snapping) bam bam bam, but before, there was so many times where I sat in a Whole Foods parking lot or the Super Fresh on Columbus Boulevard, I would sit there forever and read books. I would always have books with me.

C: And you weren’t paid for that time.

K: No, absolutely not.

C: But you were “on.”

K: I was working. I couldn’t do anything else.
Paid per order, Kate was not given any work but was not permitted to leave while on shift, either. Accounts like Kate’s and Eliot’s, as well as the many other accounts from interviewees of times when an Instacart-related task brought them over the end of their shift with no recourse, reflect the expectation that shoppers will bear the results of any inefficiencies in the company’s workflow.

Like any digital product, the Instashopper app was occasionally prone to unexplained glitches. Eliot recalled one frustrating occasion when his Instashopper app was malfunctioning and preventing him from working. He attempted to resolve the issue by calling Shopper Support, the 1-800 number provided to Instacart shoppers, but was unable to get the issue resolved.

“There was one incident where I was -- the app started malfunctioning. And I was in the middle of an order. And so I couldn't just stop. And so I was sitting in the parking garage, at Whole Foods, like, trying to get a customer service person on the phone from [Shopper Support], and then having to call back a couple times, because it was like, just the whole back and forth. And the app was like, crashing and restarting. And eventually they had to place the order [I was working on] with someone else. But then it took me another like half hour or longer to get another order. And even though they did give me another order, the app was still glitching. And it was all these problems on the back end. And the customer service person didn't know what the problem was either cuz it was like a tech issue, and I was not being paid for that. That was one of those days where I was so frustrated, because I was like, I'm not getting paid for this time to help them troubleshoot their app. The only reason I'm not getting paid is because their app doesn't work. … And my car was running, you know... It took like an hour to resolve that whole issue. I was so mad.”

Eliot lost the order he was working on, which meant he lost the pay he would have received for the work he’d already put it on it. Further, his earning hours were curtailed by the time he then spent on the phone with Shopper Support. For their part, Shopper Support was unable to troubleshoot his app’s problem. He was ready to work, there was
demand for his work, but a breakdown in the operation of his algorithmic boss prevented him from earning what he had expected to that day.

**Turning Points**

The flexibility that Instacart markets as its key offering to job-seekers is also inherent in its employment structure. Because Instacart operates via mobile apps, which are malleable digital products, changes in pay structure or work flow are implemented forcibly through changes to the apps, themselves. Instacart re-configures the employment relationship and pay structure for its workers so frequently that two people who worked for the platform only a few months apart can have had radically different experiences. And generally, the changes Instacart chooses to make result in lower earnings for workers. These frequent changes produce similar narratives among workers, even under different Instacart arrangements: it was a good job and then they made this change and then it became a bad job so I had to quit.

Most of my interviewees identified a turning point during their work for Instacart in which something about the job changed in a way that dramatically impacted their earnings. One such change occurred in late 2015, when Instacart began reclassifying some of its labor force as employees (Alba 2015). In particular, in-store shoppers – those workers who were localized to one particular store – were given the option to become employees rather than independent contractors, thus giving them access to greater workplace protections. Instacart would not impose a minimum of hours that employees
had to work during a week, but there was a maximum to prevent workers from reaching full-time status (which would have resulted in a cascade of additional costs for the platform). Instacart, as well as most of the media outlets that covered this change, portrayed the move as a positive one for those shoppers who chose to become employees: Instacart would provide worker’s compensation and it would pay for unemployment, Social Security, and Medicare taxes. This announcement also came on the backdrop of legal battles for other gig economy platforms like Uber and Handy, who were (and are) fighting for the right to classify their workers as independent contractors in order to avoid paying fees associated with having employees.31

In Instacart’s press releases about reclassification, it was framed as a choice. But later on in the process, in-store shoppers were not given the choice, and all were reclassified as part-time employees. Now, all in-store shoppers are employees. An Instacart shopper I spoke with who was working for the platform at the time during which reclassification was occurring illustrated how it hurt them rather than helped them. Jake, a 35-year old white man who shopper for Instacart in 2015 in Denver, loved the job at first. He was classified as an independent contractor, and as a result, he could work as much as he wanted. He quit a job at Trader Joe’s to work for Instacart full-time, at about 40-45 hours per week. However, when his position was reclassified as an employee position, his hours were capped at 29 hours per week and his ability to earn was significantly curtailed. Due to the decreased earning potential, left Instacart for a

31 See Rosenblat 2018 for a detailed account of how and why Uber dodges the employee issue.
managerial position at Postmates, another gig economy platform that delivers food items to customers’ homes.

Another consequential change Instacart made to its organization was to change the way customers tipped Instacart shoppers. In late 2016, Apoorva Mehta announced that the company would be replacing some of its tipping processes with a voluntary “service fee” that it would distribute more fairly among in-store and full-service shoppers (Gaus 2016). The company’s rationale was that about 20% of customers didn’t tip at all, and that this change would make rewards for service more equitable. However, many Instacart shoppers pointed out that this would inhibit them from receiving the tips that motivated them to work hard, especially for enterprise orders that are placed by large organizations.

Flora, who shopped for Instacart in the Bay Area in 2016, described a dramatic decrease in her ability to earn tips after this change was implemented. When she began working for Instacart, she noticed all of her fellow shoppers worked as fast as they could to move through orders so that they could earn larger tips. After the tip structure was changed, she and her fellow shoppers received fewer tips, and subsequently stopped working so quickly to get more orders. The change in pay structure had the unusual effect of both lowering shoppers’ take-home pay as well as their productivity.32

32 Other changes to pay structure have occurred since 2016 but a complete history would require greater access to company documents. I have had conversations with gig economy journalists who have confirmed that tracking down the exact history of Instacart’s pay structure adjustments is nearly impossible without access to company documents.
Lena’s turning point came when, a month after she started working for Instacart, her pay as a full-service shopper shifted from an hourly guarantee to a commission-based pay rate:

“When I started it was a $10 an hour guarantee, and then like halfway through doing it, they changed that to be, I wanna say like $2 a delivery, but you get your tips. So, it really was not worth it at all. I was probably just breaking even with gas.”

When she started working for Instacart, Lena already had two other part-time jobs; her Instacart income was earmarked as “fun money” for going out to bars and restaurants in Seattle. However, when the compensation changed from a guarantee of $10 an hour to a rate of $2 per delivery plus tips, she found that the job was not even earning her enough money for socializing. Of the experience, she said, “it never panned out how I pictured it.”

Most of the Instacart shoppers I spoke with left the job because it changed, in some way, for the worse. But a new Instacart shopper has no reference to how the job might have looked different a few months before they started. While the average tenure of Instacart shoppers is difficult to determine, no one I spoke with worked for the platform for more than two years, and the average tenure was nine and a half months. If that number is representative of Instacart shoppers as a whole, few shoppers today would be able to observe how much the job has changed even in the past five years. This

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33 Instacart shoppers pay for their own gas, but the cost may be deducted in their taxes as a business expense.
revolving door of workers makes it challenging for Instacart shoppers to organize for better working conditions.

Algorithmic ambiguity may be felt on the customer side, as well. It is difficult for sympathetic customers to “vote with their wallets” when they are not informed about the complexities of the service they are receiving when they are prevented from communicating further with their shopper. Even after working for Instacart, some of the shoppers I spoke with expressed confusion about how the platform’s algorithms work. In our interview, Kate told me that she had used Instacart as a customer a handful of times since leaving the platform, but that even as a customer, she was unsure of how the money she provided as tips would be divvied up among shoppers:

“I try to be as kind as possible and tip as generously as possible. Cuz theres so many moving parts now that I don’t even know who I’m tipping. Like am I tipping my driver, am I tipping the person who did my shopping? Am I tipping the person who checked everything out? Is it split three ways or however many ways? That’s a little annoying.”

Most of my interviewees concluded that working for Instacart did not provide sufficient wages to compensate for the ambiguous nature of the work. Almost everyone I spoke with said at one point during their interview, “it just wasn’t worth it.” A natural question that arises from the perspective of labor process theory, then, is, why did Instacart shoppers (myself included) try so hard for as long as they did? When asked why it would matter to remember a repeat customer or to know what their preferred preferences were, Flora said, “As trivial as it seemed sometimes, there was an understanding that people are consuming, and you want to make sure that you’re getting
what they’re asking for.” Much like CallCo relied on the hidden order of interaction to drive learning among call center workers (Sallaz 2015), Instacart relied on a generalized sense of customer service and familiarity with service work to drive effort.

Algorithmic ambiguity may reflect Instacart’s lack of preparation for being both a technology company and an employer of over 100,000 workers.\textsuperscript{34} It may be the case that Instacart was and has always been more focused on their app as a digital product than on the management of workers. Kate was hired in one of the first cohorts of Instacart shoppers in her city, and she recalled that there was more focus on the mobile app than there was on the work itself:

“There was like, no training. I went into one of those shared workspaces, there was a table. [They] just had a PowerPoint showing you how to use the app, and then you would download the training app on your phone and you would play around with it for a little bit, and then at the end they were like, ‘do you like it?’ And then we went downstairs to another area and they gave you a bag that had like, your credit card, receipt paper, your shirt… I think that was it. It was nothing. You were just like, thrown in.”

As Alexandra Rosenblat has written, gig economy platforms like Instacart and Uber can metamorphose themselves into technology companies, and sidestep their responsibilities as employers, whenever it is expedient to do so (2018:116). Instacart’s algorithmic management strategy is expedient for the company, but detrimental to its hundreds of thousands of workers.

\textsuperscript{34} Estimates of numbers of Instacart shoppers were provided by Nitasha Tiku, a tech reporter with the \textit{Washington Post}. 

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Chapter 3 References


Chapter 4: No Man’s Land: Negotiating Organizational Boundaries in Instacart Work

Perhaps it seems odd to talk about organizations when we talk about the gig economy. Few of the existing, comprehensive accounts of work in the gig economy have touched on the relationship between these platforms and other organizations, and for good reason (Ravenelle 2019, Rosenblat 2018, Ticona 2015). Working for Uber, TaskRabbit, or Care.com, though mediated by the products of a technology company, is deliberately a-organizational. Services are exchanged between individuals, and the gig economy platform gets a cut of the profit. With the exception of the short-term contracts workers agree to with the technology company that owns these platforms, formal organizations are not a part of the equation at all. (Indeed, as this dissertation illustrates, the work worlds of technology companies and gig economy workers are sharply divergent.) What companies like Instacart and other food delivery platforms bring to this picture is complementary relationships with more formal organizations.

No other gig economy platform dovetails as closely with another formal organization. While Grubhub and Caviar often have stickers or advertisements for their service in the restaurants where customers can buy from, and drivers come into the restaurant or store to place and pick up orders, there is no precious floorspace dedicated to those platforms in those restaurants. By contrast, in stores where Instacart operates, there must be a staging area where shoppers can print stickers and temporarily store orders. This trading of physical space for Instacart presence speaks to lucrative benefit of
Instacart’s presence; grocery stores do not generally have space to spare. Further, Instacart shoppers must learn more about the grocery store than what an average customer is expected to know. For example, Instacart shoppers often become familiar with members of asset protection or loss prevention departments within grocery stores, while customers generally do not.

One way we could better understand gig economy work is by separating platforms that do or do not rely on linkages with more formal organizations. On one side we would have platforms like Uber, Lyft, Care.com, TaskRabbit — labor and payment are traded between private citizens using their own bodies or property, facilitated by the platform. (The platform is the only organization involved in the interaction.) On the other we would have Instacart, Caviar, Grubhub, UberEats — the trade of labor and payment by private citizens is filtered through a third party, a formal organization that sells the goods being purchased and delivered. What makes Instacart curiously distinct from a ride-hailing platform is that Instacart’s labor process takes place within the jurisdiction of another, highly developed organization: the grocery store. This means that Instacart and its workforce must negotiate among many other organizations (since Instacart operates in a wide variety of stores) in order to function. As I will illustrate in this chapter, this complex organizational dance places Instacart shoppers in a peculiar position. They must carry out the ambiguous demands of their algorithmic boss, as well as field any additional requests that may come via customers, in the physical environment of the grocery store.
As a result, Instacart workers find themselves not only working within someone else’s workplace, they also find themselves enmeshed in the spaces and logics of another organization beyond that of their employer. This is a tricky business, because grocery stores are not designed to be quickly navigated. They are, fundamentally, retail spaces that are arranged to maximize the amount of time and money spent by customers in their four walls. Paco Underhill has documented the ways that grocery stores stock basic essentials like milk and eggs at the corner of the store furthest from the entrance specifically to draw shoppers through meandering aisles filled with all manner of consumer goods, ranging from Rainbow Goldfish to ceramic ashtrays to plastic picnicware (Underhill 1999).

While working for Instacart, there were moment of my work that serendipitously coincided with the goals of the store or of particular departments within the store. Those were straightforward, and sometimes happy occasions. On the other hand, there were many moments when my work was at odds with the layout or organizational goals of the store or of a particular store department. Those were trying, tiring times. There were compatibilities and incompatibilities between the store and the app. At other times, minor incidents would reveal the acute lack of organizational support or structure that came with being an Instacart shopper. All of this was exacerbated by an ambiguous algorithmic boss, whose demands often clashed with the realities of the store. What this implies is that the store environment exerts a powerful influence in Instacart work. I call on Leidner’s conceptualization of the customer service triangle, a feature of service work in which the customer, employer, and worker are each vying for control over the service
interaction (1993). I extend this heuristic by adding a fourth party, and suggesting that working for Instacart and similar platforms produces a service quadrangle through which workers must navigate.

In this chapter, I will use ethnographic and interview data to illustrate that the organizational context of the grocery store was highly consequential for Instacart work, and that falling into no man’s land could be emotionally and economically costly for workers. Working for Instacart is tantamount to being a “surrogate shopper,” and it puts workers in organizationally precarious and stressful reasons. I call this space “no man’s land.” (Platforms like UberEats and Caviar also produce this tension.) No man’s land is meant to evoke a space without clear rules or boundaries in which the rules of engagement are unclear and there is no one or nothing to help you other than your own best judgment. Being in the store, and interacting with its highly-developed systems, sharpens the degree to which you know you are alone. No man’s land may also extend beyond the boundaries of the grocery store – it’s an organizational space, specific to Instacart and related platforms, where one is a partial member of a series of organization but a full member of none.

**The Instacart Service Quadrangle**

Instacart relies heavily on the organization and infrastructure of grocery stores in order to function. The entire enterprise is predicated on a retail store filled with goods, cashiers who can ring up the orders, and a few square feet of floorspace on which
shoppers can stage orders for pickup. The idea that any unused space can or should be exploited for additional value harkens back to the early days of the sharing economy, which was predicated on the idea of maximizing a person or organization’s “idle capacity” (Schor and Attwood-Charles 2016). Much like an Airbnb host can rent out a room in their home for profit, grocery stores set aside some of their precious real estate to mutually benefit from Instacart’s business model.

This arrangement is symbiotic for both the platform and the stores where they operate, but it places Instacart workers in complex social situations. I could tell that my identity within the store was unclear because store customers often mistook me for a store employee and asked me questions about the location of items. Most customers were polite, and simply wanted to know the location of sliced bread or candy. Of course, I wasn’t always able to help. Once, on a busy afternoon, a customer asked me where the candy was, and without looking up from my task, I responded, “Aisle four. Or wait, five. I think five. That’s my best guess.” My response attempted to communicate that I was not an authority on the matter. But not all customers accepted ambiguity. I once crossed paths with a customer wearing a baseball cap while exiting an aisle, and upon seeing me, he demanded in an exasperated tone, “Where do you keep the kosher salt?” Customers wielded a kind of interactional power to stop employees (or those who they perceived to be employees) in the middle of whatever they were doing. Despite that I was not an employee, it felt both natural in terms of roles to acquiesce to their request for information, and it felt interactionally pressing to respond. Thus, conditions in the store could not be separated from my work for Instacart.
Shopping for Instacart lies at the intersection of interactive service work and prototypical gig economy work. Much like retail or food service, working for Instacart is a kind of service work: shoppers are beholden to the demands of both their employer and their service recipient, and all three parties have their own desired outcome of the interaction that may or may not overlap (Leidner 1993:4). Unlike other forms of interactive service work, the primary stakeholders with which Instacart shoppers interact are present digitally, on their mobile phone. Only having to interact with one’s bosses and customers via text has advantages – expressive moments like eye rolls are less interactionally risky when no one can see you doing it.

But much like typical gig economy work, working for Instacart involves facing difficult or dangerous conditions largely alone (e.g. Ravenelle 2019, Rosenblat 2018). The material conditions of the grocery store where the worker shops can be as influential to the outcome of a service interaction as the requests of a customer. Thus, to understand working for Instacart better, I propose that there is a fourth party to this web of relationships: the grocery store. In this way, working for Instacart is more like a service quadrangle than a triangle. Instacart provides its shoppers with a service called Shopper Support, a 1-800 number staffed with call center workers to address issues that shoppers may encounter while working. But Shopper Support representatives are rarely able to
resolve the issues that arise within the complex web of relationships of the Instacart service quadrangle.  

As I will illustrate below using ethnographic data, some the greatest challenges I experienced at work occurred when the mechanized demands of the app and the idiosyncratic demands of the customers came up against the practical realities of the grocery store, a setting where my presence as a worker was permitted but not always encouraged. In this way, the store became another influential party to the Instacart service interaction, in addition to the customer, the app, and me. Challenges posed by the conditions of the store were especially difficult to manage because there were rarely any coworkers or supervisors available to help. Interview data echo this finding, especially in times of increased precarity.

A particularly exhausting kind of labor was required when both the app and the customer were unaware of the material realities of the grocery store. The effects of this confluence of factors is well-illustrated in this account of my desperate attempt to locate dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets:

The customer, Kelly, had requested Perdue chicken nuggets, the one in the shapes of dinosaurs, but they weren’t on the shelf. These nuggets are a popular item, and they really flew off the shelves on today – I had just picked some up for an earlier order, maybe around 1 PM, and by 2, they were all gone. Perdue has two kinds of chicken nuggets and both were gone. If the other kind had been in stock I would have grabbed them. Perdue nuggets also happen to be the only chicken nuggets that are stocked in the refrigerated meat case, near the front of the store; all the others are stocked in the freezer aisles, toward the back of the store. So, I

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35 I regret not finding a way to interview these call center workers, who were undoubtedly engaged in their own complex web of interactive service work.
went back to the freezer section to find some frozen dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets to get as a replacement. This walk took about 90 seconds. While walking to the freezer aisles, a woman with a cart full of groceries stopped and asked me, “do you work here?” Ordinarily, I would have stopped and said something like, no but I can help you find something. However, on this occasion, I was annoyed that she had asked me, and felt very preoccupied with trying to get Kelly her groceries. I responded, without really stopping, “No, sorry, I just work for Instacart.” Her face fell and we went our separate ways. I’m accustomed to the irritation of having customers bother you for things in a retail job, but there’s something about when Wegmans customers ask me for assistance that feels unfair. I think it's because I am already very actively serving a customer whenever I’m working.

After I had scanned in a bag of Tyson frozen dinosaur nuggets, the app told me to put them back and get the other kind of Purdue nuggets. I was annoyed – the app didn’t know what I knew, which was that there were zero Perdue nuggets to be had. Out of desperation, I texted Kelly again. Kelly told me that “she” – her daughter, I’d gathered from an earlier text interaction – didn’t want them if they weren’t Perdue, which rendered my five-minute detour to replace this item pointless.

If Kelly had been in the store herself, she would have seen that both varieties of Purdue nuggets were out of stock and she would have simply continued shopping. She had information about her preferences that I didn’t have access to. Because Instacart heavily discourages its shoppers from refunding customers for out-of-stock item, and because I knew that other kinds of chicken nuggets existed in the store, I felt compelled to find a replacement. When I chose a replacement and scanned it in, Kelly was alerted, and then she told the app to tell me to put it back and get an item that only I knew didn’t exist. In this way, I was trapped among a series of cascading information asymmetries – Kelly didn’t know that I felt like I had to get her a replacement she didn’t want, the app didn’t know that Perdue nuggets were out of stock, I didn’t know that only Perdue nuggets would suffice – that spent both my energies and my goal time. Further, this virtual drama...
took place as I was holding my phone in the actual store, which was busy, as most 
grocery stores are on Sundays. Getting asked by a customer “if I worked there” abruptly 
brought me out of my phone and into the chaotic store; it also created another plane on 
which someone could make a demand on me.

Instacart shoppers must juggle the poorly informed but strident demands of the 
app, the idiosyncratic demands of the customer, and the material demands of the store, all 
while attempting to complete the order in the time requested. There is often simply not 
enough time to tell the customer why you can’t get them a particular replacement, no way 
to justify your brusque pace of movement to grocery shoppers, and there is no way to 
inform the app of an error.

Amid this web of interactional pushes and pulls, Instacart shoppers attempt to 
carry out their work tasks quickly and effectively. In the remainder of this chapter, I will 
illustrate that the partnerships between Instacart and the stores where they operate may 
have heterogenous effects on Instacart work. At some points, the symbiosis of platform 
and store yielded unexpected compatibilities that helped Instacart shoppers achieve their 
work tasks. At others, the store and the platform seemed to be at odds with each other. 
These disjoints had the effect of slowing work down or making it more challenging. 
Finally, Instacart shoppers occasionally found themselves unmoored from the protections 
or benefits associated with any organization in the course of their work. I refer to this 
liminal space as no man’s land.
Compatibilities

At some points during Instacart work, shoppers are likely to find that the organization of the store helps them on their way. After all, Instacart and the stores where they operate have the same goal of maximizing their profit by selling groceries to consumers. Mechanisms that help the grocery store sell more items, such as a friendly and accessible style of service from employees, may also assist Instacart shoppers in getting the correct items to customers. Symbiosis at the organization level also influences Instacart shoppers and grocery store employees at the interaction level.

A problem that I often encountered while working for Instacart was that the item a customer had requested was either out of stock or simply not on the shelves. For items like potato chips, this was easy enough to solve by finding the same item from another brand. But for other items, like rotisserie chickens, no reasonable replacement was available. Because Instacart shoppers are discouraged from providing refunds for out-of-stock items, whenever possible, I tried to find a replacement item for out-of-stock customers.

On a few occasions, store employees helped me locate unusual items. And in a more general sense, in certain departments of the store – like produce, deli, and meat – employees treated me as if I was a customer to whom they owed a certain level of friendly service. In this field note excerpt, I illustrate how produce employees helped me secure an unusual item:

On one of my orders, a customer had requested something called a “two person vegetable tray.” In the produce section, I found the colorful array of
vegetable trays, the cherry tomato and cauliflower-studded sort that one might encounter at a child’s birthday party, but none that were small enough for two. Behind the display of vegetable trays, three store employees in aprons and caps were chopping fruits and vegetables. I made eye contact with one of them and asked, “I’m looking for a two person vegetable tray?” She smiled and said, “There aren’t any out right now but I can make you one. It should take about ten minutes.” I looked at down at my phone in my hand, ever-mindful of the running stopwatch that monitored my speed, and said, “Maybe I’ll find something else, I’m not sure if I have enough time.” She said, “I think I can do it in five, just give me a minute.” I said, “Okay, if you’re sure. Thank you so much.” I dashed off to find the rest of the produce items on the order, which included a family pack of watermelon spears, a family pack of cantaloupe spears, and a 32-ounce package of strawberries. By the time I returned to the employees chopping produce, the veggie tray was almost ready. The employee who offered to make the tray said, “I just need to put a label on it.” I said, “Thank you. No rush.” There were two men working alongside her, and one said to the other, nodding at me, “Yeah, she’ll be here all day.” They laughed, and I did too. The employee, whose nametag read “John,” joked that I should call off on such a beautiful day, and added after a beat that he almost called in sick. He then quipped that he and his fellow vegetable-choppers should all take the day off, go to the pool and drink margaritas. At every wisecrack, his two coworkers laughed encouragingly. The woman finished printing the label for my vegetable tray and handed it over to me. I thanked her again.

The help of this employee was particularly kind, because short of a bag of baby carrots, there is little in a grocery store produce section that can reasonably replace a single-serving veggie tray. By the good-natured joking of the employees, I could tell that they knew I was working, but the woman who made the veggie tray treated me like she would any other customer. To these employees, at least, my role in the store was largely indistinguishable from other customers. They offered a service to me in the same way they would to a customer. Complementarities like this one – in which I was in search of an item and employees were happy to provide it to me – made my work days easier and more enjoyable.
Some aspects of Instacart’s workflow interlocked serendipitously with the objectives of grocery store employees. For example, at some point between late 2017 and early 2018, Instacart introduced a barcode scanner to its mobile application for shoppers.\(^{36}\) This technology was likely introduced to speed up the labor process: if shoppers only have to touch an item once, and do not have to unload items onto a conveyer belt and wait while a cashier rings up each item, they can complete more orders in less time. But this technology also saves labor for cashiers, who are themselves monitored and evaluated by metrics like item per minute rates.

On a handful of occasions during my field work, store cashiers told me how much they enjoyed it when Instacart shoppers came through their line. On one occasion, I arrived in the checkout line of a white woman with short, brown hair. When I approached her empty lane, she smiled and said, “my favorite kind of customer.” I smiled back and said, “is that right?” She replied, “oh, it’s so much easier.” I thought of the many times I had seen store cashiers wearing wrist braces and doing stretches at the start of their shift – scanning and lifting groceries on your feet all day is no easy task. On another occasion, a young white man who appeared to be in his teens alluded to the connection between Instacart’s app and speed-based objectives for cashiers. As I rolled my cart up beside him, where he could most easily scan my phone, he said, “I love these Instacart things.” I said, “oh yeah? Why’s that?” As he scanned my barcodes, he replied, “cuz um, they’re easy and quick. And they check how fast you do things. So this is just like, a free speed

\(^{36}\) I was unable to find the exact date of this adoption, but interviewees who worked before 2018 did not experience this technology.
When I asked how they measured how fast he worked, he responded, “they like – I don’t know, they have some weird formula. It’s just timing all sorts of stuff.” Neither of us fully understood how we were being evaluated, but we knew our speed was important. A mechanism that was time-saving for Instacart was also time-saving for cashiers. We were both subject to the opaque and proprietary evaluation algorithms of our employers, and in this case, the goals of those algorithms overlapped.

Instacart shoppers may capitalize on cashiers’ mutual need for speed to meet the algorithmic demands of the app. For example, Jake, who worked for Instacart in Denver, learned how to identify the quickest cashiers so he could achieve lower times. “I got to know the cashiers and who was faster and who was not as fast, who talked a lot, if they were in training… [if they were new hires,] there was always a sign, like, ‘in training.’ I'd be like, nuh-uh, not going there. I got to know the folks.” The speed strategy explained here reminded me of my own, unconscious tendency to choose the same cashier for every order during my Instacart shifts. This was a strategy to minimize unpredictability during the checkout experience and maximize speed.

As an Instacart shopper, I occupied various roles in the grocery store. Most frequently, I behaved like a customer – I asked employees for help, I used a cart, and I went through checkout. At other times, I could pursue lines of action that made me look more like a coworker. I answered customers’ questions, I exchanged raised eyebrows with a cashier over a rude customer, and I certainly felt a greater kinship to the

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37 A “speed run” is when someone plays the entirety or part of a video game with the intent of finishing it as quickly as possible. This genre of video game play originated in the early 1990’s with video games like Doom and Metroid.
employees – most of whom were being paid an hourly rate for their efforts just like I was – than I did to the customers.

On some occasions, grocery store employees treated me like a customer. But no amount of friendliness between me and the store employees unseated the primacy of the Instashopper app, which prevented me from fully embodying the roles of customer or coworker. For example, though I was frequently offered assistance by grocery store employees, I wasn’t always able to accept it due to the demands of Instacart work:

A few weeks into my fieldwork, I received an order that requested items from the prepared foods department that I had never seen before, and that were difficult to locate. I was walking around the prepared foods aisle holding my phone out in front of me, looking perplexed, when a white man behind the meat counter said to me cheerfully, “What can I help you find?” He wore a white cap and apron and his nametag read, “Geoff.” I figured he had seen Instacart shoppers like me looking perplexed in his section of the store before. I said to him, “I got a lot of problems.” I gestured to my phone and told him I needed to find a single-serving container of shrimp cocktail. I was certain this item – shrimp cocktail for one – was too ridiculous to exist, but he came out from around the counter and walked me over to the prepared shrimp area without comment and helped me find the requested item. The next item I needed to find but couldn’t locate was a two-pack of raw hamburgers with mushroom and swiss cheese. Geoff said, “Let me check behind the counter and see if we have any.” When he found that there were no mushroom and swiss cheese burgers ready, Geoff instructed two young men behind the counter to make some for me. I thanked them all. He turned back toward me and asked, “what else ya got?” But that was all I needed from the meat area. He asked, “do you have more shopping to do?” I said, “yes.” With a wink, he said, “why don’t you drop back here later then?” I thanked him again and left to find organic hamburger rolls and some items from produce.

When I returned to the meat section, the burgers weren’t finished being made yet. The young men behind the counter told me it would be another five minutes. At this point, I could tell by looking at the stopwatch on my app that I was running out of time, and I knew that if I waited for the burgers to be ready, I would go over my goal time for the order. I asked them, “would it really mess you up if I didn’t need them anymore?” One of the young men shrugged and said no. I told them that I was being timed, and that I couldn’t
really wait. I apologized. I could see behind the counter that they had already begun doing the work on these items and I felt guilty. I sent a message to the customer explaining that they were out of the mushroom and swiss burgers that they wanted, and would they prefer either plain burgers or perhaps a flavored turkey burger? But I didn’t wait for a response because I only had a few minutes left to make my goal time. I replaced the mushroom and swiss burgers with plain beef burgers and headed for the checkout. I felt humiliated and frustrated.

The employees helped me, in alignment with the logic of their organizational roles. However, my performance as a customer was poorly played – due to the demands of the Instacart app, I felt unable to wait for the product that was being prepared for me. As I will illustrate later in this chapter, different departments of the grocery store have different goals. But Instacart only has one goal for its workers: speed.

Some of my interviewees also reported building positive relationships with or receiving helpful customer service by grocery store employees. When I asked Jake how the employees treated him at the Whole Foods where he worked as a full-service shopper, he said,

“They treated me like a VIP customer. There was one person in the bakery who like, would get me – ‘Oh, you know what, let me get you the fresh one that just came out. I'll get you the good one.’ The fishmongers would always say... at the beginning, it was just like, ‘you're here. Okay.’ But then they'd be like ‘let's give you a little extra,’ or, ‘Oh, you don't want this piece.’ ‘Tell the customer that, you know, we have this new thing. It's a bit cheaper, but it's better or different,’ or whatever. And that would help my ratings and my tip, also.”

These overlaps or intersections did not necessarily make the job easier or lessen the labor that Instacart requires. But unlike the disjoints, they didn’t make it worse. The point is not

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[38] Reflecting further on this encounter, and on my positionality in the field, it also seems possible that I received a gendered, paternalistic assistance that Geoff might not have offered to a young man working for Instacart. But I do not need to understand employees’ motivations for helping me to understand that the app influenced the way I responded to that help.
that when organizations happily interlock, there is less work for workers. The point is that sometimes organizational goals align. Workers generally work the same, if not more, in those cases. They do work more, and harder, when organizational goals or objectives do not overlap.

**Disjoints**

Sometimes the organizational goals of Instacart and the stores where they operate diverge rather than overlap. In these circumstances, Instacart shoppers must exert greater effort, often relying only on their best guess of how to resolve a situation, with no clear sense of consequences for their decisions. These events resulted in greater effort and discomfort.

On some occasions, the bureaucratic, rigid nature of the grocery store’s organization clashed with the relatively fluid structure of the Instashopper app. When these sorts of disjoints occurred, I found there was no clear resolution, and I often ended up using my own time and effort to resolve the situation:

The customer requested a pack of four yogurts by a brand called YoCrunch that contained crushed-up pieces of Oreo cookies. For whatever reason, on this day, the store was out of many things, and I was making many replacements. The only YoCrunch products on the shelf were two single-serving containers of yogurt with M&M candies. I replaced the Oreo yogurts with the M&M yogurts and messaged the customer to tell her so. I continued shopping the rest of the order. After I checked out, and was looking at my phone in the staging area behind the row of cash registers, I saw that the customer had messaged me to say that she “would pass on” the M&M yogurts since her child only eats the Oreo kind. This left me in a pickle, since I had already checked out and effectively “paid” for the yogurts using my Instacart-issued
credit cart, and the customer would be charged. Since I had failed to notice the customer’s message, I felt responsible to make it right. For the average grocery store customer, making a return is easy: you just bring your receipt and the item to be returned to the customer service counter. However, because I was a sort of middle woman in a transaction that typically takes place between two parties, I had to both refund the customer and give the items back to the store in order to fully resolve the issue. I looked around for a moment, as if a coworker or supervisor would magically appear to advise me on what to do; they did not, so I used my best judgment.

First, to refund the customer, I used the Instashopper app to go backward through the checkout process and refund the customer for the yogurt. I was worried that taking this action within the mobile app would require me to go through checkout again, but fortunately, I was able to refund the customer with no issues and then return to the “staging” portion of the app’s workflow. Then, to return the yogurts to the store, I took the receipt for the order and the yogurts and went to the service desk. I approached an employee behind the desk and brightly explained that the customer had decided they didn’t want the yogurts, and that I needed to return them. His face took on a concerned expression and he said, “okay, but you can’t return those because they’re perishables.” Surprised, I said, “really?” And he said, “yeah,” and looked to another employee to his right, who said, “yeah, Instacart shoppers can’t return perishables.” I said, “huh, well that’s too bad, I just pulled these off the shelf. So they’re just a loss then?” The male employee I’d been speaking to reached for a white binder and opened it on the counter in front of him. He flipped through a few laminated pages and read, from a section explicating policies around Instacart, that Instacart shoppers could return nonperishables but not perishables. He said that the front-end manager had put these rules into place. After explaining this, the employee said of the yogurt, “so I don’t know what happens to them.” I said, “well, me neither.” I hesitated a moment, unsure of what to do, and realized that for him, this interaction was over. Sheepishly, I said, “well, let me get out of your way,” and shifted the yogurts to the side of the counter. He moved on to helping a person who was behind me. I decided there wasn’t anything he could help me with, and took the yogurts back to the staging area. Having been forbidden from returning the yogurts but feeling like taking the yogurts would constitute shop-lifting, I opted to leave them in the fridge in the Instacart staging area. I wondered if I would get in trouble because the
yogurts had been refunded to the customer but were, according to store records, taken out of the store. Since I’d refunded the customer, I wondered who, technically, had paid for them – Instacart, I suppose? I felt frustrated that I was left to my own creativity to solve this problem, and felt the minor but noticeable sting of a store employee being annoyed at me. Further, solving this problem added about ten minutes to this order. At the end of this shift, my app let me know that I had missed my speed goals for the day, and I know that this kerfuffle was at least partially responsible.

This interaction partly illustrates the complexity of attempting to satisfy all sides of the service quadrangle. If I had been working for this customer directly, without being mediated by Instacart, I would have been able to return the yogurt without issue. But because I was associated with Instacart within the store’s jurisdiction, I was unable to. On the other hand, if Instacart operated out of its own warehouses, designed not for shopping but for picking, I would not have needed to navigate the store’s obstacles (physical and organizational) at all. There being two profit-seeking organizations at play in this interaction is what made it so complex. In that moment, I was alone. There was no infrastructure within the grocery store’s organization or Instacart’s to handle unusual circumstances, no manager and, on this day, no coworker to consult. I had to make a decision based on insufficient information, with unclear consequences. The normal function of the Instacart work arrangement is for shoppers to handle these sorts of things on their own, to use their own time to solve it.

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39 This is the business model of FreshDirect, an online grocer that has served cities on the east coast of the United States for over two decades.
On other occasions, routine, particular happenings within the store delimited my ability to obey the app’s requests. For example, one of the most popular items at the grocery store where I worked, among store customers and Instacart customers, was rotisserie chicken. A rotisserie chicken, in the world if Instacart, is a troublesome product. First, in-store shoppers must store rotisserie chickens in an insulated bag in the staging area so that they stay warm while they wait for a full-service shopper to pick up the order. However, in the Instashopper app, there is no specific bag location that indicates a hot item, just letters that correspond to shelves. So, occasionally, a full-service shopper would be in a rush and forget to look in the insulated bag and would assume that one of the bags from the order was missing. On one early morning during my fieldwork, I opened the insulated bag to store a rotisserie chicken I had just shopped for only to find another, whole chicken from the previous day that had been forgotten about in the bag. It had to be thrown away, an entire, grotesque, tepid chicken. Second, rotisserie chickens are one of a small group of items that cannot be adequately replaced. As a convenience item, rotisserie chickens can be a boon for busy families: they can be picked up from the store, along with a plastic bag of broccoli and yet another plastic bag of microwavable rice, and dinner can be on the table in minutes after a busy day. Prepared foods are one of the most profitable sections of most grocery stores, and profits associated with them are projected to grow (Ruhlman 2018:229). In a society where hours worked are increasing but wages are stagnating, meals that can be prepared quickly are important. Further, according to the American Time Use Survey, recent data indicates that though women are working about as much as men are, they are still bearing a greater share of domestic labor
like cooking and planning meals. So, access to items like rotisserie chickens are
depended upon heavily by women and families to paddle against rising economic
precarity, and replacing them with something technically similar – like raw or frozen
chicken – seemed like an unsatisfying compromise.

But perhaps the greatest challenge presented by the request for rotisserie chickens
is that they are only prepared at certain times of the day, and they sell out. Instacart
promises its customers an on-demand grocery experience, but not all grocery items are
available all the time. Some items, like a box of Triscuits (or something like it), are
relatively static, and can be counted upon to be available at any time of day. But other
items, like rotisserie chickens, are dynamic, and have schedules of their own. The store
where I worked sold rotisserie chickens that were prepared twice per day: once in the
morning, by 11 AM, and again in the late afternoon, just in time for shoppers who work
from 9-5 to pick them up. They were held in a heated display near the front of the store,
and their tantalizing scent was a dominant feature of the store. At times, I would receive
orders requesting rotisserie chickens before they were ready. At least once, I simply
refunded the customer for the rotisserie chicken if it wasn’t available, in spite of the app’s
protests that “customers strongly prefer replacements.” But I felt uneasy about refunding
customers for the rotisserie chicken if it wasn’t available. I imagined the household
accounting that might have occurred on the other side of my phone, and I felt the familiar
pull of the drive to provide good customer service.
In the field note excerpt below, I detail an instance when a rotisserie chicken was requested before they were ready. Tired of refunding customers for rotisserie chicken that weren’t ready, I decided I would try to interact with Instacart to get the customer’s order rescheduled. I had heard another shopper at my store briefly describe this procedure before. He had recommended calling the 1-800 “Shopper Happiness” line that was provided as a service to Instacart shoppers. Unfortunately, my attempt to reschedule the order and provide a better service resulted in more work for me:

Like yesterday, my first order gave me trouble. I was shopping an order where the customer, Jeanette, had requested two rotisserie chickens. However, at 10 AM, the chickens were not out yet, although I could see and smell that they were almost done. I worried that they wouldn’t be ready by the time I had shopped her order; it wasn’t worth it for me to go thirty minutes over my goal time just to get the chicken. I had heard Tom mention this before as an issue early in the morning, and that he has called shopper happiness and asked to have orders rescheduled. Because I figured this customer would be upset if they didn’t get any rotisserie chickens when they’re requested two, I decided to park my cart and call shopper happiness. At this point, I had shopped half of the order – in my cart, I had Glade plug-ins, Clorox cleaning spray, a case of bottled water, a bag of green beans, a box of oatmeal, and a tub of Fluff. I got the shopper happiness number by Googling it. At first, the phone picked up and I could hear the sounds of a call center in the background, but no one was on the line. I said “hello” four times before hanging up and trying again. On the second time, someone picked up and offered to help me. I told the person on the other line the situation and they responded as if I was asking a complex thing – to have my current order postponed so that I could take another order, thereby ensuring the first order was properly filled. The voice on the other end said at one point, “That’s a tough one. Give me one second please,” and put me on hold. When the person returned to the phone, they said they had spoken to the customer and that the order would be rescheduled. I thanked them and asked, to confirm, “so when I hang up with you I’ll get a different order?” The voice responded, “you’ll likely get her [the customer’s] order, it was just postponed by about twenty minutes, that way the chicken will be done.” I said okay and thanked her before hanging up. This was good news, to me – I was going to be given more time to do the same order. However, this is not what happened. I opened my InstaShopper app again and saw that I’d been assigned a different order (which also requested a rotisserie
chicken, incidentally). Thinking that perhaps I would get Jeanette’s order afterwards, I left all of her things in my cart and shopped this new order. After I finished shopping the new order, staged it, and submitted it, I was given yet another new order. At this point, I figured Jeanette’s order had been sent to another store to be fulfilled, since I was not getting it. But I was still a little worried about putting all the items back in case I would need to just pick them up again, so I left a Wegmans bag with the dry goods on the shelf and put the green beans back in the produce section. This third order requested eggs, which is near bottled water, so I used that opportunity to put the case of water back on the shelf. I ended up putting back the other dry goods during a lull toward the end of my shift. While everything ended up fine, I was annoyed at yet another example of how trying to provide good service ended up giving me more work.

The issue rescheduling the rotisserie chicken represented a clash between Instacart’s on-demand service and the rhythms of the grocery store. In my capacity as a service provider, I tried to negotiate between them but the opacity of Instacart’s operations prevented me. I lost time and effort attempting to provide a good service.

**No Man’s Land**

Instacart is noticeably different from most grocery stores in organization and work norms. Lena started working for Instacart after seeing shoppes at the Whole Foods where she had a part time job. She reported that working for Whole Foods was a highly formalized position that involved many levels of management and certification, especially for those working in the meat and cheese departments. Comparing it to Instacart, she said,

[Whole Foods] was a pretty well-oiled machine. Like, I always had someone to report to, [they were] pretty strict about clocking in, and yeah, Instacart just kind of felt lawless. Not that I need so many rules, but it just felt nebulous. Like, what am I doing? It just felt bizarre. No structure.
Navigating the structure of the grocery store as well as the “lawlessness” of Instacart was at times a disorienting feeling. The events in this section describe times when there were disjoints between Instacart and store goals, but the events that transpired were a result of not having an organizational “home.” These events took place in what I call no man’s land. By no man’s land, I mean a specific, complex gap between organizational boundaries into which workers may fall. In no man’s land, workers have no advocate and no guidelines for behavior, yet they may be faced with consequential decisions (or decisions that seem consequential, with no one to tell them otherwise).

For Instacart shoppers, there were psychological and material consequences to having no organizational “home base.” In my interview with Eliot, he referred to a consistent lack of access to bathrooms as “a characteristic of the job.” He worked for Instacart as a full-service shopper for about six months. He recounted a particularly humiliating encounter in which he was unable to find a bathroom while he was between Instacart orders in his car:

“I had to pee in the back of my car in a cup, which is so degrading. I am an adult man, with a house. There is no reason I should be peeing in a cup. It was in between gigs, I was on the way from one thing to another thing. I was nowhere near any, like, there wasn't a CVS in sight. There was nothing. Nothing. So I was just like, pure desperation. I came home that day and my partner was like, how was work? And I was like, well, this is the most degrading day of my entire life. It was so humiliating.”

Earlier in our interview, Eliot had told me that it was frequent to receive orders that led him to drop-off destinations that were far from the city, or from another grocery store. As a result, he was only near a store (and, therefore, near a bathroom) for a small proportion of his workday. He described this incident as “degrading,” “humiliating,” and
“shameful.” Alexandra Rosenblat has documented that Uber drivers commonly urinate in bottles in their vehicles, since their car is their workplace (2018). For Uber drivers, there is no promise of organizational stability. But for full-service Instacart shoppers, who work both in their cars and in stores, the grocery store acts as an oasis of humanity. At the store, they can use the bathroom, pick up something to eat, or charge their phone for a brief moment while picking up an order. But the Instashopper app and its commands serve as constant reminders that full-service shoppers do not have full access to the grocery store and its organizational benefits.

Instacart shoppers may also find themselves in uncomfortable gaps between the various departments of the grocery store where they work and the ambiguous nature of algorithmic management. Not all departments or employees within a grocery store have the same goals. While a customer service logic seemed to prevail in departments like the deli and prepared foods, other departments, like asset protection and the front end, were primarily concerned with losses in revenue and productivity. Instacart offers grocery stores both an opportunity for increased profits and the possibility of lost profits through neglect or theft. Thus, my interactions with store employees varied depending on what store department they worked for. During my fieldwork, I had a run-in with asset protection, the department of the grocery store responsible for preventing theft or loss of product, because an item in one of my orders had not been scanned, and thus had not
been paid for.\textsuperscript{40} When I reached out to Instacart for help solving the issue, there was no clear Instacart-led solution, and no way to know the stakes of my actions. In the end, I decided to pay for the item myself to resolve the issue. The next few pages provide a detailed account of the event from my field notes. This extended ethnographic excerpt illustrates: 1) that I was alone between the organizational logics of the store and Instacart, 2) that my actions had mixed and unclear consequences in this inter-organizational space, and 3) that the drive to be a “good employee” or “do the right thing” could lead to unpaid work:

\textsuperscript{40} I had been introduced to Hailey, the asset protection employee who features in this excerpt, on the day I was trained. I was informed that Hailey would perform regular “audits” of Instacart shoppers’ receipts and compare the receipts to staged items to ensure that all items had been paid for.
In the middle of an order, as I was picking toothpaste, mouthwash, and shampoo for a customer, I was approached by Hailey, the woman who I’d met and who’d introduced herself as being in asset protection department. She called to me, “Hey,” from the edge of the toiletry aisles. I replied, “hey,” and she came over to me. She held a receipt in her hand, and told me that while doing an audit, she had found that on the receipt for my second order of the day, one Marie Callender’s steak and potatoes frozen meal had been scanned at checkout but two were in the freezer. She had marked the item in question, which had only been scanned once. I told her that the customer had requested two, and I recalled that the cashier who checked me out on that order had had a hard time with his scanner. He would place the scanner right against my phone and pull it away while scanning to try to capture the barcode. Once, he accidentally scanned something twice and then had to delete it. So, as I tried to remember him scanning the barcode for the frozen meals, it seemed possible to me that he might have accidentally scanned it once when he thought he’d scanned it twice, or that while deleting an excessive scan, he had deleted the second frozen meal barcode. In any case, Hailey seemed uninterested in any potential explanation for why this happened. She handed me the receipt and said something like, “So I don’t know if you need to call Emily or Amanda⁴¹, or…” I replied, a bit confused, “I’ve never had this happen before, so I don’t know, but I guess I’ll text Emily when I get a free second.” Hailey said, “great, thanks,” and walked away. I then held the receipt in my hand and felt flummoxed. I also felt like I had just been chided, despite that it seemed like the person who made the mistake was the cashier, and not me. I had been doing great on my current order, a 62-unit order with a goal time of one hour and twenty-six minutes, but this really threw me for a loop. I wondered, should I text Emily right now? Should I wait? I could feel the timer on my phone running while I pondered – when would I have time to explain

⁴¹ Emily and Amanda were two white women who worked for Instacart in a managerial capacity. Amanda was the area shift lead, and she oversaw hiring, training, and other high-level managerial tasks for three stores in the area. I saw her three times in the course of my fieldwork. Emily worked a shift lead in the store where I worked, but she left her position about a month into my fieldwork, and was not replaced until the last few weeks of my fieldwork. She also trained me. I saw her five times.
this situation over text? How serious of a problem is this? I decided at the time that the issue, though clearly placed in my sphere of responsibility, was not my fault, and so I could wait to deal with it later.

While I staged the order, Cody arrived to the staging area with an order of his own. I asked him, without really greeting him, “Have you ever had that person from asset protection ask you about something from your order?” He said no. I told him about my exchange with Hailey, and about the receipt now in my possession. I told him, “She asked if I was gonna call Emily or Amanda and I was like…” As I trailed off, Cody took over for me, suggesting, “’no?’” I volunteered my own, meeker, “’I guess?’ But when am I supposed to do that, when I’m on break?” Cody closed his eyes and shook his head. He clearly did not approve of my using my break on this task. He said, while organizing his bags, “With that kind of mistake I doubt it’s a big deal. Apparently there was someone who used to steal a ton of stuff.” While sticker ing and staging my bags, I said, “Oh really?” He continued, “yeah, apparently he would add stuff to the order and then just take it home with him.” Closing the refrigerator door, I said, “that seems a little… poorly thought out.” Cody agreed. Once I was sure he had nothing left to say on the topic, I tried to brush it off like I wasn’t worried about it and said, “Whatever.”

Later in my shift, there was a lull between orders, so I decided to take that opportunity to text Emily about the receipt, and about the frozen dinner issue. I had never texted Emily before. I copied her phone number into a new text message on my phone; hers, Amanda’s, and community support’s number were hand-written on a piece of paper posted on the side of the black cabinet in the staging area. I sent Emily a text. I wrote it quickly, expecting another order to come in at any moment.

However, another order never came. I very slowly began to relax, feeling less like a full can of sparkling water and more like a person with every passing moment; noticing things more, remembering what my feet and legs feel like after walking four miles in a grocery store. I waited for a response from Emily but didn’t get one. I caught up on texts from friends. The receipt with the frozen dinner on it was burning a hole in my back pocket. With only a few
minutes left on my shift, I started breaking down my cart. I placed any of my open bags inside the black cabinet on a clothes hanger, placed my clips on the inside of the cabinet doors (they have magnets on the back), broke down my priority mail boxes, and clipped them together with the binder clip attached to the front of my cart. I placed my lanyard back in the zippered pouch with my name on it, inside the plastic bin. Not too much later, the app sent me a push notification saying my shift had ended.

After a typical shift, I would change my clothes and get something to eat. However, on this day, I needed to buy my own groceries. For that reason, I decided not to change out of my sneakers and Instacart shirt just yet. I was already in the aisles with a cart, after all; I decided to just start my personal shopping, and to then change once I had checked out. That way, I could be entirely finished with groceries for the day.

I was picking up my last few items in the produce department, a bunch of organic bananas, a red onion, some russet potatoes, and peaches, when I received a text from Amanda.

Amanda asked me to go see if the order was still there, and that if it was not, I should get my lanyard again from the staging area and attempt to pay for the balance of the item with my payment cart. I assumed the logic here was that since the amount needed to pay for the item had once been on my card, that it might still be on my card. This sort of made sense to me, so I did as she said.

I checked out with my groceries and then wheeled my cart – filled with my own groceries, not that it felt any different – back to the staging area, where Cody was. He said, “You back for more?” I told him that I had gotten in touch with Amanda about the extra frozen meal, and that I would need to pay for it with my lanyard. I fetched my lanyard and walked to customer service with it, and with the receipt.
When I arrived at the customer service desk, an employee was standing in front of the counter, spraying it with disinfectant. She sensed me there behind her and said, while rubbing the counter with a rag, “I’ll be with you in just a minute, someone spilled raw chicken!” I said, “Oh, please, take your time.” She finished wiping off the counter and then walked around the counter and resumed her regular position, behind a computer and beside a phone. She asked brightly, “What can I do for you?” Her nametag read “Joan,” and I saw her photo on the wall to my right with her title underneath. She looked a bit older in person than she did in the photo, which made me think that she has worked at Wegmans for a long time. I explained to her that I was an Instacart shopper – “obviously,” gesturing to my t-shirt – and that on one of my orders, an item had not been scanned, and that I would need to pay for the remaining amount with my Instacart credit card. She said okay, and began looking up the item in question. She was having a hard time finding the exact item, but she did eventually find a frozen meal of equal value. While she was getting this set up, I texted Amanda; I wondered what I could have done differently in this scenario, feeling annoyed at working a half hour after my shift had ended. Amanda’s response – basically saying that it was my responsibility to ensure that the cashier always rings up the right amount of items – left me feeling irritated, as I couldn’t remember ever being told to vigilantly watch cashiers during my training, but I kept it chipper.

Joan encouraged me to come over to the side of the counter where there was a card reader that I could use. I swiped the Instacart card the way I always do for orders, and it was declined. A very helpful text message arrived to my phone to let me know that the card had been declined. I assume that this is all a part of a larger, and more complex, system of security measures to ensure that shoppers don’t misuse their Instacart credit cards. I apologized to Joan and said I would need to go get in touch with my shift lead. She said, “hey, don’t worry about it, I’m here!”

With the card declined, I decided to text Amanda again, now deciding that I was going to make my problem her problem until it got solved so that I could leave. She suggested that I try to locate the order that requested the frozen meal in the app, and if that didn’t work, to contact community support. I
suspected that I wouldn’t be able to see the order in my app since my shift had so long been over, and I was right; when I went to see “orders” in my app, there was nothing there. I headed back to the staging area to deliberate what I was going to do. When I got back there, Cody was still there. I told him what was going on. When I said I would have to call community support, he groaned and said, “community support is so useless.” He also speculated that Amanda perhaps didn’t really know what she was doing. He said, “she always seems flustered.” I agreed that it did seem like she was either very preoccupied or incapable of helping me. I said, “I texted them about this problem an hour ago and they’re only just now getting back to me. That doesn’t feel like my fault.” At this point, it was 3:30 and I desperately did not want to be dealing with this situation anymore. Cody told me that I should report my shift as “bad” in the app – after every shift ends, the next time you return to the app, a dialog comes up that asks, “How was your last shift?” You can choose from “great,” “okay,” and “bad.” Today, I chose “bad.” In the next screen, from options of what was bad, I chose “checkout issue,” and in a third screen, when asked for additional comment, I simply wrote, “I’m dealing with a cashier error thirty minutes after my shift ended.” So I told Cody, “Oh, I did.” He said, “I say it was bad every time my shift is even a little bad, and I go into every little detail about what went wrong.” I said, “oh yeah? Do you ever get a response?” He shook his head and said, “oh, never.”

I returned to the black cabinet to find the number for community support. When I dialed the number, I heard a pre-recorded message saying, “Thank you for calling shopper happiness. We are experiencing an unusually large volume of calls, and are only taking emergency requests. You may email you question to…” At this point, I began to feel very irritated. Now I needed to send an email? I had no idea how long it would take for someone to read my email and put $2.49 on my card so that I could leave, but I suspected it would take a long time. I tried the phone number again and got the same message. I told Cody what was happening, and I texted Amanda to let her know that I wasn’t able to get through to community support, and that at this point, I needed to leave. Her responses became increasingly vague. When I said I needed to leave, and suggested that I try to address the issue during my next shift on Sunday, she said only, “If you leave you won’t be able to fix it.” A moment later I got another text from her saying, “If you need to leave you can, but the order issue will be unresolved. Just let me know what you decide.” I felt furious. I had no idea what my options were, or what difference it made, which made it difficult – and also, seemingly, pointless – for me to “decide” anything. I was lost in a sea of anonymity and meaningless. To try to better understand my situation – what were the stakes of me just leaving the store? What could happen, really? – I asked her, “what would that mean for me?” She replied, bafflingly, “I don’t know as that would be a Wegmans decision not an Instacart decision.” The conversation had reached its surreal
apex; I truly did not understand what she was saying. Did she mean that the repercussions for me not resolving this issue would lie with Wegmans? If so, what power did Wegmans have over me, personally? Perhaps it would build distrust between Wegmans management and Instacart at a local level, but it was hard for me to imagine anyone at Wegmans doing anything to me. On the other hand, I felt like she was not ruling out the possibility that something bad could happen to me. The only means of sanctioning shoppers is the reliability incident, a strike on your record that you receive if you miss an order or are late for a shift. Three reliability incidents can result in termination. Because of Amanda’s vague response, I felt unsure that I wouldn’t get a reliability incident if I just left the store. However, I didn’t see the point of asking her more questions, since it seemed that she either didn’t know how to handle the situation or didn’t want to offer help. To Cody, I suggested, “maybe I should just pay for it myself to get this over with.” He cocked his head to one side and said, “yeah that’s probably what I would do.” I said, “It’s only $2.49.” Without consulting Amanda again, I returned to the customer service desk, and to my friend Joan. I said to Joan, “So I wasn’t able to find anything out. Would it be okay if I just pay the $2.49 myself to cover the loss in the Wegmans system?” She said, “Sure, and then you can follow up on that with Instacart,” suggesting I should get reimbursed. I said, “Sure,” knowing full well that I wasn’t going to do that, given how dysfunctional this entire experience had been. After I for the meal, Joan said, “okay, we’re all good!” I thanked her and went back to the staging area for the last time, to put the original receipt back with the other receipts.

When I got back there, Cody was staging another order. I shook my head and told him, “I paid for it.” He said, “wow, star employee over here.” I laughed and gestured to the sky, saying loudly, “And for what? For who?” I told him, “If there’s ever some kind of award, I’d appreciate it if you voted for me.” He said, “oh yeah, you’re getting it, for sure.” We said goodbye to each other as I left the staging area. I wished him good luck on the rest of his shift.

After I took my cart to the café area and was able to use the bathroom to change my shoes and my shirt, I sent Amanda a strongly-worded text in which I told her what I had done, and that I didn’t want reimbursement. I explained to her that I was frustrated, and that I felt there should be greater clarity for shoppers around issues of checking out, and on how things work if a problem like that comes up. I sent that text at 3:57 PM, and she never responded.

There is much to unpack from this event, but I want to focus on how small hiccups on the job can ground workers between the gears of Instacart and the stores they partner with. Once I agreed to Amanda’s request to try to return the frozen meal after my shift had
ended, I had unwittingly stepped into no man’s land, a space where the demands of the organization I was physically within came up against the demands of the organization I worked for, and my employer was not able to help me. As the area shift lead, Amanda’s requests held weight for me. I believed that if I did as she said, the problem would be resolved. I also feared retribution for doing the wrong thing, and I hoped that deferring to her would help me avoid any negative consequences. Not only did her suggestions fail to resolve the issue, she implied that it was my fault that the meal had not been paid for. I attempted to assert my rights as an employee by stating that my shift was over and that I would not work on this any longer, and she said it was “up to me” what I decided to do, and that the consequence of my decision would be “a Wegmans decision, not an Instacart decision.” (This interaction also revealed that I had found the limit of Amanda’s latitude as a manager.) My choice to pay for the frozen meal was primarily motivated by my lack of understanding about what asset protection, or the store more broadly, could do to me. Two dollars and forty-nine cents seemed a small price to pay to avoid being socially marked as a thief by the store employees who I saw every time I went to work.

While my position as an ethnographer may have contributed to my choice to pay for the item myself, I connected with another Instacart shopper on Facebook who encountered a similar organizational gap, and made a similar choice. In April of 2020, the following post was shared to a Facebook group for gig economy food delivery workers. On this Facebook group, it was common for gig workers to tell stories from their workdays, trade tips for dealing with apps and customers, and share resources for organizing.
A group member named Cliff posted the following account of a recent issue he’d had while working for Instacart:

Cliff: Well wow- Instacart is useless now for sure. I had to use my own money to pay for an order for a customer (400$!) because the [Instacart credit] card was repeatedly declined and [shopper] support is non-existent.. They better get their shit together or they are about to lose their entire enterprise. 3 hours later they told me that they are still unable to do anything besides ask me to file for reimbursement..

Comments under Cliff’s post from fellow gig workers roundly excoriated him for his decision to pay for the customer’s groceries after his Instacart-issued credit card didn’t go through at checkout for a $400 order:

Commenter 1: Instacart card doesn’t work=abandon order! Period. NEVER pay yourself.

Commenter 2: Why do people keep doing this dumb ass shit. Congratulations you just donated $400 worth of food. [shrugging emoji, face-palm emoji]

To defend himself, and to better explain the situation, Cliff responded to some of the comments:

Commenter 3: I mean I’ve gotten through to [shopper] support pretty quickly during an active batch. You should never pay for an order yourself.

Cliff: I tried to get to support for over 30 minutes waiting in store. It said they had very high call and chat wait times. I was #500 in line. There was no way I was about to give up after shopping that massive order

Commenter 4: Good God. Never use your own money!!

Cliff: Never have before but the woman [customer] was desperate to get her delivery and there was no other resolution available other than indefinitely stand around in the store that was closing soon..

Commenter 5: Why would you ever trust them to pay you back? For someone you don't know?? Wtf??

Cliff: Because I just shopped a massive order and had no other option other than to abandon it and then have wasted the time, gas and effort and have potentially a negative review..etc

Curious to better understand Cliff’s predicament, I messaged him over Facebook’s message function and asked if he would be willing to share more details about the
event. He reiterated that he had just shopped a $400 order at a Costco, a big box retailer that has a partnership with Instacart, and that the store was closing within 30 minutes of him shopping the order. His Instacart-provided credit card was declined. He followed the prescribed procedure for unexpected issues while on shift and tried to contact the 1-800 number to reach Shopper Support, but no one picked up the phone, likely due to the unusual demand for the service. He considered abandoning the order, but a $400 order takes a long time, and carries the possibility of a significant tip. He didn’t want to risk losing his pay for this work. Further, he had spoken to the customer on the phone, a woman with kids at home, and she impressed upon him that she really needed the groceries. He felt that paying for the order himself was the only option. He submitted a reimbursement request through Instacart, but he received an email from the company stating that they weren’t able to process it because they couldn’t verify the store, date, or items given the photo he had sent them of the receipt. He replied with another, clearer photo of the receipt, and received an auto-reply reading, “Thanks for reaching out to Instacart Support. This email address is no longer in use.” Two days after the incident, he had not been able to get in touch with Instacart for a reimbursement.

Cliff was no rookie – he had been working for Instacart for two years at the time of this incident. His experience mirrored what I uncovered during my fieldwork: pursuing Instacart’s stated goals of customer service could render you vulnerable to organizational

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42 I told Cliff (a pseudonym) that I was writing about Instacart for my doctoral dissertation, and asked for his permission to share his story without identifiers, to which he agreed.
43 When Instacart customers place an order, the cards are pre-loaded with an amount of money just slightly higher than the assumed value of the order to prevent shopper theft. Sometimes, information lags between stores and Instacart systems can cause problems at checkout, especially if an item costs more at the store than Instacart expects it to.
gaps, like the one Cliff fell into. Instacart was an unreliable employer that could not be counted upon to follow up on a concern or problem. Shoppers like Cliff felt forgotten by the distant employer. Worse, Cliff felt he had been taken advantage of for trying to do the right thing.

No man’s land may also encompass a broader range of organizations and institutions with which Instacart shoppers interact. A common issue among the full-service Instacart shoppers I spoke with was that filing taxes was confusing and time-consuming. Because full-service shoppers are independent contractors, they have to put aside a certain amount of their earnings on a regular basis for their tax contribution. Kate, who worked for Instacart for about a year, recalled being told by a tax professional that she needed to register herself as a business to file her taxes properly. Despite being more prepared to file her taxes than many other independent contractors, Kate spent a good deal of money and time trying to file her taxes properly with no assistance from Instacart:

“I didn’t know how to do them, so I went to get them done at an H&R block. And the guy was very nice and very helpful. But he said he couldn’t sign off on the papers until I got a business license. So I had to go downtown and get a business license because I was an independent contractor working for myself, therefore I was a business, so then I had to take my license and bring it to him to sign off and then he charged me a business fee for doing… so I went with all of my receipts, I had my gas receipts, my car maintenance, my chart that I kept with all my miles, and he charged me like several hundred dollars for that. And then the following year, when I was no longer an independent contractor, I got a letter in the mail telling me that I could go to jail because I didn’t file taxes for my business, and I had 30 days to remedy or there was going to be a warrant for my arrest, or something… and I was like, what the, I didn’t do anything, I’m not a real business! So I, I forget what I did. I filled out a form online and paid money to close my business. So technically people who are not doing it that way are fraudulent, is how they explained it to me. If you’re an independent contractor, working for yourself, making money for
yourself, not collecting taxes, or, not paying taxes for the money that you’ve earned on your income, that is fraud. And it would be against the law for this H&R block guy to sign off on my taxes.

It was really shocking. But I was lucky enough to know to put 30% of every paycheck aside. I can’t imagine people who are making thousands of dollars doing Uber, Lyft, Instacart or whatever, this is their full time job and oh you think you’re getting a big refund? Joke’s on you, you owe thousands.

There’s no handbook. They’re like, you’re an independent contractor. Period, end of sentence, I’m not going to explain to you what that means because I want you to be here.”

Kate had to pay additional fees to file her taxes, both in business fees to H&R Block as well as to close the “business” she set up a year later. The nature of the H&R Block employee’s insistence that Kate register as a business is unclear; independent contractors are not required to have business licenses to file taxes, according to the IRS. Lacking any kind of organizational support or information from Instacart on how to file taxes, or any community with which to organize, Kate fell victim to misinformation about her taxes and it cost her.

As Kate implies toward the end of her story, it would be disadvantageous for platforms like Instacart to inform their contracting workforce about the amounts they are likely to owe in taxes because it could deter them from the job altogether. Unlike Kate, Eliot did not set aside regular proportions of his Instacart income for tax purposes because he only expected to be working there for a short while. Because he was unable to find more long-term work, he ended up working for Instacart for six months, and was unprepared for the amount of his Instacart income he had to give toward his tax contribution. When I asked him how he handled taxes the year he worked for Instacart, he responded:
“Poorly. Yeah, I didn't track my expenses very well. Cuz I wasn't planning to be doing it for six months. I thought it would maybe be two, three months tops. So I didn't track my gas spending or any other work expenses. I tried to make some rough estimates when I did my taxes. But at the end of the day, I think I still ended up paying a fair amount of money in taxes. Luckily, I didn't make that much money. I mean, luckily depending on how you look at it. So it wasn't so much that it ruined my life or I was unable to pay it. But it was enough that I was kind of like, damn, I just got punished for working this shitty job.”

In owing so much many in taxes that he was not prepared to owe, Eliot felt doubly punished for working a job that didn’t make him feel respected. What these tax stories illustrate is an overall lack of organizational support that harms workers by leaving them ill-prepared to deal with consequential decisions, like how to file taxes. All but one of the full-service interviewees I spoke with reported feeling unprepared to file taxes. Flora, who had worked for Instacart in San Francisco, reported having a shift lead who shared resources on how to file taxes as an independent contractor. But this seems to have been an exceptional experience.

Working for Instacart meant existing within the four walls of an organization but being unable to enjoy the structure and benefits it provided its own employees. The roles available to Instacart shoppers were various and blurred – shoppers may embody roles of customer, co-worker, and interloper in the course of a regular workday. Fully intelligible to neither their customers nor their grocery store counterparts, Instacart shoppers were impermanent members of the grocery store’s ecosystem. Workers are on their own, and the stakes are unclear (Ravenelle 2019). The result is a lonely and thankless work experience that many Instacart shoppers decide is not worth the meager pay.
Chapter 4 References


Chapter 5: Conclusion

In response to the research questions that I posed in the introduction, my research suggests that: 1) opportunities to “belong” in organizations vary across new economy contexts, 2) both organizations and their members play a role in accomplishing professional identity, and 3) organizational belonging may overlap with other, existing inequalities in the workplace. I will address each of these points in kind, and then suggest some avenues for future research on Instacart, which is (as of July 2020) understudied and increasing in social relevance.

The research I have presented here suggests that identity-building may be unequally distributed across new economy work settings. At Watermark, workers felt highly enmeshed within their employment relationships and generally experienced positive associations with work. Even in cases where workers wished to be less closely associated to their employer, as was the case for Al, the developer who kept to himself and scoffed at the idea that Watermark was “a family,” there was no negative impact on identity due to association with Watermark.

In contrast, Instacart does not seem to provide an identity that workers want to claim. Multiple interviewees reported that working for Instacart was degrading and made them feel “low.” In a reversal of my findings at Watermark, the only Instacart worker I spoke with who sought a positive identity through Instacart was unable to secure it due to the platform’s quick-changing employment terms. Jake, a 34-year-old White man who worked for Instacart in the Denver area for about a year, was the only Instacart shopper I
met or interviewed who reported a strong sense of affiliation with the gig economy, broadly. He described it as cutting edge and exciting. While working for Instacart, his hope was to rise in the ranks to be a city manager for Instacart in Denver. As a result, he worked harder than most Instacart shoppers did. However, toward the end of his time at Instacart, all the city managers were let go and Instacart removed that level of management from its organization, thus removing his goal. He said, “everything all at once stopped leading to any kind of future.”

I spoke about this tendency for platforms like Instacart to roll out critical changes to their organization almost like software updates, without any transparency or warning, in chapter three. In an earlier work paradigm, Jake’s commitment strategy might have paid off in a managerial role. But at a gig platform like Instacart, where technology has been a force in casualizing labor (Ravenelle 2019), workers are afforded fewer opportunities to build a professional identity. That Instacart continually makes changes that are detrimental to workers’ earnings without experiencing a shortage of workers indicates that 1) people, generally, do not work on gig platforms long enough to observe dramatic changes in income and 2) Americans are desperate for work, in particular work that they can schedule themselves (Schneider and Harknett 2019). Gig work like Instacart plays a role in the work lives of many Americans that our national social safety net is not strong enough to fill (Uetricht 2019).

As Jake and Al illustrate, both organizations and their members play a role in accomplishing identity. Not all employers seek to “mold” workers in their image; not all
workers seek to be identified by their work. Belonging may also be structured by an individual worker’s identity and work history. In chapter two, I wrote about how Watermark had succeeded in creating a sort of boutique company culture that was built to the preferences of its founding members, which meant that newer members to the organization found that there was little room for them influence the company culture. For example, the founders enjoyed drinking beer, so there was a beer keg in the office, even though not all employees enjoyed beer. Even though Watermark founders saw their company as a democratic culture where people could do what they wanted, those values and symbols did not map neatly onto everyone who worked for them. My research suggests that organizations, especially new ones, ought to be cautious about whose values they impute into the rituals and symbols of the company. What’s fun for some might be exclusionary to others.

While organizations like Watermark offer opportunities for high organizational belonging, whether organization members actually feel that they belong depends on their personal values, and whether they like what they see in the organizational mirror (Dutton and Dukerich 1991). Many of the tools and practiced Watermark offered its workers to construct a positive identity were accompanied by gendered meanings, and as a result, women told me in interviews that they felt on the sidelines of the organization. In contrast, Instacart offered almost no tools with which workers could build a professional identity. This is not to imply that gender dynamics did not operate in Instacart work but that there were few interactional “joints” at which gender could enter. Cecilia Ridgeway has argued that gender is a readily available set of norms and expectations that get
imported in situations where gender might not be relevant, and that gender is something we “reach for” as a means of understanding each other in social interaction (Ridgeway 2011). But there was very little interaction at Instacart. Gendered attitudes at work might have been more present if there had been means by which Instacart shoppers could interact and had images of themselves.

In the introduction, I quoted Richard Sennett, who asked in his classic *Corrosion of Character*, “How can a human being develop a narrative of identity and life history in a society composed of episodes and fragments?” (1999:26) But scholars of identity have argued that “episodes and fragments” are precisely the stuff of selves (Somers 1994, Stets and Burke 2000). A longitudinal study of gig economy workers would offer stronger evidence than I have offered here to answer Sennett’s question, but I propose that the identity work of coalescing seemingly disconnected events into a coherent narrative is not limited to the new economy. After Jake was unable to progress with Instacart, he worked for Postmates in Denver. Later on in his professional life, he hopes to rent through Airbnb. Professional heartbreaks can be incorporated into coherent narratives of identity over time (although their financial damage may be serious and long-lasting). Though they incorporate more changes and upheavals, the professional identities of today’s workforce – for knowledge workers and wage laborers alike – may be more adaptable than they were for the Greatest Generation, whose men were accustomed to trading their days in exchange for lifelong job security (and who were devastated when that contract frayed). Professional identities are consequential for a sense of self, but they need not be exclusively so.
Topics for Future Study on Instacart

Studying Instacart for a dissertation-length project yielded almost more questions than answers. The service, and the work, is exceedingly strange even by gig economy standards. While I regret that my project was not more comprehensive, I have identified two dimensions of of the platform that are of great theoretical importance: algorithmic ambiguity and the organizational space of no man’s land. That said, there is much more to explore. The first is the capacity for Instacart to incorporate or preclude community. The second is the increased precarity faced by Instacart shoppers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief conclusion will address data and media on both topics to set a course for further study of this compelling and increasingly relevant platform.

Possibilities and Problems for Community

An overwhelming feature of Instacart work, and of no man’s land, is isolation. Being caught between two (or more) organizational mandates is not quite so challenging if workers are able to share resources. As shown above, I was able to periodically confer with another in-store shopper, Cody, a college student whose shifts sometimes overlapped with mine. However, during most of my Instacart shifts, I saw no one else who worked for the company. After being trained to work for Instacart, Kate never spoke with another person associated with Instacart over the year that she worked there. Eliot
recalled going through a digital training procedure through the Instashopper app; he never met a single person associated with Instacart.

Among my interviewees, there was only one person who reported having a sense of community with other Instacart shoppers. Flora worked with a consistent cadre of Instacart shoppers during her time with the company, and it was with them that she learned how to shop more quickly and what strategies might yield her better tips.

I met some really great people who I'm still friends with to this day… whenever we had our lunch breaks, it was like a really communal experience because everyone was bonding over like surrogate of like. Yo, this person was really nitpicky about you know, how many grapes needed to be in the bag. Because of the store that we worked in – I would say that was very like a really clear class difference. You know, this was like, a Whole Foods at the top of the hill in the richest part of San Francisco. It was like, you know, all these regular working class folks who are like, Alright, cool, we can get their groceries and I guess we can finish off by talking about the intricacies of what people ate. And then we would swap tips on how to, like, move through the lists in the most efficient way.

Flora alluded to both a clear class distinction between the shoppers and the customers as well as a racial one, since she estimated that “about 90%” of her fellow coworkers were people of color. Having community as an Instacart shopper, at least based on my interviewees and the experiences I’ve read about on various online fora, is rare. Flora’s experience illustrates the possibility for Instacart to be a more dignified job if it supported the creation of community. At present, Instacart work lacks community, but it need not be that way (Schwartz 2018).

On-demand grocery delivery has already begun transforming the use of grocery stores, and in turn, urban landscapes. At the Whole Foods in the Fairmount neighborhood of Philadelphia, storage for its accelerating delivery service has replaced an entire floor of
public space that used to include a coffee bar and a seating area (Saffron 2020). On a recent visit to New York City, gig economy workers had crowded the seating area in the Whole Foods on the Lower East Side – many were crowded around outlets, charging their phones, either on break or waiting for their next batch to come it. They were identifiable by their t-shirts and lanyards. “Third spaces” that once served as meeting places, the site of a quick family dinner, or a homework hangout are now de facto break rooms for scores of grocery workers (Simon 2009). On-demand deliveries also strain neighborhoods. GoPuff, a Philadelphia-based company that delivers convenience store items on demand, operates a warehouse in the Callowhill neighborhood. The constant coming and going of trucks and delivery drivers causes traffic jams on the neighborhood’s narrow, 18\textsuperscript{th} century streets, causing neighbors to complain and transforming the streetscape (DiStefano 2020).

The transformation of urban space also reflects urban demand. During our interview, Eliot told me that most of the orders he delivered were for wealthy urbanites living in apartment buildings in Center City, Philadelphia:

The most common order was like people living in expensive apartments, ordering things from Whole Foods. Usually like large amounts of frozen stuff, pre-made food. And a lot of beverages that I'm assuming they didn't want to carry back and forth. So like, cases of La Croix and like, cases of bottled water and yeah, large things of toilet paper and things like that. Things they don’t want to deal with.

Of course, grocery delivery is only one sector of the new economy that is transforming urban space. Amazon has been gobbling up warehouse space in rural areas for years, and it is also expanding into cities, as at 41\textsuperscript{st} and Chestnut streets in
Philadelphia (Van Helder 2018). As demand for on-demand delivery platforms increases, so too will their footprint in urban neighborhoods. Despite that companies like GoPuff and Instacart are often conflated with placenessness, given their digital operations, their operations are the last step in massive, complex logistics chains (Vallas 2019). As such, their growth in popularity will almost certainly involve the transformation of urban and rural spaces.

Increased Worker Precarity due to COVID-19

Instacart has profited greatly from the COVID-19 pandemic. Forbes identified Instacart as “one of the major beneficiaries” of the boom in demand for grocery delivery services as millions of Americans try to avoid going outside.\(^4^4\) In fact, increased demand for Instacart’s service during the April of 2020 resulted in Instacart turning a profit for the first time in its eight-year history. It has also turned Instacart’s CEO, Apoorva Mehta, into a billionaire (Wang 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Instacart was largely a luxury service favored by families and exceptionally busy professionals for whom time is a premium. The ability to get groceries delivered, and to avoid physically going to the grocery store, was something a small sector of Americans were willing to pay for. But the viral pandemic has radically changed the way most Americans interact with the world outside of their

front door. While at the time of this writing, in July of 2020, most Americans have
developed a system for going to public places like grocery stores, in the early days of the
pandemic, Instacart skyrocketed in popularity as the need to eat clashed against the fear
of infection.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Instacart has transformed into an essential service
(Huet and Chapman 2020). Much like how the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001
transformed firefighters and police officers into heroes (Collins 2004), COVID-19 turned
grocery workers – including Instacart shoppers – into essential personnel. Some of its
new customers were the elderly, the immunocompromised, and their caregivers, people
whose risk of infection is unusually high and dangerous. Many others were unwilling to
expose themselves or their families to the risk of infection. On April 19th, a middle-aged
woman with whom I am Facebook friends posted this update to her page:

So, my [daughter] has insisted on doing my grocery shopping (along with my
mother’s) for the last few weeks. I decided I did not want her spending that
kind of time in grocery stores… I want her safe as much as she wants us safe.
So, I tried Wegmans curbside delivery today, and it was actually great. “Meg”
from Instacart was my shopper. If I could pick her every time, I certainly
would. She did a great job. Now my Caroline can be safe, too.

As posts like this one suggest, Instacart provides an option for individuals or families
who do not want to risk viral infection to still get the groceries they want. However, what
remains unspoken is that someone is still at risk: the Instacart shopper. Instacart is one of
many employers that, during the pandemic, has tacitly informed its workers that they can
either show up for work or lose their job. Since the start of the pandemic, Instacart has
hired an additional 300,000 workers (Bogost 2020). This reflects both an increased demand for the service as well as historic levels of economic depression.

The complexity of the Instacart service arrangement may cause even more problems for Instacart shoppers in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has driven demand for Instacart’s service to historic levels (Bogost 2020, Huet and Chapman 2020). When customer need is heightened, and the atmosphere of the store is more tense, as it has been in many American grocery stores starting in March of 2020, Instacart shoppers may be forced to make difficult decisions about how to deal with issues on the job, as was the case for Cliff in chapter 4.

The malleability of Instacart’s employment relationship puts its workforce in an increasingly precarious position. While shoppers count on Instacart for wages, the platform abdicates accountability by making sudden changes that have drastic impacts on workers’ earnings. As the global economy reels from the COVID-19 pandemic, Instacart has experienced so much demand that it turned a profit for the first time in April of 2020. On March 23, 2020, Apoorva Mehta announced that the platform would hire an additional 300,000 full-service shoppers in North America over the next three months to meet increased demand (Bogost 2020). Instacart shoppers have coordinated with workers from Target, Amazon, and Whole Foods to demand that these companies provide their workers with sick leave and personal protective equipment as their profit margins explode, but so far, no meaningful policy to protect workers has been enacted at these companies (Lerman and Tiku 2020). As Alexandra Rosenblat has written about Uber,
“technology doesn’t produce accountability automatically” (2019:116). So long as gig economy platforms like Instacart are unregulated by government reform and unmoved by labor movements, they will continue to benefit from widespread economic insecurity.

Chapter 5 References


Appendix: Interview samples

Watermark

Research at Watermark was done in two ethnographic “waves.” The first, ranging from March to August of 2015, resulted in about 200 hours of observation and 31 interviews (60% of staff). The second, from January to August of 2016, yielded about 100 hours of observations and 25 interviews, 19 of which were follow-up interviews from time I. Table 1 lists the names, ages, genders, positions, and years at Watermark for all staff members mentioned or quoted in this dissertation. Table 2 summarizes the interview sample across both ethnographic waves, using pseudonyms only.

A clarification on the positions: at the time of this research, there was no formal designation of “senior” or “junior” within teams or “disciplines,” as they were often called at Watermark. Mike and Dan had the same title, even though they had vastly different levels of experience. This was a topic of active discussion during my research, since some members of the organization wanted clearer distinctions between positions and others thought such distinctions were snobby and unnecessary. Regardless, on large teams like the design and development teams, I have elected to mark whether that person was senior or junior in their position, although this was not their job title.

Table 1: Watermark staff members featured in chapter 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years at Watermark</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>~40(^{46})</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Co-owner</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{45}\) At time of research.

\(^{46}\) The ages of the co-owners were not shared with me, so I have estimated them all to be about 40. All were married to women and had children over the age of 5 at the time of the research.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>~40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Co-owner</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>~40</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Co-owner</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Senior Designer</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Senior Designer</td>
<td>&gt;5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tyler</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Managing Director</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Junior Designer</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maureen</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Operations Manager</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Researcher</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>Senior Designer</td>
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<td>Al</td>
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<td>Cameron</td>
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<tr>
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<td>F</td>
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Table 2: Watermark interview sample and summary

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<th>Time II: Spring 16</th>
<th>Key</th>
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<td>Rosie</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Interviewed</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zack</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<td>Tyler</td>
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<tr>
<td>New</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Instacart

I interviewed six Instacart shoppers, all of whom were compensated with a $10 honorarium for their time. One, Cody, was someone I met while working for Instacart. He was the only other shopper with whom I developed a friendly relationship, and he agreed to an interview after I left the Instacart job. I reached out to my personal social network to see if I had any second connections with an Instacart shopper, but none turned up. All the other interviewees were found via Facebook. I solicited interviewees by posting in a neighborhood group on Facebook. Here is the script I used to seek out interviewees:

Hi all! I’m a graduate student in West Philly, and I’m looking for people who work for Instacart (or have worked for Instacart) to participate in an interview study. I have been a shopper for Instacart in the past, and now I am writing a research project about the gig economy. Interviewees will be paid a $10 honorarium for their time. All interviews will be conducted in an agreed-upon location, and all information shared with me will be kept entirely confidential. The interviews will focus on your experience as an Instacart shopper. Interviews should last about an hour.

If you work for Instacart or know someone who does, please comment or PM me so I can get in touch! Thanks!

I posted this message twice in a neighborhood group over two months and secured five additional interviewees. I asked each of my interviewees if they knew anyone else who worked for Instacart, but none of them did. Interviews solicited through Facebook were conducted at various coffee shops in West Philadelphia.

It was considerably more difficult to find Instacart shoppers to interview than it was to interview Watermark employees. At Watermark, Molly, a managing director, introduced me to the entire company and told the staff that I would be contacting them
for interviews, and that “helping PhD students with their research is good karma.” Every Watermark staff I asked agreed to an interview. Joe, a researcher, had been tasked with reserving conference rooms for my interviews with staff members. In contrast, I only knew one other Instacart shopper well enough to ask for an interview. (I met four other shoppers at my store, but only saw most of them once.)

The challenges of securing Instacart interviewees, contrasted with the ease of securing Watermark interviewees, is an outcome of each set of workers’ various degrees of organizational belonging. Watermark employees were highly enmeshed in their organization, and Instacart shoppers were not.

Table 3: Instacart interview sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Preferred Pronouns</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Length of Time Worked</th>
<th>Yearly income while working for IC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cody</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>He/his</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>In-store</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>(missing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Full-service</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>$24k or below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>He/his</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>In-store</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>$25k - $50k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flora</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
<td>In-store</td>
<td>18 months</td>
<td>$25k - $50k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Full-service</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>$25k - $50k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliot</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>He/his</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Full-service</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>$24k or below</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>