

# “We’re not uber:” control, autonomy, and entrepreneurship in the gig economy

We’re not uber

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Unlike the effect of management styles on employee attitudes, little is known about the effect of managerial assumptions on workers within the gig economy. The purpose of this paper is to utilize McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y as a framework to discuss two gig economy platforms and how their differing management assumptions affect worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The author utilized qualitative interviews and demographic surveys with 41 contract workers from TaskRabbit, a personal assistant platform, and Kitchensurfing, a “rent-a-chef” service, to examine the impact of differing management assumptions on independent contractor perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs.

**Findings** – The Theory X management assumptions and correlated behaviors directly contradict the entrepreneurial ethos marketed by the platforms, resulting in a psychological contract violation for workers and negative responses to the platform. In comparison, Theory Y managerial assumptions and correlated behaviors can be utilized to encourage worker innovation, creativity and sense of self as an entrepreneur.

**Practical implications** – As the gig economy continues to grow, algorithms are likely to take on increased importance as a management tool. Although some have suggested that such algorithms may reduce the impact of a capricious manager, the fact remains that algorithms are created by management. If the gig economy intends to encourage entrepreneurship, additional attention must be paid to how differing management assumptions, and their resulting behaviors and algorithms, affect worker attitudes and experience.

**Originality/value** – This study represents one of the initial academic investigations into how the Theory X and Theory Y management assumptions and correlated perspectives may be applied to independent contractors within the gig economy. Additionally, this study is among the first to examine how gig worker attitudes toward platform firms, and views of themselves as entrepreneurs, are affected by algorithm-implemented management policies.

**Keywords** Attitudes, Motivation, Qualitative research, Entrepreneurship, Job satisfaction, Communication, Psychological contracts, Management attitudes

**Paper type** Research paper

No boss. No shifts. No limits. (Uber)

Find jobs you love. At rates you choose. Make a schedule that fits your life. (TaskRabbit)

Mimic a restaurant experience [...] without all of the chaos and uncertainty. (Kitchensurfing)

## Introduction

The gig economy markets entrepreneurship by promising workers that a flexible schedule, a self-directed workplace and limitless earnings can be at their fingertips through app-enabled work. Nearly a quarter of workers earned money by working in the gig economy in 2015 (Smith, 2016). The sharing economy may soon grow to exceed the US restaurant industry (Cannon and Summers, 2014). Intriguingly, while the platforms market entrepreneurship, a number of workers view themselves as part-time employees, rather than entrepreneurs



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(Ravenelle, 2017; Smith, 2016). Management attitudes and styles can affect worker satisfaction (Ayres, 2014; Edmans, 2012; Lim, 2010), yet, as noted by Kuhn (2016), little is known about “platform service providers’ attitudes toward platform firms and their work” (p. 159).

This special edition on the gig economy focuses on the role of management constructs and concepts in the platform-based economy and the implications for recruiting and motivating workers. As a result, this paper has two primary research questions:

*RQ1.* How – if at all – are gig economy workers affected by differing management assumptions?

*RQ2.* How do management behaviors affect worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs or part-time employees in the gig economy?

While risk and autonomy are commonly associated with entrepreneurship, and are often found in gig work, platform-based workers may find themselves facing restrictive workplace policies that appear to be at odds with the workplace autonomy inherent in entrepreneurship. A secondary goal of this paper is to utilize worker experiences to provide practical suggestions on how the gig economy could encourage entrepreneurship to increase worker motivation and retention.

McGregor’s (1960) Theory X and Theory Y are best described as two differing sets of cognitions or beliefs about human nature in the workplace. Utilizing interviews with gig workers as a data source, this paper uses Theory X and Theory Y, and the behaviors that result from such mindsets, as a framework to argue that the Theory X belief system, with its focus on worker control and coercion, negatively affects worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs by removing a sense of autonomy and replacing it with coercion. This reduction in entrepreneurial freedom, which contradicts platform marketing of the entrepreneurial ethos (Ravenelle, 2017) leads to psychological contract violation (Morrison and Robinson, 1997) for workers, and has a negative effect on worker attitudes and behaviors (Zhao *et al.*, 2007). The subsequent sections will provide a brief overview of the gig economy and entrepreneurship and a review of the literature related to McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y before discussing the research methodology.

### **Background on entrepreneurship and gig work**

As noted by Bennett and Dann (2000), the term entrepreneurship has been used inconsistently, at various times indicating small business ownership, self-employment through freelance work, the use of innovative approaches to approach market opportunities (Schumpeter, 1934) or the creation of a new organization (Drucker, 1985). Linking back to its French root, *entreprendre*, meaning “to undertake,” this paper utilizes Cantillon’s (1755/1931) original definition of an entrepreneur as an individual who is engaged in self-employment and assumes the risk of a business venture.

The literature on the traits of entrepreneurs is equally varied, with contradictory findings as to the relationship between various characteristics and entrepreneurial leanings or success (Decker *et al.*, 2012). Vecchio (2003) noted a “Big Five” of traits and concept dimensions that seem to be commonly associated with entrepreneurship: a propensity for risk taking, needs for autonomy and achievement, self-efficacy and a locus of control, although results are not uniformly supportive for the prevalence of such attributes among entrepreneurs.

The autonomy, achievement, self-efficacy and locus of control that are commonly identified with entrepreneurs is also integral to the concept of an independent contractor, an individual who works for a company, but is not considered to be an employee. The majority of American gig economy services consider their workers to be independent contractors or 1099 workers, named for the end-of-year tax document they receive that details their income. In addition to freeing companies from the obligation to pay into unemployment insurance funds or to make

an employer's contribution to Social Security and Medicare (7.65 percent of the employee's salary), classifying workers as independent contractors allows companies to save on workers' compensation premiums and avoid workplace injury and disability-related disputes. Independent contractors in the USA do not receive unemployment benefits, paid vacation or sick leave, retirement, overtime, disability accommodations, family leave protections, protection from discrimination or sexual harassment, or the right to form unions. As a result, classifying a worker as an independent contractor can save an employer roughly 20–40 percent on labor costs (Belman and Block, 2008).

Under the independent contractor model, a worker's method for completing a job, the tools they utilize and their schedule are not supposed to be dictated by the business. A company that hires an accountant as an independent contractor cannot require that the accountant work between set hours or that they use a particular calculator. However, gig services, like traditional workplaces, still need to balance the supply of workers with expected demand. If all Uber drivers want to drive between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., but the demand for drivers is during peak commuting hours, the model quickly collapses. As a result, platforms utilize algorithms and gamification techniques in order to encourage workers to work. In the case of Uber, for instance, which is notorious for having an adversarial relationship with workers (Shahani, 2017; Willis, 2017), the platform has opted for "psychological inducements" such as "game techniques, graphics and noncash rewards of little value that can prod drivers into working longer and harder" (Scheiber, 2017). While Uber may be an extreme case, this limited control over workers leads to carrot and stick strategies that highlight management's assumptions about workers' essential nature.

While Theory X and Theory Y are more commonly applied to research on the direct interactions between managers and workers, most gig economy platforms are designed to allow for minimal human interaction between the platform and worker. However, platform operating algorithms are not created in a vacuum, but are designed within a particular management mindset. Workers are either viewed by management as potential entrepreneurs or as recalcitrant workers who need to be cajoled into working, and these perspectives affect platform decisions regarding workplace flexibility and the implementation of policies that are intended to punish or reward workers for their behavior. In the following section, I will provide a more complete overview of the Theory X and Theory Y mindset.

### Literature on Theory X and Theory Y

Douglas McGregor's *The Human Side of Enterprise*, which focuses on the impact of managerial mindsets on worker behavior, has been described as one of the most influential management books ever written (Bedeian and Wren, 2002). McGregor's theory can be summed up as follows: managers operate under assumptions about human behavior that can be grouped into two categories of Theory X and Theory Y. Theory X managers operate under three primary assumptions:

- (1) people dislike work and will avoid it if possible;
- (2) most workers need to be "coerced, controlled, directed and threatened with punishment" in order to get them to work (McGregor, 1960, pp. 33-34); and
- (3) The average worker wishes to avoid responsibility preferring to be directed, and has little ambition, although they do desire security.

According to McGregor (1960), as part of Theory X, management has little trust or confidence in workers, and communication flows down from management, not up from workers. Furthermore, managers with a Theory X mindset will tend to be more controlling and focused on directives and will engage in close monitoring of workers (McGregor, 1960).

By comparison, Theory Y managers operate under the assumption that workers are committed to work and are capable of innovating to find solutions to problems. Under Theory Y, the work environment is structured so that “employee goals coincide with organizational goals, resulting presumably in greater creativity and productivity” (Bobic and Davis, 2003, p. 245). Theory Y presumes that workers are motivated by “recognition and acknowledgement” and that they are “self motivated and require little supervision” (Noland, 2014, p. 146). Managers hewing to a Theory Y mindset believe workers to be inherently hardworking, industrious, able and interested in contributing to the organization (Prottas and Nummelin, 2018).

McGregor’s work was highly influential in leading to the emergence of organizational development as a field, and continues to be a mainstay of management education in business schools (Volkema, 2010). As a result, the theory is a widely known framework with intuitive appeal that also provides a useful framework for studying differences in managerial assumptions and how they play out. While it is true that Theory X and Theory Y are simply mindsets or cognition systems – as opposed to particular management styles – there is a relationship between beliefs about an object and attitude toward an object (Fishbein, 1968). Additionally, a meta-analysis of 88 attitude-behavior studies by Kraus (1995) finds that that attitudes appear to significantly and substantially predict future behavior. As a result, Theory X and Theory Y beliefs are correlated, or associated, with particular ways of communicating or behaving with workers, which – in turn – impacts worker outcomes. The sequence of causal flow can best be illustrated as Theory X/Y beliefs lead to correlated behaviors, which lead to worker outcomes.

Work by Larsson *et al.* (2008) found that leaders who favored Theory X assumptions tended to have lower results in regards to employee views of their leadership. Research examining downward maintenance communication (from superior to subordinate) also found that a Theory X perspective was a significant negative predictor of downward confirmation, while a Theory Y perspective was a significant positive predictor of downward confirmation and downward civility (Sager, 2015). As a result “these [Theory X] assumptions lead managers to deny employees control over their work environment and use methods of influence that are direct and harsh [...] [they] emphasize the chain of command, reward-or-punishment motivational techniques, and close supervision of subordinate behavior along rigidly defined behavioral parameters” (Bobic and Davis, 2003, p. 244). Additionally, managers are often unaware of the self-fulfilling nature of their assumptions: a manager with a Theory X mindset may inspire a low level of employee motivation and indeed be the source of their complaint that, “it’s hard to find a good worker” (Kopelman *et al.*, 2012). In effect, the behaviors associated with Theory X and Theory Y beliefs are the causes of worker responses.

As a result, this paper has two major research questions:

*RQ1.* How – if at all – are gig economy workers affected by differing management assumptions?

*RQ2.* How do management behaviors affect worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs or part-time employees in the gig economy?

The following section addresses research methodology and provides a brief overview of each platform. The discussion then moves to how the Theory X and Theory Y assumptions led to differing management techniques within two platforms, and affected worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs.

## Methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from qualitative interviews with 22 TaskRabbit workers and 19 Kitchensurfing chefs. Participant recruitment into this study was conducted via the

apps, allowing for the use of platform algorithms in order to increase the likelihood of sample randomness. Workers were hired through the services between March and November 2015 and then told about the project in a face-to-face conversation after rapport had been developed. Phone numbers and email addresses were requested, and interviews were solicited and scheduled at a later time in order to reduce potential pressure to participate. Three TaskRabbit participants were recruited through snowball sampling, and one tasker was recruited through contacts at local colleges.

All interviews (except for one interview with a tasker) were conducted face-to-face in public locations in New York City such as local cafes and parks. Interviews averaged more than 2 h in length and included open-ended questions about how the worker became involved with the sharing economy; their most memorable experiences; how they handled gig scheduling and access to bathrooms and breaks; the work involved in managing their online profile; the experience of getting reviews; and if they identified as an entrepreneur. The demographic survey asked participants about their age, sex, race/ethnicity, income, educational level, occupation, home ownership, marital status, number of children, political affiliation, sharing economy income and expenses (by service platform) and to describe what attracted the worker to the sharing economy in three words or less.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded into thematic fields. Survey data were entered into an online spreadsheet and analyzed by calculating means. Thematic qualitative data, such as perceptions regarding one's identity as an entrepreneur and the decision making involved in accepting gig requests, were sorted into broad topical categories, coded inductively under grounded theory and analyzed by examining patterns. To preserve confidentiality, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms based on the Social Security Administration's list of popular birth names.

Study participants were generally diverse, with 50 percent identifying as white, while approximately 12.5 percent identified as hispanic and 25 percent described themselves as black/African-American. The remainder identified as Asian, multi-racial, declined to answer, or gave an ethnic or religious affiliation instead. The majority of respondents were male (65 percent). Worker ages ranged from 20 to 60, with 40 percent falling between 20 and 35 years old. Their education levels were especially high: 35 percent had a Bachelor's degree and 22.5 percent had a Graduate degree. Nearly 40 percent (37.5 percent) of respondents listed their educational level as some college or below, including several who were currently enrolled in a local college. Nearly 8 percent described their household income as more than \$100,000 and 10 percent listed incomes between \$75,000 and \$99,999, while 32.5 percent categorized their income as below \$35,000.

### **Kitchensurfing**

Kitchensurfing was started in 2012 as a way to hire professional chefs for home dinner parties. The platform was originally a marketplace; chefs were recruited through online advertisements and vetted by passing a sample meal "audition" within the company's test kitchen. Approved chefs could post a profile and sample menus (ranging from an intimate dinner to a cocktail party for more than 100) and related food images. In addition to providing marketing and advertising, Kitchensurfing processed client payments and served as an escrow service in exchange for a 10 percent commission.

In 2015, the service added an on-demand alternative through its Kitchensurfing Tonight service. Clients picked one of three daily meal options and a chef arrived at a pre-set hour, with all of the ingredients and tools necessary to cook and serve the meal. The cost, which started at \$25 per person, included ingredients, disposable plates, tax, clean-up, and covered worker transportation, labor and tip. The portions were generous, with a main dish and side, and often included a salad and small after-dinner treat. The entire process – from the time the chef arrived to when he or she left – usually took about 30 min. Workers were paid \$60 for a 4-h shift, even if the shift started late or ended early, and those who worked at least

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four shifts per week were also given a weekly unlimited MetroCard, worth \$31. Workers were also eligible for the Secret Diner program, which allowed workers to earn a \$200 bonus for meeting service expectations. Eventually, the platform discontinued the marketplace feature and focused entirely on Kitchensurfing Tonight; in April 2016, the service closed its doors due to insufficient customer demand.

### **TaskRabbit**

TaskRabbit was started in 2008 and originated as a bid-focused marketplace. Clients posted tasks ranging from taking headshots, to assembling Ikea furniture, to cleaning, and the workers bid on the work, giving short marketing spiels about why they were the best choice. In the Summer of 2014, TaskRabbit “pivoted” from an open-bidding market to more of a temp agency format with workers providing availability in pre-set 4-h increments, roughly equal to morning, afternoon and early evening. Potential employers chose a job category and time window, provided a task overview and were prompted to hire from an algorithm-selected listing of up to 15 potential workers.

Under the new system, workers experienced heightened levels of algorithmic control including a requirement to respond to tasks within 30 min or less and to accept at least 85 percent of their offered tasks. Workers who fell short of these expectations could be required to complete online tutorials regarding the requirements. Workers were also required to remain active on the platform, going too long without completing a task could result in platform deactivation. The following summer, TaskRabbit increased their service fees from 20 to 30 percent, tacked on an additional 5 percent trust and safety fee to be paid by the consumer, and offered a reduced 15 percent fee for any repeat business from the same client. Tasks that had previously cost the client \$100 and netted the worker \$80 now cost the client \$105, and the tasker received \$70. According to TaskRabbit, the change was intended to “incentivize entrepreneurship” so that workers would obtain repeat clients. In 2017, the trust and safety fee was converted to a Trust and Support Fee and increased from 5 to 7.5 percent; later that year, Ikea purchased the platform.

The TaskRabbit marketplace, with its bidding model, was seen as an entrepreneurial opportunity, but after the changes, workers regularly complained that their sense of independence and being their own boss had dissipated, and they instead thought of themselves as employees, workers or even “indentured servants” (Garling, 2014).

The rest of this paper will discuss how these two management perspectives were illustrated by the tactics undertaken by each platform in an effort to motivate workers. Worker responses to these tactics and how such activities affected their perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs or employees will also be addressed.

### **Results**

Under Theory X, workers are believed to dislike work and avoid it if possible. As a result, companies must coerce workers and threaten punishment in order to get workers to work. After the 2014 pivot, TaskRabbit began enforcing strict responsiveness requirements and requiring workers to accept 85 percent of their tasks. Workers who previously had the luxury of bidding on interesting tasks found that their autonomy and ability to choose work was adversely affected and those who did not hew to the new expectations were punished with lower ratings and less desirable tasks.

While gig work is often described as being “on-demand,” workers regularly noted that their ability to get work was not just linked to their willingness to accept all potential tasks, but also keeping their app on and their availability open. For instance, Natasha, 28, explained that if her app was off for several days and then she turned it back on, there was an inevitable delay unless she started accepting same-day tasks, at which point,

“the algorithms pick up that I’m active and then it starts swarming me with jobs so I’m just really overwhelmed [...]” (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 85). We’re not uber

As an authoritarian belief system, Theory X’s focus on productivity is illustrated in the push to get workers to quickly accept the vast majority of offered work, leading to the perception that workers could no longer choose to work, and felt “afraid to say no.” Such tactics are similar to those explored by Neuliep (1987) in finding that anti-social compliance-gaining strategies such as threats, deceit and aversive stimulation were more positively correlated with the presence of a Theory X mindset among managers. Additionally, under the Theory X perspective that workers sought security, the punishment for violating expectations was twofold: workers had even fewer work choices, further increasing the need to “accept every single thing,” and increasing the likelihood that they might go without work entirely. Workers were aware that their lack of work was a punishment for their reluctance to accept earlier tasks or past unavailability. As Jamal, 25, explains, “[...] because I haven’t done anything it rarely goes off. Even if I leave my [availability] on it rarely goes off because I don’t show up in searches much anymore.”

The 30-min responsiveness requirement was also a source of consternation for many workers. Internet access in the city’s subway system is limited at best and cell coverage can be spotty in certain neighborhoods or apartments:

Now they want me to answer within 30 minutes, otherwise you lose the job completely, which is asinine [...]. Whatever that concept is, we’re not Uber [...]. (Victor, 31)

Additionally, for active taskers, such as Victor, it was not unusual to receive requests while they were on another job. Victor often accepted handyman tasks that involved working with electricity or heavy objects. However, he was still expected to respond to a potential task within 30 min, even if he was working for another TaskRabbit client. Concerned about the lack of professionalism of negotiating with a client while he was on the clock for another client, Victor reached out to TaskRabbit. “The response that I got from TaskRabbit [...] was ‘well, just set your availability to off.’ My response to that is ‘no, then I won’t get hired. You’re taking away my stream of income. My availability is there for them to hire me.’”

While workers were held to the 30-min requirement, clients were not, leading to communication asymmetry. Workers often held time slots, only to find themselves lacking crucial task information such as location. In some cases, after several hours without a response from the client, workers would contact TaskRabbit to complain and to have the task deleted. Taskers were often reluctant to personally delete a task because it could negatively affect their task acceptance metrics.

In addition to facing reduced work opportunities in the future, taskers who did not accept a sufficient percentage of tasks or who fell below the responsiveness metrics were punished with warnings and temporary deactivation. These increased work and responsiveness requirements point to a Theory X mindset where workers must be controlled and coerced “into putting in effort with threats of punishment” (Heery and Noon, 2017):

So if any of those [metrics] slip, you’re on thin ice and you’ll get a warning. If it slips again they’ll rudely disconnect you and make you do a quiz. They basically go through “should I do any type of task or not, why or why not?” It’s very condescending. (Marcus, 34)

What they’ll do now is they’ll pause your account if they see that you have bad things happen or whatever, you don’t respond in time and then you have to go through like grade school, like write an essay as to why you think you’ll be a good TaskRabbit or why you’ll never do this again. (Victor, 31)

As noted by Ashforth (1994), Theory X mindsets are associated with subordinate perceptions of “petty tyranny,” defined as an individual who “acts in an arbitrary and self-aggrandizing manner, belittles subordinates, evidences lack of consideration, forces conflict resolution,

discourages initiative, and utilizes non-contingent punishment” (p. 772). Worker descriptions of the experience as “insulting,” or a return to “grade school,” demonstrate a recognition of the warning and quiz as a form of punishment and belittlement. In some cases, the workers questioned the alleged violation, noting that the app countdown was even less than 30 min or that alerts were not appearing in time, further heightening the sense of arbitrariness and a lack of consideration for workers.

Clients had the option of allowing for a task to be released to all taskers (referred to as an “emergency” or “same-day” task) but in order to find and accept such tasks workers needed to be essentially “on-call,” by constantly checking the app for new work, further increasing the sense of “petty tyranny.” Michael, 49, found himself constantly clicking “refresh” on his TaskRabbit app, a process he described as “click, crossword, crossword, crossword, click, crossword, crossword, crossword, click” (Ravenelle, 2019, p. 84).

In an added measure of dystopia, those who neglected to work for a period of time or who violated guidelines found themselves “deactivated” or “removed from the community.” For instance, Sarah, 29, found herself without any tasks for more than two months. When TaskRabbit notified her that she was in jeopardy of being deactivated, she reached out to the platform to indicate that she was trying to get work and had listed two weeks of availability, but the platform administrators were unsympathetic.

Meanwhile, Emma, 26, neglected to forfeit a task, which would have reduced her metrics. TaskRabbit staff reached out to inform her that failing to forfeit a task – which forwarded the task to another worker instead of removing it from the system – could result in her being “kicked out of the TaskRabbit community.” I was like ‘wow, it’s that easy!’ It was like a warning you know and it was such a small technical thing which obviously I won’t do it again [...]. I didn’t realize how easy it was to get kicked out.”

The sense of capriciousness was further heightened by how the changes were implemented. In line with Russ’s (2011) research on how Theory X managerial assumptions result in a reluctance to engage in participative decision making, workers reported that they were left out of the platform’s 2015 decision to change its pay structure. The platform changes were a significant driver of worker frustration, but the loss of autonomy – especially as platform executives argued that such changes were intended to “incentivize entrepreneurship” – contributed to workers’ sense of a psychological contract violation. While more commonly applied to employees, a psychological contract is a worker’s “beliefs about the reciprocal obligations between them and their organization” (Morrison and Robinson, 1997). More specifically, such contracts include beliefs about what individuals are obligated to give and entitled to receive in exchange for another party’s contributions (Levinson *et al.*, 1962). However, as noted by Lucero and Allen (1994) and Rousseau (1989), and as illustrated in the quotes below, while psychological contracts are expectations held by an individual, such expectations may not be shared by employers or gig platforms:

And I think if you pay someone money, don’t [...] what do they owe you? [...] they don’t feel they owe me anything or they don’t see themselves as owing me anything or they don’t feel as if they’re responsible to owe me any explanation whatsoever. (Will, 38)

Brandon, 30-something, reported a “sour, bitter feeling that more benefit is going to them, TaskRabbit HQ and investors, than to me.” Other workers discussed a sense of betrayal upon realizing that the platform did not feel any responsibility to workers, even in light of their commission payments to the site. Emma, 26, explains that there was a perception among workers that, the platform would be “making more money off of us, taking what I think is rightfully our money.” As noted by Rousseau (1989), the worker’s intense reactions can be attributed to “unmet expectations of specific rewards or benefits, but also to more general beliefs about respect for persons, codes of conduct, and other patterns of behavior associated with relationships” (p. 129).

The perceived intentionality of the violation further intensified worker feelings of violation (Bell and Tetlock, 1989; Heider, 1958). For instance, Richard, 50, had completed a sufficient number of tasks on the platform that he received a phone call notifying him of the change instead of the mass email received by other workers. He described the speech as a “dog and pony show” before explaining to the caller that the platform had increased their cut by 50 percent (from 20 to 30 percent) by taking it out of his pocket. More than a year after the pivot, he still described the situation as bothering him.

Workers often reported that under the bidding system, they viewed themselves as having a high level of freedom as they bid on tasks and worked to market themselves:

It was great because it felt entrepreneurial. You're bidding. “This is what I think I'm worth for ;this particular project,” and if I get it, I get it; and if I don't, I don't. So it was great. (Brandon, 30-something)

As a result of this psychological contract violation, and the policies created by managers operating under a Theory X mindset, many TaskRabbit workers stopped thinking of themselves as entrepreneurs, and began to view themselves as employees. Such findings are in agreement with Kuhn and Maleki's (2017) assertion that “workers who are more actively managed by a platform firm often perceive themselves as employees” (p. 193):

Whenever you punish people by saying – “Well, you haven't completed a task in a month, you're out.” That's being treated as an employee [...] Or being suspended for not responding because sometimes I would have my phone off for something and then I would turn it on and all of a sudden all these things would come up and I'd try responding and they were like – “Well, that task is no longer available.” (Jose, 60)

In the USA, where health insurance, retirement and disability coverage are all linked with employment status, there are many advantages to being categorized as an employee. However, while these workers began thinking of themselves as employees, this did not translate into receiving additional workplace benefits such as health insurance or workplace protections. Instead, much like Robinson and Rousseau (1994) found with employees who had experienced a psychological contract violation, TaskRabbit workers often expressed dissatisfaction with the work and an intention to leave (Table I).

### **Y: trusting workers to work**

Within the Theory Y perspective, workers are assumed to be interested in work, “to be self-directing and to seek responsibility [...] [and] to be creative in solving business problems” (Morse and Lorsch, 1970). Within the Theory Y assumptions, work is a source of achievement and respect, a view that seemed to be highlighted by Kitchensurfing's policies regarding a chef's response time to prospective work. Gig offers that were sent via the marketplace did not automatically deactivate until a relatively generous 48 h had passed. When the request was deactivated, an email sent to the requestor included the chef's first and last name. Marketplace requestors could also include their contact information in their emails to chefs without it being redacted by the platform, suggesting that chefs were trustworthy enough to not go off-platform[1].

For the on-demand Kitchensurfing Tonight service, rather than the “stick” tactics that were commonly used by TaskRabbit, workers were rewarded for their performance. Workers who arrived to the nightly commissary on time at 4 p.m. each weekday afternoon were eligible for cash bonuses, and chefs who committed to working at least four shifts a week were given a free weekly MetroCard, worth \$31. Instead of the possibility of a penalty, workers had the opportunity of a reward.

During the hour-long commissary meeting, which was used by chefs to pack their coolers with the evening's ingredients (all previously prepped by the company's staff), workers

Theory X mindset	Theory Y mindset
<p>1. People dislike work and will avoid it if possible</p> <p>2. Most workers need to be “coerced, controlled, directed and threatened with punishment” in order to get them to work (McGregor, 1960, pp. 33-34)</p> <p>3. The average worker wishes to avoid responsibility preferring to be directed, and has little ambition, although they do desire security</p>	<p>1. Workers are committed to work and are capable of innovating to find solutions to problems</p> <p>2. Workers are motivated by “recognition and acknowledgement” and that they are “self motivated and require little supervision” (Noland, 2014, p. 146)</p> <p>3. Workers are believed to be inherently hardworking, industrious, able and interested in contributing to the organization (Prottas and Nummelin, 2018)</p>
<p>[...] It’s like they assume everybody’s like glued to their phone, or if your schedule says you’re available, that you need to respond immediately (Jasmine, 23)</p>	<p>About every other week I get a bonus so that makes it sort of more worthwhile. And that’s, like, a hundred and seventy-five I think [...]. Then there’s another kind of bonus that you get from a secret shopper program where there’s, like, an embedded employee who’s evaluating you. And if you do well on that which happens once to me then you get, like, another bonus of I want to say 250 or something like that [...] (Joe, 26)</p>
<p>So if any of those [metrics] slip, you’re on thin ice and you’ll get a warning. If it slips again they’ll rudely disconnect you and make you do a quiz. They basically go through “should I do any type of task or not, why or why not?” It’s very condescending (Marcus, 34)</p>	<p>They also do these like staff events – I just started [and] they want to me to come in and do cheese tasting which is awesome. But they clearly have like a big budget for like playing, morale stuff, like cushy like start up things. And like my staff meal which I’m grateful for, because when I first signed on I didn’t even know we were going to be getting that (Laura, 29)</p>
<p>When I first signed up, I loved the concept where it was more of, if someone needed a task done, they put onto a site, you see it, you bid on it and you see the task dude wants to hire you. Loved the freedom with doing that, just picking my task, being on it and going ahead and doing it. And it changed [...] (Randy, 45)</p>	<p>[...] I use this more as a thing to like network and to see the city and stuff. So I think of it as more of entrepreneurship [...] I like to read the reviews, because I know what I can improve on, and that people like me (Roxanne, 27)</p>
<p>Whenever you punish people by saying – “Well, you haven’t completed a task in a month, you’re out.” That’s being treated as an employee [...] Or being suspended for not responding because sometimes I would have my phone off for something and then I would turn it on and all of a sudden all these things would come up and I’d try responding and they were like – “Well, that task is no longer available” (Jose, 60)</p> <p>I think of this as being a way to use somebody’s product that they made from their entrepreneurial skills, and making money for them. But I don’t see myself as an entrepreneur. I see myself part of a system to help somebody else make money[...]. Even though legally as a TaskRabbit, I’m an independent contractor, I see myself as a TaskRabbit employee (Jamal, 25)</p>	

**Table I.**  
Assumptions of Theory X and Theory Y and impact on workers

were usually fed a complimentary evening meal, and often given a cooking presentation or other reminders. Chefs were also asked to share their experiences on the front-line in people’s kitchens, a supportive communication style that is more common within Theory Y orientations (Sager, 2008, 2015):

On Monday, they’ll do this dish, they ask us our feedback: “you guys have done this, what do you think about this? So what problems are you running into?” (Ian, 31)

Unlike with TaskRabbit, the “tests” given to Kitchensurfing Tonight chefs were not seen by chefs as a form of punishment, but a data-gathering effort by the platform’s staff:

They’ve started doing a thing where they randomly test us on our cooking skills. This is the first actual metric that I can tell that they’re gathering about us. And so they sometimes will give us a tray with, like, a piece of a chicken and a cup of wine and a cup of salt or something and you have to cook it. And then the next week, four ingredients and a steak [...]. (Joe, 26)

Additionally, because Kitchensurfing chefs were actively solicited for feedback – and were given bonuses for good reviews – they also spoke of soliciting reviews from their clients that could be utilized by the platform. After cooking a Kitchensurfing meal, Roxanne, 27, asked clients to complete the nightly dinner survey:

[...] if you want to just write how much you enjoy the service, anything you saw or feel that could be approved upon [that would] be very helpful, because again it is a start-up so we’re still working out [details].

The Kitchensurfing marketplace also served to support entrepreneurship. Unlike TaskRabbit, where workers were coerced into accepting gigs, Kitchensurfing chefs were able to specify the style of food they wanted to cook and free to reject any and all requests without penalty. This freedom enabled chefs to shape the experience into one that was useful for their own goals. For instance, Ashaki, 35, used her time as a Kitchensurfing marketplace chef to test recipes for an ethnic restaurant she planned to open in the future, and also gave her an opportunity to meet and market to prospective diners.

Kitchensurfing was not a perfect situation. While the service encouraged entrepreneurship, as independent contractors, workers were vulnerable to sexual harassment and on-the-job injuries for which there was no redress (Ravenelle, 2019). Some of the company’s policies – such as the Secret Diner program – meant cash bonuses for chefs, but if that one meal did not go well, chefs lost out on their opportunity for a \$200 bonus. Later changes included the closing of the chef marketplace service and a reclassification of Tonight chefs as employees, rather than independent contractors. Finally, and perhaps the most obvious, Kitchensurfing closed in April 2016. While the closure was explained as a lack of demand, as opposed to linked to management assumptions and behaviors, the fact remains that Kitchensurfing, if it remained open, might have eventually embraced Theory X beliefs. Even with these challenges, Kitchensurfing’s focus on chefs as capable of exercising “self-direction and self-control in the achievement of organizational objectives” remains one of the better examples of Theory Y assumptions and related management behaviors in the gig economy (McGregor, 1960, p. 326).

## Discussion and conclusion

The gig economy promises to bring entrepreneurship to the masses, yet little is known of the role of management constructs and concepts in the platform-based economy or the impact on recruiting and/or motivating workers. Given the growth to date of the gig economy – with nearly a quarter of American workers earning money through the gig economy in 2015 (Smith, 2016) – partnered with unemployment at historic lows, studying the issue of worker recruitment and motivation is of special importance. Additionally, this study represents one of the first academic investigations into how the Theory X and Theory Y management perspectives may be applied to independent contractors within the gig economy, and to examine how gig worker attitudes toward distinct platforms – and views of themselves as entrepreneurs – are affected by algorithm-implemented management policies.

The purpose of this paper was to utilize McGregor’s Theory X and Theory Y as a framework to discuss two gig economy platforms and how their differing management

assumptions affected worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs. As a result, this paper has two major research questions:

*RQ1.* How – if at all – are gig economy workers affected by differing management assumptions?

*RQ2.* How do management behaviors affect worker perceptions of themselves as entrepreneurs or part-time employees in the gig economy?

This study utilized qualitative interviews and demographic surveys with 41 contract workers from TaskRabbit and Kitchensurfing. The unstructured interview format allowed for a respondent-led interaction and contributed to building rapport with respondents. This methodology is especially useful in detailing how people approach risk and challenges in the workplace (Kasinitz and Rosenberg, 1996; Rivera, 2015) and in collecting detailed and theoretically rich data about an unbounded population.

Theory X managerial assumptions include a belief that workers dislike work and will avoid it if possible, and must be coerced into working through the threat of punishment. These assumptions are correlated with management having little trust or confidence in workers and downward communication flows that rely on directives and close monitoring. On the TaskRabbit platform, these managerial assumptions were correlated with deactivation of workers who did not meet work expectations regarding availability, responsiveness or policy adherence. Workers were pushed to accept the majority of offered work, an anti-social compliance strategy that has been correlated with a Theory X mindset (Neuliep, 1987).

Illustrative of the lack of participative decision making among managers with a Theory X mindset (Russ, 2011), workers reported a lack of notice regarding the platforms service pivots and changes to its pay structure, resulting in workers experiencing a psychological contract violation and developing negative responses to the platform. As a result, workers viewed themselves to be employees as opposed to entrepreneurs, and expressed dissatisfaction with the platform and a desire to leave.

By comparison, a Theory Y perspective was exhibited by managers at Kitchensurfing. Rather than threatening workers with deactivation, chefs were rewarded with cash bonuses for meeting or exceeding expectations, and those who worked at least four shifts a week were given the “bonus” of a weekly, unlimited MetroCard. A supportive communication style, which is correlated with a Theory Y orientation (Sager, 2015, 2008), involved active solicitation of chef opinions and experiences, and led to chefs actively seeking feedback to assist the platform and viewing themselves as entrepreneurs.

This paper has theoretical implications for both gig economy workers and managers. This research suggests that the implications of Theory X assumptions on manager behavior, and on worker attitudes, may be especially disastrous in terms of worker retention and success when workers are classified as independent contractors. Theory X assumptions that workers do not want to work, and must be compelled to work under threat of punishment, contradicted worker expectations of this new economic movement and perception of themselves as entrepreneurs. As a practical implication, before joining a platform, gig workers may be well served to learn about the assumptions held by management rather than assuming that work as an independent contractor will be inherently independent.

This paper also supports work by Fishbein (1968) on the relationship between beliefs about an object and attitude toward an object, and research by Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) on how attitudes influence behavior. In addition to contributing to work on managerial X/Y attitudes and managerial X/Y behaviors (Lawter *et al.*, 2015), these findings further imply that Theory X and Theory Y assumptions can be a source of variation in the behavior of management in the gig economy and can affect algorithm-implemented management policies.

This paper also contributes to the literature on worker motivation and job conditions by supporting Evans' (1986) work on how leadership and job design affect worker motivation and

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worker behavior. This paper further adds to the recommendation that workers be empowered to take responsibility for their own motivation, rather than utilizing punishments or threats to motivate workers as illustrated by TaskRabbit. Effective managers should seek to understand what workers need and what motivates them, and to engage workers in the problem-solving process (Nicholson, 2003). In the case of gig work, for instance, this could take the form of a worker-led advisory board or active solicitation of suggestions from contract workers. This paper further contributes to research on the importance of promoting high performance and playing to workers' strengths (Buckingham, 2005) and spending organization funds on true rewards for specific performance (Atchison, 2003).

One obvious limitation of qualitative work is that it does not easily lend itself to industry-wide generalizations or statistical analysis. However, the gig economy is still less than a decade old and research on this field remains highly exploratory in nature, and, as a result, qualitative work is necessary to identify future areas for quantitative inquiry. Furthermore, gig workers remain a fairly unbounded population, making statistical analysis challenging[2]. An additional limitation is that interviews were not conducted with middle or upper managers for TaskRabbit or Kitchensurfing. Although workers identify differing behaviors that appear to be correlated with differing management assumptions, it would require a separate and different paper to address managers' perspectives on the evolution of such assumptions and correlated behaviors. For instance, it is not known if TaskRabbit management originally embraced a Theory Y mindset and only turned to Theory X later, or if the management was unaware of the correlation between assumptions and behavior. A fascinating future source of inquiry would be to conduct an ethnography of management at a start-up gig economy platform. Such a project could provide an intriguing window into how managerial assumptions are correlated with management behaviors and how such assumptions may change as part of the evolution of a gig economy platform or be correlated with platform service pivots.

This research also has practical implications for how platforms can motivate workers and encourage entrepreneurship. One simple recommendation for platforms is to refrain from massive service pivots that lead to Theory X assumptions informing policies and punishments. Platforms that promise workers opportunities for entrepreneurship should avoid implementing draconian policies that reduce worker autonomy and flexibility. Violating the psychological contract with independent workers is unlikely to contribute to the trust necessary for such workers to risk building their business on a gig platform, especially given the already prevalent distrust of algorithms (Yeomans *et al.*, 2019). While Kitchensurfing is just one case of Theory Y assumptions, and one that is not without flaws, the fall-out from the TaskRabbit pivot clearly shows the negative impact that Theory X assumptions and correlated management behaviors can have on "independent" workers.

Additionally, platforms may be able to contribute to worker entrepreneurship by offering workers the protections of employment such as access to benefits and workplace protections. For instance, Kitchensurfing chefs who worked a 4-h shift were guaranteed the full amount of pay, even if the shift started late or ended early – a helpful income safety net. Research shows that poverty reduces cognitive performance, possibly because poverty-related concerns consume mental resources (Mani *et al.*, 2013). Poverty also appears to limit entrepreneurs' ability to profit from the creativity they bring to the marketplace (Doering, 2015). Gig workers who identify as entrepreneurs are more likely to have the financial capital to support entrepreneurial dreams (Ravenelle, 2019). Access to a safety net can increase rates of entrepreneurship, for instance, the existence of food stamps and awareness that they are an available option in the event of a failure increases entrepreneurship (Olds, 2015). Likewise, changes to the French unemployment system that allowed workers to remain eligible for benefits while they started a business also led to a growth in entrepreneurship (Sraer *et al.*, 2014).

Organizations and relationships that further trust, reputation, mutual interdependence and reciprocity can also produce supportive entrepreneurial structures (Larson, 1992). As noted by

Echols and Neck (1998, p. 38), “enabling employees to detect, facilitate and pursue opportunities while fostering an organic, organizational structure with shared vision and values” can strengthen a firm and increase worker loyalty. On-demand platforms that pay their workers as W-2 employees – such as MyClean, Hello Alfred and Munchery – have low worker churn rates, high client ratings and continue to grow, suggesting that they offer supportive entrepreneurial structures (Ravenelle, 2019). However, more research is needed to learn how front-line workers may experience gig-based corporate entrepreneurship.

This study represents one of the initial academic investigations into how the Theory X and Theory Y assumptions and correlated behaviors may be applied to independent contractors within the gig economy. This paper suggests that such cognitive frameworks can be applied to algorithm-managed gig-based work, even though such work offers minimal interaction with workplace managers. If gig economy platforms intend to encourage entrepreneurship, additional attention must be paid to how differing management perspectives and behaviors – and their impact on the development of workplace algorithms – affect worker attitudes and experience.

### Notes

1. Airbnb, for instance, automatically redacts all contact info for host or potential guest, including phone, email and address, until payment is received through the app.
2. In one oft-cited study by Hall and Krueger (2015) based on an Uber-funded survey of Uber drivers, workers were defined as active if they gave a ride within the past six months – a broad definition that would be laughable in any other industry.

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