

Reputation Relocated:
Futures of Trust and Reputation in the Platform Gig Economy

A Project Report
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology
San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Applied Anthropology

by
Andrew Marley
May 2020

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The Undersigned Graduate Committee Approves the Project Report Titled

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by

Andrew Marley

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2020

DocuSigned by:

Jan English-Lueck

9CDBB0C475D2942E...

Dr. J.A. English-Lueck, Professor of Anthropology, San Jose State University

Date

DocuSigned by:

AJ Faas

90E52E165DAB4EC...

Dr. A.J. Faas, Associate Professor of Anthropology, San Jose State University

Date

DocuSigned by:

William Beeman

9038F0B843514D7...

Dr. William O. Beeman, Professor of Anthropology, University of Minnesota

Date

ABSTRACT

The rapid increase in the popularity of online services and apps - known as platforms - that match workers with hiring clients in short-term work has created new types of client-worker relationships, often referred to as the gig economy. Prior to the internet age, this work included consultants and low-level “temp” employees, with jobs lasting from a day or two to several years. Each platform builds their own system for managing workers’ reputations and facilitating interactions between workers and hiring clients. How stakeholders in this sector use and think about these systems and use them to navigate their professional lives will have an important impact on the future of these systems. The Institute for the Future, recently named to the California Future of Work Commission, is keenly interested in the future of equitable working futures, and the gig economy is a major sector of change in both thinking and practice. I endeavored to better understand how stakeholders build and use trust and reputation in their professional lives on the platform gig economy. I used a purposive sampling method to find a diverse group of stakeholders in the gig economy as I looked for insights into the future of reputation in this space. I also participated in the gig economy as a worker and hiring client through participant observation techniques. Through seventeen stakeholder interviews and participant observation, I found that by providing a service of reputation gathering, the platforms effectively own workers’ reputations, restricting how they can present themselves to potential employers, and routinely changing how they calculate performance metrics as they attempt to refine the system. I delivered a lunchtime talk to the Institute for the Future, wrote an article for their blog, *Future Now*, and created a card deck presenting curated excerpts of my research data to aid in delivering an Ethnofutures training still in development.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has been a winding journey, and I could not have completed this research and the resulting deliverables without the help and support of many individuals. I would like to thank my interlocutors, who were generous with their time, sharing their experiences without reservation, even when they were not particularly proud of their past actions. This is especially true for the workers who agreed to sit for in-person interviews with a stranger hiring them through an unrelated TaskRabbit category. I now understand the potential anxiety and fear of safety that they regularly experience when going out to work in strange places alone.

I would like to thank The Institute for the Future for the financial support that allowed me to hire workers for interviews and allowing me to attend the foresight practitioners training. I would like to extend special thanks to my contacts at the Institute: Rod Falcon, Namsah Kargbo, Lyn Jeffery, and all the attendees of my LOTT who gave up their lunchtime to provide feedback and direction.

I want to thank Jan English-Lueck for her constant support and helping connect me to a community of practitioners and sympathetic organizations when I arrived in a new place with no local professional network. Her superhuman turnaround of my drafts never ceased to amaze me.

I would also like to thank Drs. A.J. Faas and William O. Beeman, whose perspectives helped me shape the final version of this report, and have always been available for educational, professional, and, sometimes, grammatical advice. I would also like to thank my professors and classmates at the College of Wooster. Their support, lessons, and feedback on my undergraduate thesis and coursework prepared me for the rigors of this process far more than I realized at the time.

Lastly, I would like to thank Shilpi for her constant support, dealing with my complaints through every phase of the graduate school experience, and reminding me to celebrate the little victories.

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THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT OF WORK

Prologue

This report documents an ethnographic research project that explored how stakeholders in the platform gig workers understand, build, and utilize trust and reputation in this space. I conducted this study to support the ongoing research efforts of the Institute for the Future; a non-profit research institution focused on futures thinking. Through semi-structured ethnographic interviews and participant observation as both a client and worker in the online gig economy, I found some of the ways in which trust and reputation are utilized, built, and understood by various stakeholders, as well as the implications of some emergent behaviors and systems. Using these insights, I developed three deliverables for my community partner, the Institute for the Future.

According to a 2016 report by JPMorgan Chase, the number of adults participating in the Online Platform Economy increased sharply during the three years between 2012 and 2015. My first experiences with the platform gig economy occurred just before I began this research. As a transplant to California in August of 2017, I needed to work part-time to make rent while a full-time graduate student. My half-decade of experience in the private sector convinced me that I should be able to provide more value to an employer (and command a correspondingly higher wage) than most part-time positions.

The contingent work or “gig” economy is a sector of the economy in which workers and employers enter into short-term professional relationships. Prior to the internet age, these included consultants and low-level “temp” employees, with jobs lasting from a day or two to several years. In the last years of the 20th century, internet-based services, including oDesk (a precursor of Upwork), began connecting short-term remote contractors to hiring clients through

online job postings. These services now often referred to as “platforms” or “apps,” have since expanded and form a diverse set of services offering a variety of work situations. These platforms now include ridesharing giants, Uber and Lyft, design-based Fiverr, in-person physical labor and low-level clerical-focused TaskRabbit, and remote knowledge work focused Upwork.

The flexibility, type of work, and higher pay offered on Upwork seemed like an ideal opportunity for me. I logged in and began sending proposals to postings. I submitted twelve proposals and only heard back from one, a client who immediately asked me to work off Upwork, an explicit violation of the terms of use. Not wanting to take that risk, I declined the work. With time running out before the beginning of the semester and no income, I ended my brief experiment with online gig work and took a job at a local Trader Joe’s. However, this failure to attain work for which I knew I was qualified continued to weigh on me. I wondered what I had missed about how people go about finding work in the platform gig economy.

Trust in the Age of Online Gig Work

Life in the platform gig economy remained in the back of my mind when I began considering topics for my research. My advisor, Dr. English-Lueck, has a long-standing relationship with the Institute for the Future (IFTF), a non-profit think tank in Palo Alto, California, focused on helping organizations and the public create better futures through holistic, futures research, which includes searching for signals of emergent behaviors ready to scale and work with broad drivers to create a plausible future. The Institute’s research agenda for 2018 focused on trust, a topic business anthropology literature has discussed extensively. The Institute for the Future, with its long-established clients across a variety of sectors, including the general public, was an ideal partner to help my research find the audience that could use the information.

The Institute's recent announcement of a partnership with the State of California on the future of work reiterated the need for updated research into a growing segment of the economy.

While working on a project studying workplace anthropology, I coded the recording of an interview with Stephanie Krawinkler, who conducted her Ph.D. research on trust in an Austrian wiring company. This exposure reinforced the importance of the topic of trust in my long-term career development in organizational anthropology and sensitized me to the ability to ethnographically study organizations and workers as they negotiate their professional relationships. Anthropologists have a long history of documenting how actors in working relationships develop trust (Baba 1999; Krawinkler 2013). However, the dynamics of gig work did not quite fit with their findings. Krawinkler (2013) identified factors of trust and ways that actors could improve the level of trust in their professional relationships as part of her study of a wire company in Austria. Over time, and through activities like drinks after work and reciprocal coffee purchases, co-workers build trust to a point where former strangers become fictive kin (Krawinkler 2013, 161). In fact, the passage of time is so important to building trusting relationships, Krawinkler (2013, 149) includes it as one of her eight parameters of trust.

How would these trust-building activities differ in co-working relationships that only last a few days or even hours? These work arrangements usually rely on a quantified reputation based on past reviews of worker performance making reputation the primary expression of trust in short-term employment, however the extended effects of these changes were not clear. An examination of the functions and role of trust in professional associations on these still emerging services fit IFTF's goals, as this ethnographic research could inform discussions on the future of work, a topic of constant interest to the Institute. I saw that trust in organizations built through work were changing, both as a continuation of trends toward more ephemeral employment, and

within the gig economy, as actors navigate new systems and the presence of platforms that develop them. With the continued expansion of the platform gig economy (JPMorgan Chase 2016), nascent strategies based on how trust and reputation function in the emerging space will inform, or even become, the prevailing norms of the future.

Objective of Project

In the late 2010s, the Institute for the Future has, in parallel, focused on the future of work and the future of trust, which includes reputation. However, a place where those two topics overlapped, the platform gig economy, remained under-explored. To address this gap, I investigated how stakeholders build, understand, and utilize trust, specifically in the form of reputation, through the constraints of digital services that connect workers with clients and maintain unique interaction structures and reputation management systems. IFTF's body of relevant past research was based on a mixed-methods approach that included ethnography. This work provided both a useful foundation of contextual information and a great springboard into my research design. However, I needed to better understand the history and underlying factors of the gig economy through both the anthropological lens and that of my community partner. This provided historical context to modern events and economic forces, and allowed me to track the path of these drivers when looking for insights and developing forecasts for my deliverables.

Work in the Gig Economy

Contingent or "gig" work is defined here as employer-employee relationships that actors enter knowing that the association is likely to be short-term and treated differently from permanent employees, even if the workers are performing the same tasks. Contingent workers

are often paid less than their permanent counterparts, have fewer if any benefits, and little institutional power (Trevithick 2010, 4). New online platforms have facilitated an increase in temporary work arrangements, but short-term work arrangements are not new. Scholars across disciplines are concerned that more and more of these contingent arrangements are in central parts of the economy, occupying spaces where stable employment once dominated (Barley and Kunda 2004, 19). Today, the gig economy continues to expand, but primarily in the lower wage sector, highlighting and exacerbating the increasing precarity Americans face in the lower tax brackets (Shrikant 2018). As regulators turn their eyes to the lack of protections for platform gig workers, all stakeholders will need to understand how trust functions (Lieberman and Srivastava 2016), so that they can make changes to create it.

Employee turnover has always occurred, but beginning with the labor laws and norms laid out in the New Deal, which continued through a more paternalistic version of capitalism in the mid-20th century, many companies began to prize loyalty and incentivize longevity. The obligations to workers that employers took on as part of the New Deal began to unravel in the 1980s (Barley and Kunda 2004, 9). The advent of neoliberal thinking began to roll back the social pact in which employees offered loyalty and good-faith effort in their jobs in exchange for an expected level of long-term job security from their employers. Used here, “neoliberalism” refers to a form of economic thinking, that supports deregulation and privatization but also carries significant social, and even moral components where the impetus for general well-being falls on the individual rather than other actors (e.g., the state) (Faas 2018). Maximizing shareholder value became the new prime directive at the expense of all employees, not just the blue-collar workers who had been the victims of past layoffs (Barley and Kunda 2004, 11).

Citing agility and efficiency, in the 1990s, many organizations embraced contingent labor, citing a need for increased flexibility or skills that the organization did not possess (Orr 2000, 9). These changes corresponded to a shift in the general mindset around work. As Barley and Kunda (2004, 11) succinctly state, in the late 1990s, “Loyalty was passé and self-reliance was in vogue.” The practices of companies to hire through temp agencies, and now through platforms like Upwork and TaskRabbit, are continuations of this trend.

Now, loyalty and tenure are often viewed as liabilities by employers considering applicants (Gershon 2018). Yet, these cultural attitudes toward employment tenure vary across different regions of the United States, with the Midwest preferring longer tenure and the West Coast having the shortest. This disparity in assumptions makes worker mobility more challenging, as the misunderstandings and lack of shared assumptions during this time of transition have serious implications for all stakeholders. While seemingly trivial, missed opportunities due to differing assumptions often mean a loss of income for workers and negatively affect their ability to support themselves or their families.

The advent of internet services (often referred to as “platforms”) that connect a widely dispersed workforce of freelancers with organizations and individuals in need of contingent work has caused an increase in the number of remote gig workers (Vinik 2018). The impacts of the platform gig economy on relationships between organizations and their various employees, as well as the broader labor market, are still developing. Large and influential companies like Procter & Gamble and General Electric are integrating freelance work into their strategic plans (Wald 2016). Utilizing remote freelancers is a form of the much broader “gig economy” of temporary tasks, which also includes handymen and Uber drivers (Heller 2017).

As with any major economic shift, the rising platform gig economy will have differing impacts on a wide variety of people whose livelihoods are affected. In the United States, where healthcare is linked to employment, potential ramifications include an expensive health bill as a result of the lack of benefits offered to these workers, the further displacement of stable, full-time positions in organizations, and a wide range of long-term, macro-level potential outcomes. These range from the workers' enjoying freedom from a restrictive organizational bureaucracy to the possible rise of a "neo-liberal feudalism" (Cefkin et al. 2014, 4). Carrie Lane's (2011, 2) examination of white-collar employment instability exemplifies the prevailing view that the individual is solely responsible for their economic survival. Her subjects reported feeling like temporary contractors, even in permanent, full-time jobs. This acceptance of the increasing ephemerality of employment may lead to further adoption of gig work and the resulting income instability (JPMorgan Chase 2016).

Cefkin and colleagues (2014) are primarily concerned with the use of remote, non-permanent workers, referred to as "crowdwork," alternatively identified with other terms such as platform economy, contingent work, and "E-Lance" by Malone and Laubacher (1998). While organizations have been using temporary workers in the form of consultants and contract workers for many years, there are the added dimensions of anonymity and distance in remote, digital crowdwork. A trusting relationship can develop between actors in a remote work situation, but this relationship is likely different from one with a named consultant who interacts with the organization locally.

In September of 2019, Governor Gavin Newsom signed California Assembly Bill 5, which made it more difficult for organizations to classify workers as independent contractors, prompting ridesharing giants Uber and Lyft to threaten to spend a combined \$60 million in

support of a ballot initiative to repeal the law (Conger 2019). This law is directed primarily at drivers working for Lyft and Uber, but it will almost certainly affect the stakeholders in my study. AB5 is the first major law that has focused on trying to regulate employment in the platform gig economy.

The law went into effect at the beginning of 2020 and has met with stern resistance through lawsuits from companies (Rodd 2020) and professional organizations, like the California Trucking Association, legislators introducing bills to modify the law (Wiley 2020), and in print (Carr 2020). The statewide rollout of the law impacted industries in a variety of ways, with some absorbing it reasonably well, and others thrown into chaos with businesses cutting costs and altering schedules (Roosevelt 2020). While considerations of bargaining power are generally used in describing labor organization, this is the concept legislators in California used when considering which jobs would be exempt from this bill. Many white-collar workers (e.g., doctors, lawyers) who lawmakers deemed to have significant individual bargaining power were exempt from the law's requirements from the outset (Said 2019). However, the widespread impact on a variety of industries in California shows how reliant businesses have become on contract labor to provide for their basic functions. Lawmakers are already proposing revisions to help mitigate the law's unintended impacts. Still, with many businesses reclassifying workers as employees, its impact is already changing the legal environment toward more stable employment. Most of the workers in my study will not be affected by this new law as they qualify under the simpler requirements of independent contractors.

While that bill was working its way through the legislature, Governor Newsom announced a "Future of Work Commission" to recommend steps the state can take to improve the economic stability of California's workers. The group includes prominent leaders in public,

private, and educational sectors. The commission is working with IFTF to “help develop a public agenda to promote shared prosperity for all Californians” (State of California 2019). IFTF’s continued involvement in the Future of Work Commission necessitates further knowledge of the still-evolving platform gig economy, which is likely to remain a significant factor in these discussions.

With these historical trends and current attitudes in mind, anthropology’s unique ability to humanize broad changes and highlight the diversity of experience is well-suited to investigate these research questions. The plethora of permutations of gig economy employment arrangements demands that stakeholders, lawmakers, and even researchers acknowledge that no single interpretation or experience represents a complete picture. By engaging stakeholders directly, anthropology can help shed light on the breadth of individual realities that make up this rapidly changing segment of the economy.

Applying Workplace Anthropology

As the Institute for the Future use research data and insights as part of an established research methodology and publish their findings in a variety of media, this project needed to produce data that informed action toward the Institutes immediate goals. In this case, insights to improve forecasts and forecasts that augment their research offerings. These goals exert additional constraints on the ethnographic inquiry to align the research with the eventual goal of the study. Schensul and LeCompte (2016, 4) describe this kind of applied work as “ethnography in action” and define it as a way to use ethnographic tools as investigatory techniques used to glean and synthesize data in the pursuit of implementing solutions to problems, in contrast with

working to answer social questions without an application in mind for that knowledge (LeCompte and Schensul 2010).

Ethnography assumes that human behavior and the values and beliefs that reinforce those behaviors are both specific to a locality and highly variable. This approach contrasts with other varieties of scientific research, that focus on producing generalizable knowledge that can be broadly applied and tested. Ethnographers enter underexplored places and meet groups of people to understand unforeseen phenomena better. To this end, ethnographic tools are designed primarily for exploration and provide flexibility to pursue areas of interest as they arise with focused, but open inquiry improving the quality of ethnographic research (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). Ethnographers reject that this type of scientific inquiry can be objective, and work to account for their own biases as much as possible. This inductive, explorative, and adaptive methodology contrasts with bounded survey instruments and is one of ethnography's advantages over other, more common forms of inquiry. Observing and talking to people in the normal context of their behaviors and beliefs gives the researcher a more accurate view of their subjects' actions and leaves the researcher open to observe novel behaviors indicating an unmet need (Ladner 2014, 17). In addition to the depth of exposure, the researcher becomes an active participant, helping them take the emic perspective of the research population, which they can report back to stakeholders, producing better-fit solutions to problems.

When studying patients after laryngectomies to understand how they used a client's (called MedCo) voice prosthesis ReD Associates invited MedCo employees into the field and trained them to act as researchers. The client had previously invited clients into their facilities, but most employees had never interacted with a patient outside of this controlled environment. In acting as ethnographers, the clients saw their customers as people with unmet needs, not abstract,

distant users. This exercise had the added benefit of energizing MedCo employees, with many reporting a new sense of purpose, even those who had been with the company for years (Hou and Holme 2015). By showing the client the emic perspective of their end-users, ReD uncovered a variety of shortcomings in the product design thinking, as well as energized the clients to do better for their users.

Complementing the Community Partner

This predisposition to understanding the subjective and targeting specific deliverables works well with IFTF's methods, which prioritize finding edge cases that might scale and represent the norm of the near future. This highlights the oft-quoted central principle at IFTF articulated by William Gibson – “The future is already here; it’s just unevenly distributed.” (Johansen 2007, 14). The exploratory nature of ethnography is ideal for identifying and building an understanding of these emergent behaviors. Anthropologists strive to understand these behaviors through the emic perspective of their interlocutors. By understanding how actors understand their world, researchers can understand the environmental and cultural factors that may cause the spread of the behavior into the new normal. Identifying these signals and drivers of change feeds directly into the forecasting processes developed by the Institute for the Future. IFTF uses signals and drivers to generate foresight about plausible futures, eventually leading to insights about current situations and actions to affect the future that we bring into being.

In the past few years, IFTF has published several reports and forecasts on the future of work (Fidler 2016, Avery et al. 2016) as part of the “Workable Futures” initiative. These works reported findings informing forecasts on the future of work, but multiple publications focused on the growing platform gig economy. Through the Workable Futures Initiative, IFTF built

forecasts trying to ensure that everyone can earn a reasonable living the economy we create (Avery et al. 2016). Also, many of their other initiatives have considered the effects that changes to pervasive concepts will have on work and employment (Kreit and Skvirsky 2018). The platform economy is changing the ways that people organize their personal and professional lives as technology enables short-term temporary work. IFTF reports address the different kinds of people and strategies in the platform gig economy (Avery et al. 2016), the expansion of work beyond traditional organizational and employment structures (Fidler 2016), and the emergent behaviors around consideration and presentation of reputation and skills (Kreit and Skvirsky 2018). Work and economics are tightly tied to the kinds of futures that IFTF is concerned with, and additional, updated information, allowing the Institute to generate more relevant insights into the future of work.

The Institute focused their 2018 research on trust and all its permutations: including outsourcing authority to artificial intelligence programs, continuous verification of credentials, and boundary management between trusted and untrusted entities. As part of a significant body of information published in the late summer of 2018, a few articles focused on how trust and reputation will be utilized differently for employment in the next few years, based primarily on recent changes. However, these works primarily focused on more traditional work situations and did not explicitly tie into the previous work on the gig economy.

My research endeavored to understand the unexplored intersection of two recent IFTF research foci better. The body of research on both made provided a good springboard into understanding how trust (and more specifically, reputation) and alternative work intersect. This project supports the Institute for the Future's future efforts by uncovering potential signals of widespread change in the form of scalable behaviors and identifying drivers of these behaviors.

As part of a new effort to better articulate their multi-disciplinary forecasting process, researchers at IFTF are working toward a clearer understanding of how each of the research disciplines they utilize contributes to their forecasting methodology. In partnership with IFTF, I conducted ethnographic research on trust and reputation in the platform gig economy to serve as both additional research and a case study in understanding how ethnographic data can contribute to the process of forecasting. I used my data to evaluate and expand upon IFTF's previous forecasts on the topic of the future of the gig economy and, more generally, the future of trust in work.

Avery and colleagues' (2016) report on the future of gig economy workers, built archetypes of worked experience, based on ethnographic interviews with thirty-one stakeholders in the platform gig economy. The goal of this report is to provide insights to decision-makers so that designers will build the algorithms that govern the platform gig economy to provide "workable futures" that return money to owners and investors, but also provide humane working conditions for workers (Avery et al. 2016, 2). Their findings illustrated that the shift to gig work has both positive and negative consequences for individual workers, highlighting both the flexibility and insecurity of gig work as long-term outcomes. Using these insights, the authors reveal unexpected consequences of decisions made in building the platforms and draw out consequences of current trends, two of IFTF's foresight tools (The Institute for the Future 2018a).

Fidler's (2016) research on the economics of networked work provided needed context into the recent past of work as a concept as well as research design ideas for my project. Like other IFTF publications (Avery et al. 2016), Fidler (2016, 8-9) endeavors to provide insights into the changing concept of work caused by the hollow recovery from the 2008 recession that

increased employment and, therefore, economic instability in the United States. In line with the Institute's desire to prescribe actions based on their insights, Fidler splits his findings into two sections: "Opportunities to be Amplified" and "Challenges to be Mitigated." Building on these concepts, Fidler explores parallel plausible futures to identify preferable outcomes that actors in the sector can realize.

Kreit and Skvirsky's (2018) forecast based on the changing ways employers look for proof of skills in more traditional work arrangements provided an excellent insight to extend into the platform gig economy. Traditional credentials, like college degrees, are often broad and permanent. Employers across the economy are increasingly looking for better indicators of needed skills from applicants, and applicants who learned skills on the job or in ways other than traditional education systems (e.g., free online courses) are trying to figure out how to relate those to potential employers in a convincing way. While employers often look for skills using restrictive or even secretive methods, the renegotiation of professional reputation can also offer workers a freedom of expression, as employers remain open to new signals of competence in the more traditional media of resumes, cover letters, and portfolios. Using these signals, the authors engage current IFTF forecasts to propose potential future adaptations, including employers embracing more dynamic forms of reputation and addressing problems with current trends like restrictive filters employers use to filter out applicants (Kreit and Skvirsky 2018). Like most Institute forecasts, this work describes both positive and negative future meant to invoke the reader into action.

Report Roadmap

The Institute's ongoing interest in the future of work, the rapidly changing landscape of the platform gig economy, and the gap in the need for the platform economy converged to form need for this project. In the next section of this report, I describe anthropology's place in futures thinking and the Institute for the Future's history, recent research, and relevant needs at the beginning of this project. With this understanding, I describe the Institute's desired deliverables, designed to fit into their particular way of working. In the following section, I lay out the concepts and methods used to address the described needs and conduct my research. Based on the fieldwork, I outline my insights into the platform gig economy and how I used those findings to build my three deliverables and describe the method of their delivery and use. This report closes with a reflection on the course of my project, the changing political and economic landscape, and some ideas for additional research steps. Following the references section, I have included appendices with relevant artifacts from the project.

PARTNER NEEDS

Anthropology in Forecasting

Through the employment of and partnership with many anthropologists, IFTF forecasts often draw upon ethnographic research, to avoid ethnocentrism in the development of forecasts (English-Lueck, personal communication). Anthropologists have utilized future-focused methods for nearly half a century. Building on the work of Margaret Mead, Dr. Robert Textor pioneered Ethnographic Futures Research (EFR) in the 1970s. He defined EFR as "a form of ethnography adapted to the needs and constraints of research on rapid change and people's perceptions thereof." (Textor 1989,1). Textor worked alongside Former IFTF research director and President

Bob Johansen. The influence of EFR is clear in the Institute's ethnography heavy forecasts (Avery 2013) and their embracing of the concept of forecasting instead of prediction. Forecasting focuses on identifying signals and broader drivers, with an emphasis on equipping their clients with this information so they can use their own agency to create the best future possible based on the constraints. Likewise, Ethnofutures thinking seeks out diverse contributions and audiences to help build forecasts that are not culturally bound, which has been a common problem in futures thinking, especially those based solely on quantitative data (English-Lueck and Avery 2020).

History of the Institute for the Future

Studying the history of the Institute was vital to me understanding the reasoning behind their methodology and current goals. This familiarity improved both my research design and the deliverables I produced, as I worked to conform each to the Institute's normal processes. The most important of these is likely the Institute's focus on finding edge cases that could scale and become the normal behaviors of the near future.

The Institute for the Future sprang from the defection of researchers from the RAND Corporation, a non-partisan policy research institution founded in the late-1940s to bridge current research and military decision-making (RAND Corporation, n.d.). A small group of RAND researchers, feeling constrained by working only on classified research, founded the Institute for the Future in 1968 to push futures thinking into the broader world (Johansen 2007). The Institute for the Future uses methods developed over more than fifty years of practice to forecast future scenarios. They identify signals and drivers of change, conduct further research, which often includes ethnography, and then play out scenarios to ultimately develop provocative forecasts. Their forecasts are meant to unstick thinking from the present and reorient clients to

futures thinking and present them with plausible future states the clients can use in strategic planning. In addition to working with paying organizational partners, IFTF publishes much of its research to make it accessible to the public.

Futures researchers go to great pains to point out that these forecasts are not meant to be predictions, but are instead meant to provoke their readers into keeping their minds open to insights so they may better plan for and make their futures (Johansen 2012). Bob Johansen, a Distinguished Fellow and former CEO of the Institute for the Future, cites Herman Kahn, the inventor of modern scenario planning when discussing this topic. Kahn went to great lengths to keep his readers open-minded about multiple potential futures, including telling his readers that some parts of his work were intentionally misleading to keep them on alert and skeptical (Johansen 2007, 17).

Forecasting is inherently an interdisciplinary endeavor and the Institute works to remain a multi-disciplinary team. They routinely bring in experts with unusual backgrounds to help them understand new perspectives. As a result, IFTF often leans on a network of experts to find a new understanding of events from a variety of perspectives. This practice is built on the Delphi method, which The RAND Corporation pioneered in the 1960s. It involves gathering a diverse group of experts from different disciplines and conducting multiple rounds of blind surveys. These surveys are aggregated, and either form a consensus around a forecast or a clear division between camps of experts (Johansen 2007, 20). In recent years, IFTF employs scientists, engineers, social scientists, and a diverse group of rotating artists, including a famous clown and magician. Anthropologists focus the forecasters attention on the lived experience of a diverse set of people.

Over the past fifty years, IFTF has worked with a three-part cycle of Foresight-Insight-Action. Under this framework, the Institute uses foresight based on signals and drivers of emergent behaviors to create insights into the implications and resulting choices of those forecasts. They then deliver those to clients as recommendations for actions to take (The Institute for the Future 2018a). Using this model, the Institute encourages their clients (and anyone who cares to read their published work) to consider changes to the broader environment, use those constraints to consider potential positive and negative scenarios, and then take action based on those insights to create the part of the future that is within their control.

The Institute for the Future generally works with a loose “Ten Years Ahead” temporal scope, though this is often bent based on the needs of the project. This timeframe is partially due to client organizations’ tendency to have shorter strategic timeframes but is also far enough in the distance to help see slow-moving changes form into patterns, separating themselves from the noise of daily life (Johansen 2012). By staying around that temporal range, they add value to their clients that is a good fit for their strategic thinking. IFTF began developing a ten-year forecast each year, based around a central topic in 1978 (Johansen 2007). The focus in 2018 was “trust,” and 2019’s was “power.” They reveal this research to clients and their expanded network of colleagues and contributors at a conference each Autumn.

The Institute’s spatial scope is far more fluid. Their acceptance of a variety of organizational partners forces them to change the breadth of their research foci regularly. Working for a large, international organization may require an international approach, sending researchers around the globe to interview stakeholders. Conversely, projects for smaller organizations or state-run utilities might shift their primary focus to smaller regions or specific industries. This research is made available to IFTF’s partners, a diverse group of large and small

organizations, ranging from for-profit giants like Nestle, Mitsubishi, British Petroleum, and Microsoft to national non-profits like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the AARP (The Institute for the Future n.d.c)

The Institute for the Future identifies ethnographic interviews as foundational to their research model and employs several anthropologists, including some cited in this report (The Institute for the Future n.d.d). This is evident in their use of both top-down and bottom-up forecasting. Anthropological study focused on the future, sometimes called Ethnofutures or anticipatory anthropology, began in the mid-twentieth century, now sitting between applied anthropology and futures research (English-Lueck, Personal Communication). The discipline uses anthropological methods and integrates ideas from futures thinking to inform forecasts. Anthropology's focus on the quotidian aspects of the lives of everyday people creates a bottom-up approach, which represents the agency and values of the often-overlooked majority of people in a population (English-Lueck and Avery 2020, 16, 29). These methods include designing questions to help understand the boundaries of what they would tolerate in a future scenario, as opposed to the more traditional design method of asking their thoughts on a specific product destined for the market (Kuester and Prescott 2019, 11). This is in line with the Institute's focus on provoking practitioners and partners to get out of their comfort zones and get unstuck from current thinking (The Institute for the Future 2018a).

The Institute for the Future maintains ongoing "labs," which are organized around research topics. These include initiatives focused on health, food, governance, and emerging media. The Workable Futures Initiative has been an ongoing project for more than a decade, with its first report, a map titled "The Future of Work," published in 2007. Since then, the Institute has regularly conducted research, including ethnographic fieldwork, into various elements of

current work situations, highlighting insights about plausible future scenarios. Many IFTF publications sources cited in this report are part of the Workable Futures Initiative.

In line with the founding principles of IFTF, The Workable Futures Initiative was a collaborative venture. Organizers laid out a four-tiered approach to research and subsequent dissemination of insights. These include on the ground research with designers and users, a reformulation of labor economics specifically considering the rise of platforms and algorithms, prototyping platforms with a positive outcome, and encouraging broad engagement to help the public apply research findings and forecasts (The Institute for the Future n.d.a). The Institute's prototype positive platforms were especially collaborative. IFTF convened leaders in stakeholder groups as part of the development process and tested the prototypes through public outreach events. The Institute disseminated their findings through a publishing series of whitepapers, reports and maps, and a public awareness campaign.

The Workable Futures Initiative, though still active on the IFTF website, has not published any new literature since 2018. The final and only publication after 2017 is an op-ed written by the Institute's director Marina Gorbis. The last several WFI publications advocated for the concept of universal basic assets (UBA). As of early 2020, the Workable Futures Initiative had been integrated into Equitable Futures Lab, supporting California's new Future of Work Commission. The Equitable Futures Lab combines previous research, including on work and economics, to work toward better understanding and providing solutions for the growing level of economic inequality. The foci of this initiative are specific and aimed at highlighting the variety of impacts such high levels of inequality can have to the new commission (The Institute for the Future, n.d.b).

Remodeling Trust 2018

Each year, the Institute selects a theme to focus their research toward for an annual ten-year forecast, unveiled at a conference in the Fall. The conference includes speakers and authors from a wide variety of fields, including game designers, journalists, documentarians, and more. The theme for 2018 was *Remodeling Trust*. To align with these needs, I focused my research project on this topic. The forecast had four models of trust for the future: Continuous Verification, Boundary Management, Outsourced Authority, and Filtered Preferences.

Each of these models aims to forecast how trust might function in the post-truth world, as formerly trusted entities lose the public's trust. Continuous Verification forecasts posit a future in which digital algorithms or artificial intelligence can evaluate data and confirm claims immediately so decision makers can make the most informed decisions possible. Future instances of Boundary Management show an increasing reliance on separating a desired group with values that match the actor's own from an undesirable. Methods for boundary creation in the forecast include physical barriers, brand ecosystem loyalty, and group-specific currencies. Outsourced Authority forecasts place individuals' trust in other entities, usually data-driven sources like computer algorithms, to make recommendations or decisions for them. The Institute acknowledges that people have long looked to experts to help in their decision making, but trust in traditional institutions has been eroding and new authorities are taking shape (The Institute for the Future 2018b). The concept of Filtered Preferences envisions a future in which users trust third parties to filter their realities to avoid sensory inputs that the user would find distasteful or upsetting. This builds on the concept of social media bubbles that form when people only follow others who share their views. Filtered Preferences and Outsourced Authority were of particular

interest to this study. Gig economy platforms filter workers based on client preferences and hiring clients rely on workers' reputations curated and effectively owned by the platforms.

Each of IFTF's published works was based on these models, along with seven drivers IFTF identified for the future of trust. Contributors considered the role of trust in employment and hiring (Kreit and Skvirsky 2018), but they did not look explicitly at the role of differences in credentialing in the platform gig economy. This missing piece left an opportunity for my project to bridge the gap between two major IFTF research efforts. I was fortunate enough to attend the Ten-Year Forecast Summit in 2018. I heard several speakers discuss the economic implications of their research, helping me better understand the wider context in which my research was taking place. This experience also helped me to tailor my work to be more in line with how other IFTF contributors structure their publications and present their findings.

Foresight Essentials Training

Starting in 2018, the Institute for the Future worked to expand their training offerings in both variety and frequency. The first of these was the Foresight Practitioner's Studio (now called Foresight Essentials) to teach basic foresight methodology to interested parties to take back to their organizations to influence organizational strategies. This training guides trainees through exercises they can use with their organizations. These exercises are divided into groups of "Prepare," "Insight," "Foresight," and "Action," roughly mirroring the central IFTF process. The exercises within the training, which are codified in a hard copy toolkit issued to each participant, both emanate from and feed into ethnographic interviewing. In one exercise, the practitioner invites participants to use signals and drivers to envision plausible alternative futures based on general themes, including scenarios of unchecked growth and collapse. This focus on

ethnographic methods is partially due to the intention behind the tools being that the practitioner will use them to facilitate data-producing activities with others, mirroring the role of an ethnographer.

These training courses have proven very popular with the Institute's partners, with some even ordering customized on-site training sessions for their employees. Building on the continued success of the Foresight Essentials training, IFTF launched two new courses in 2019: Design Futures, helping designers prototype political policies, artifacts and processes of informed futures, and their Ethical Operating System, a framework to help designers of solutions to consider potential ethical dilemmas in their designs. These are the first of several waves of new courses that the institute is planning to roll out to their expanding community of organizational partners and foresight practitioners.

With the Workable Futures Initiative research still informing new research in other areas of the Institute, expanding and updating some of the work will provide IFTF with additional foundational research for use in developing further forecasts, as well as providing some published material to add additional value to both paying clients and the general public they endeavor to serve.

The Deliverables

As with any project, one with a multi-year timeline must shift and adjust to the changing needs of the client. This is especially true when the client has a one-year horizon for most projects, as the Institute for the Future usually maintains, which does not align with the usual academic calendar. In the end I developed and presented three distinct deliverables: a lunchtime talk, which would also serve as partner feedback on preliminary analysis, an article for the

Institute's Blog *Future Now*, and a set of curated ethnographic data for use in a new Ethnofutures training course. The lunchtime talk would follow an established format called a LOTT, short for "Lunch on the 'Tute." These are catered lunchtime presentations, usually from outside scholars that the Institute hosts regularly. We would schedule the LOTT sometime after the completion of my fieldwork and during preliminary analysis. The feedback from Rod Falcon and other attendees would help guide and fine-tune my analytical framework and by suggestion foci and categories for deductive codes.

The second deliverable would be an article in the Institute's blog *Future Now* which has taken on additional significance now that their yearly print magazine, of the same name has been discontinued for the foreseeable future. IFTF decided to integrate the article into the public rollout of the Remodeling Trust forecasts in 2020, after publishing this work exclusively for IFTF partners in late 2018. These two works would be integrated into the Institute's understanding of the gig economy and trust, providing insights that would inform further research on the future of work and other initiatives for IFTF's private and public partners.

As part of IFTF's expansion of futures training offerings, Dr. English-Lueck and IFTF Distinguished Fellow Dr. Lyn Jeffery started to design an Ethnofutures training and thought that my data could be useful. It is not practical for participants to generate data during a short training course. A body of example data would allow trainees to focus on the use of ethnographic data in futures thinking as efficiently as possible. I would curate a collection of excerpts from my data to form a body of examples IFTF trainers could provide to trainees to practice using the Ethnofutures tools that are still in development. This body of example data took the form of a deck of cards based on the format of other IFTF products.

Due to delays in the development of future IFTF training studios, we decided to prototype the curriculum as a tutorial at the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC) in October 2020. This allows us to test the curriculum and publicize the training in partnership with the Institute. We plan to integrate this research into a new foresight training aimed at helping attendees learn to use ethnographic data in forecasting. Assigning both existing IFTF writings and the products of this project to trainees will help trainees understand the context of the exercises we have developed as well as sensitizes them to IFTF's processes and forecasts.

Using this knowledge about the Institute for the Future, their history, methodology and future goals, I began developing a research plan in support of these objective. I designed a project that would generate insights into the expressions of trust in the platform gig economy which would, in turn, lead to new insights into existing forecasts and generate new research to support the Institute's ongoing efforts toward equitable futures.

INQUIRY, CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT, AND ANALYSIS

Inquiry Foci

Anthropologists had addressed the role of trust in electronically mediated work relationships and how they changed as the arrangements moved from more traditional work arrangements to the new online platforms (English-Lueck et al. 2002), but none had looked at these dynamics in the platform gig economy. Additionally, the acts of hiring and applying for work are far more common in the platform gig economy, meaning that trust is chiefly expressed as an understanding and construction of reputation. As a result, most of my inquiry was focused on how stakeholders built, evaluated, conceived of, and in the case of platforms, built the

constraints of reputation, and how they change their own behaviors and strategies to account for the actions of others.

As a result of my experience with the Institute for the Future's Foresight Practitioner training (now renamed Foresight Essentials), I focused my inquiry strategies to elicit data that would best inform forecasts. I wanted to understand my original research questions, but in a way that produced insights that would be useful to my community partner. This meant focusing my inquiry on finding edge cases and emergent behaviors that could scale and become norms of the near future. This focus on edge behaviors also highlighted the need to understand behaviors and strategies that were still in negotiation between stakeholders, including assumptions stakeholders made about other people's intentions and what they viewed as telling signals of others.

Based on these needs, it was important to understand how trust and reputation manifest in the traditional workplace as a baseline to understand how the gig economy both conforms and deviates. What follows is a consideration of workplace trust and its most relevant expression in the gig economy, reputation. These concepts underpinned the design of the research, analysis, and deliverables.

Trust in Work

IFTF's focus for 2018 was trust. The short-term relationships the gig economy encourages, create an environment where trust functions in a situation where the two parties do not have any previous interaction. As a result, actors must rely on various indicators of potential trustworthiness. Reputation is understood here as an indicator of potential trustworthiness when an individual has no prior experience with the other party and falls under the conceptual umbrella of trust.

As a feature of every relationship, trust is a topic with wide-ranging applications and opportunities for study. Trust serves to reduce the uncertainty and potential risk of collaboration between actors. Work performed by parties who distrust each other is often hindered by the necessity for formal contracts and the time required to develop them (Baba 1999). Even though more trusting relationships between actors offer for-profit organizations a competitive, and therefore financial, advantage, there is still a trend among American companies to eschew social science solutions in favor of the physical sciences (Baba 1999). In the case of the platform economy, the platforms have streamlined the process of contracts, by reducing the risk to the client through standardized working situations. Clients have at least a rough idea of what to expect from a worker and retain avenues for recourse if the worker's performance is unsatisfactory. In these cases, clients can leave bad reviews and, on some platforms, withhold payment.

Many authors address the concept of social distance as a factor in trust or often in a lack of trust (Krawinkler 2013; Heyman 2004). The similarities between actors can be educational or class based (Heyman 2004), or shared experience in a professional group (Krawinkler 2013). Baba (1999) shows that members of the same socioeconomic group will develop trust more easily than relationships between demographics. This similarity is credited to a shared system of values, which can come from several different components of a person's background. Building on whatever foundation exists, social distance can be closed by interactions like having beers after work or water-cooler talk (Krawinkler 2013). However, many of these trust-building activities are not available to stakeholders in the gig economy, due to the extremely short work relationships and physical distance between stakeholders. This lack of availability magnifies the impact of social distance in the platform gig economy. Workers and clients in the gig economy

try to work with individuals or organizations with whom they have an existing relationship, to reduce some of this uncertainty and build on the social distance decreased by earlier encounters. Trust is an adaptation of people to the environment created by those around them, which allows for a simplified decision-making process, such as whether to trust a worker or client with your wellbeing. The decisions in this scenario are whether to enter an arrangement where another party can do them harm, either economic or physical.

Few social scientists defined trust as a concept until the late 20th century because it is ubiquitous and functions in a variety of ways across cultures (Baba 1999, 333). Since then, many anthropologists have suggested frameworks for understanding trust. They are often multi-layered and faceted. Marietta Baba's (1999) seminal work outlines many elements and functions of trust. While each of the constructs is useful in considering certain situations, the functions of platforms and other stakeholders in the platform gig economy limit those that are relevant to this study. The clients in my study primarily considered a worker's perceived ability to perform a task, falling into Baba's "competence" category. While the portion of trust Baba describes as "goodwill" or "fiduciary responsibility" (Baba 1999, 333) is less relevant to this discussion as gig workers and client rarely have cause or opportunity to work in this way.

In developing this study, I focused specifically on Baba's (1999, 332) concepts of competence, consistency, and to a lesser extent, openness as dimensions of trust. Competence and consistency seemed to be the goals of curated reputations online. I excluded integrity and loyalty as they did not seem to be as functionally important in the platform gig economy based on my initial experiences. In addition, Baba's comparison between cognition-based trust, focused primarily on competence, and affect-based trust, founded on integrity, loyalty, and openness, was especially helpful in my analysis due to their sharp divide.

Most frameworks of trust are primarily focused on regular interactions and how different components of trust are used in a variety of situations. This project is concerned with how novel types of social interactions have changed. Marietta Baba (1999) posits that reputation, like credentials and demographic information, are used as indicators of an individual's trustworthiness. This decision is necessary when the actor trying to limit their own risk does not have enough experience with the other actor to make a choice.

Reputation

Reputation is most effective in situations where potential long-term associations are more valuable than short-term theft. Sosis (2005) uses the example of diamond trading as an example of a relationship where the long-term gain is often outweighed by the short-term opportunity to steal from another actor. Even if the two parties have previously had a reciprocal association in the past, a new situation may change one actor's evaluation (Walsh 2009). There is little such incentive in the gig economy, as reputation does not travel between platforms.

The function of reputation varies across existing work arrangements. However, the platform gig economy offers a variety of new factors and constraints. Face-to-face reputations are well-studied by anthropologists in traditional organizations and in a variety of relationship types around the world. Actors consider different indicators of trustworthiness depending on the kind of arrangement the two parties are hoping to initiate.

In-person reputation is built on a variety of factors that vary between situations and cultures. The changing methods of hiring for traditional employment is a closer analog to hiring in the gig economy. Employers look for specific examples of competence in the skills they see as important to the job description. This shift takes many forms, as employers not only tolerate but

even encourage alternatives to traditional resumes and cover letters. Google runs interactive ads with coding problems so that potential coders can solve those problems and show Google their competence in coding without ever submitting a resume or knowing that they are applying for a job (Kreit and Skvirsky 2018, 116). This ongoing negotiation of what is important in someone's professional reputation is mirrored in the new space of the platform gig economy. This study looked for both consistency and contrast between these emerging systems. The primary differences between each area are the short tenure of employment and the reputation systems of the platforms.

Quantified metrics are major components of reputation in the platform gig economy. They meant to show the quality of a worker's performance in a field. In other words, they are meant as indicators for whether a client should trust the worker to perform a kind of work adequately. These are based on past interactions and customer reviews. Baba (1999, 333) bases the cognitive evaluation of trust partially on reputation and credentials, with other dimensions assigned to affect-based trust. However, metrics can be opaquely or poorly calculated and leave little room for argument or error correction. This pushback has become even more prevalent in the era of algorithmic calculation of metrics, which usually affect the already vulnerable and increase inequality by relying on the demographic-based assumptions (Ruckenstein 2019).

Caitlin Zaloom's (2009) study of finance professionals yielded telling evidence about the affective relationship human actors can unintentionally develop with these supposedly objective metrics. Zaloom challenges the notion that reasoned actions are the result of data and certainty, based on research into the relationship financial professionals have with the U.S. Treasury's bond prices, called the yield curve. These experts often spoke of the indicator of the market's view on the future economy with the kind of language reserved for vengeful deities. The

understanding of the curve as a metric assumes that the actions of other traders in the market are rational and based on good data. Zaloom uncovered that the assumptions about the curve are socially bound, and not every actor in the bond market is an expert. By assuming certainty that is not supported by facts, affect is far more prevalent than it initially appears. In addition to this finding, Zaloom also points out the inherent flaws in how we interact with indicating metrics, which are similar to those used for worker reputation in the platform gig economy. As a result, I considered the fallibility of metrics as a construct and considered how their flaws impacted stakeholders, particularly more vulnerable workers.

As with trust and reputation, the power dynamics in itinerant employment situations are not entirely new, but actors are still negotiating toward a consensus in the emerging platform gig economy. While anthropology is keenly aware of power differentials and their effects, I limited the consideration of power in the development of this study to its impact on the roles of reputation and trust in the lives of my informants. I focused specifically on the differences in vulnerability, one actor risks some form of harm, and dependence, one actor cannot control the other's actions (Baba 1999), each actor experiences when they enter a gig work arrangement, even as a one-time transaction. Understanding these disparities in agency was important in considering how they constrain the strategies actors develop to mitigate risk or take advantage of opportunities.

With a greater understanding of the theoretical concepts that I wanted to use to understand the functions of reputation and trust in the gig economy, I developed a research design and began fieldwork. In the next section, I describe my research methods and how I tailored them to better inform my deliverables, how my fieldwork proceeded, and how my research plan changed over time.

Data Collection

Based on the understandings of trust and reputation, both from the anthropological literature as well as that of my community partner, the Institute for the Future I began my fieldwork in pursuit of insights into how stakeholders in the platform gig economy understand, build, and use trust and reputation. I collected data through two avenues, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the gig economy and participant observation by working and applying for jobs on three of the most popular services, Upwork, TaskRabbit, and Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Though it was not part of the initial plan, I also experienced the process of hiring as a client on Upwork and TaskRabbit during informant recruitment. By using a multi-method approach, each method informed and directed the other. This interplay allowed me to learn and quickly apply my findings to my research design, helping to maximize my use of limited time and other resources. In addition, my use of semi-structured interviews helps to align me with the Institute for the Future for who ethnographic interviews are the primary method of inquiry.

The Three Services

Due to the proliferation of gig work services in the past several years, I decided to focus my research on a limited number of diverse platforms. I avoided Uber and Lyft as they were already under a significant amount of public scrutiny and are narrow in the kinds of work they offered. I wanted to delve into less known areas of the gig economy to help The Institute for the Future find compelling edge cases that were more likely to have been missed. TaskRabbit, Upwork, and Amazon's Mechanical Turk offered a breadth of work types, pricing structures, and reputation systems, maximizing my opportunities to find edge cases.

Upwork jobs tend to require skilled workers, sometimes at consultant-level rates, and are usually remote, allowing workers to complete the tasks at a location of their choice. These jobs are either priced on a flat-rate basis or with a desired hourly rate. Hourly job postings can have an estimated cap or as is increasingly common, be open-ended arrangements sometimes mimicking full-time employment. To find jobs, workers search for postings and then send proposals and customized profiles to clients, who then select the requisite number of workers for the task.

TaskRabbit predominantly offers hands-on, in-person, manual labor, including both skilled and unskilled tasks. However, even those requiring a skilled worker are primarily jobs traditionally considered blue-collar work. Illustrating the platform's focus, IKEA purchased TaskRabbit in 2017, providing their customers with an army of workers to help customers assemble their flat-pack furniture. In addition to these tasks, handymen, personal assistants, and lawn care services are some of the jobs a prospective client can hire a worker to perform. Workers, called "taskers," set hourly rates for each task category in which they will accept jobs. TaskRabbit has a somewhat complex rating system in which workers have a general reputation reflecting their performance across the platform, as well as a reputation specific to the job category (e.g., personal assistant).

Amazon's Mechanical Turk (also called MTurk) primarily posts tasks that take well under one hour to complete, and require minimal skills, though foreign language skills are often in demand. These HITs (short for "Human Intelligence Tasks") pay a set amount, usually under one US Dollar per task, and are usually part of a large set of the same task. Market and academic research surveys are common postings, as well as small pieces of audio transcription and repetitive data entry tasks. Unlike the other two platforms in this study, HITs have set prices and

a binary rating system of work accepted and payment dispensed, or work rejected with payment withheld. Mechanical Turk clients do not hire workers directly, but rather post the jobs with requirements such as physical location, work acceptance score, minimum number of tasks completed, and certain endorsements of skills. Only workers who meet the task's requirements can accept the HIT and complete the assignment. The platform withholds payment until the poster accepts or rejects the work, which can range from a few hours to several weeks. This structure is in direct contrast with the other two systems in which workers receive payment for the hours or tasks completed, independently of the quality of their work.

The variety offered by these three platforms maximized my opportunity to identify emergent behaviors in the limited time available. By examining three unique platforms, I was able to compare norms and structures, helping to identify when one was unusual. The depth of knowledge gained by my participant observation was especially helpful in improving interview questions and strengthening signals from my interviewees.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is a research technique in which the researcher learns about the day-to-day routines and processes of a research population through active participation in those activities (Schensul and LeCompte 2012, 83). While the researcher is not always able to fully immerse themselves, they often end up participating in unforeseen ways (Jordan 2013, 23), exemplifying the exploratory nature of ethnography and allowing for adjustments to the research design.

As very few norms have been established in the platform gig economy, the emergent nature of this area called for ethnographic methods that were particularly exploratory and suited

for studying a population of which the researcher has limited knowledge. In addition to the adaptability of participant observation, the remote nature of the platform gig economy made the time and cost barriers to entry for this method of inquiry very low. Once I signed up and paid enrollment fees, the highest of which was twenty-five dollars, I was able to actively participate as a worker and hiring client in the platform gig economy at my leisure and without leaving my home. I worked small jobs on Mechanical Turk intermittently over the course of the next year, slowly building my understanding and reputation.

The Institute of the Future provided funding, allowing me to hire workers for interviews. This incentive made them far more willing to participate. In addition to helping me secure interviewees, this experience served as participant observation from the client side of the relationship. I was able to experience the hurdles and idiosyncrasies of both the Upwork and TaskRabbit apps from the client-facing side. These experiences reaped immediate rewards as I was able to use my experiences to hone my interview questions. I asked hiring clients more pointed questions about navigating the system and worker interaction and workers about disparities in the vetting process and reviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

I chose a semi-structured interview format, which allowed the freedom for discovery while ensuring that I, an inexperienced interviewer, had focused questions and addressed each of the areas of inquiry while maintaining necessary flexibility (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 172). I created distinct interview plans for clients and workers as their experiences were so different. However, as the study continued, I was able to gain access to additional types of stakeholders. As a result, I ended up with four categories of interviewees: workers, hiring clients, employees of

one platform, and a university career counselor. I finalized my interview instruments and received IRB approval at the beginning of August 2018. I conducted my fieldwork in the Fall of 2018, interviewing a variety of stakeholders in the platform gig economy. These people were workers, casual clients, professional clients, employees of one of the platforms, and a university career counselor.

Development of the Interview Instruments

My primary goal in developing my interview instruments for client and worker interviews [Appendix A] was eliciting evidence of emergent strategies for adapting to the new environment of the platform gig economy. Understanding the resulting strategies requires understanding both the wider environment and constraints that produce them and the history and experiences of the individual. I focused my interview questions on how interlocutors viewed other parties and how they made choices about how to interact with them (or not). I asked each interlocutor how they became involved in the platform gig economy, how they evaluate other actors, and how asked them about different scenarios for the future of the platform on which they participated.

Sampling and Recruiting

This project looked at the manifestations of how reputation and trust are built and utilized in these new professional settings to support more nuanced forecasts. I used purposive sampling across a variety of platforms to understand better the experience of different levels of workers. These ranged from high-paying, white-collar knowledge work to the 21st century equivalent of piecework. This broader focus fit well with the Institute for the Future's search for signals of

emergent behavior as it exposed me to more segments of the platform gig economy in which these behaviors may manifest.

The focus of futures research is on scalable signals from edge cases, so sampling a large population is less important than framing the stakeholders accurately and sampling across their differing experiences. To this end, I chose a purposive sampling strategy, a non-probabilistic sampling approach that is appropriate for situations in which research populations are not clearly bounded. Purposive sampling is well-suited to identify edge cases by targeting representatives of several classes of stakeholders in the platform gig economy, looking for the most data-rich opportunities to connect with participants to maximize limited resources. Using this approach, the researcher selects participants based on their knowledge of the project goals, population, and experience (Etikan et al. 2016, 2). Moreover, each of my study populations potentially includes hundreds of thousands of people across the world, making any kind of probabilistic or representative sampling strategy unworkable and ill-fit to the goals of this project.

I identified a series of stakeholder types in the platform gig economy and ensured that I had some representation in each category and subdivision. The broad categories were worker, client, and platform employee, with each having subdivisions based on platform and tenure in the gig economy.

Interviewees by Stakeholder Category		
• Workers (7)		
• TaskRabbit	Short Tenure (2)	Long Tenure (2)
• Upwork	Short Tenure (1)	Long Tenure (2)
• Clients (7)		
• TaskRabbit	Short Tenure (2)	Long Tenure (2)
• Upwork	Short Tenure (1)	Long Tenure (2)
• TaskRabbit Employees (4)		
• University Career Counselor (1)		

Table 1. Interviewees broken down by stakeholder category.

Within the worker and client categories, I considered the platforms on which they worked and hired, focusing on finding interlocutors to represent both TaskRabbit and Upwork. I could not figure out an effective strategy for identifying Mechanical Turk workers, and as my participant observation efforts were on that platform, I considered my own experiences working and researching the platform would be a serviceable substitute. In addition to considering stakeholders across multiple platforms, I made sure that I interviewed both new and seasoned workers and clients on each platform. I recruited workers and clients located in the United States to limit variables where possible. I hired and interviewed three workers on Upwork and four through TaskRabbit, the last of which came from a referral from one of the other TaskRabbit interviewees.

In line with my selection of workers for this study, I wanted to interview both experienced and inexperienced clients. This was to mirror The Institute for the Future's previous research into the future of work, and because they seemed like they would have markedly different experiences and roles in the gig economy. New or novice hiring clients were likely to hire for a few personal tasks here and there, whereas experienced clients would have well-developed strategies to share.

I reached out through my extended personal and professional networks to recruit hiring clients. Approaching clients on Upwork and Mechanical Turk would have required messaging each individually, and it would not have been possible to contact clients on TaskRabbit, as they contact workers directly and don't have visible profiles. Fortunately, my networks returned several willing participants who fell into each category.

While online platforms are generally not restricted to a locality, the in-person nature of the work on TaskRabbit forces the platform to account for spatial constraints in ways that

Upwork and Mechanical Turk do not. Conversely, it is difficult to restrict searches by locality on the other platforms due to the structure of the hiring process. As a result, my interviews were split between in-person and online. I conducted online interviews via Zoom, a free video chat and meeting service with a built-in feature for recording meetings.

I interviewed five professionals (not workers or hiring clients) associated with the gig economy: four workers at one of the services and one university career counselor. I conducted each of these interviews at the interlocutors' places of work. As I had hired the TaskRabbit workers, I interviewed them all in public libraries. During one interview, a respondent mentioned that having the interviews at a library instead of in a more private location made her more at ease with the unusual request for an interview by an unknown client.

Analysis

The Foresight Practitioners' Studio Training I attended in the summer of 2018 provided a foundation for my thinking about the Institute's processes and goals as well as laid out activities I used to analyze my data. I drew upon this familiarity during my coding process and planned deliverables that better matched The Institute for the Future's processes and goals. The Lunch on the 'Tute (LOTT), a catered lunch, was on its own, a presentation of preliminary findings for the Institute's benefit, as well as meant to help with my analysis in pursuit of additional deliverables. The attendees shared their thoughts on my preliminary findings. These included questioning whether my data included certain data, suggesting codes that they had seen in past research, and building on my presented themes. Drawing on IFTF's recent research, the attendees reinforced the emergent nature of some signals, including TaskRabbit's recent attempts to build community among workers. Other conversation included extrapolating the implications of how metrics are

currently quantified. The group briefly discussed how public and private feedback differed, the implications of such heavily quantified reputation, and how different types of reputation would compete with or build off each other moving forward.

I developed two bodies of codes using two different, but related goals. The first of which used anthropological literature on trust, futures thinking, work, and the platform gig economy. I based the second group of codes on my analysis of the IFTF Foresight Essentials toolkit, during which I considered what kinds of ethnographic data would best fit the kinds of signals and drivers IFTF utilizes to produce forecasts. In the end, my codes identified edge cases, decision points, historical or modern context for behaviors, and constraints the stakeholders felt.

Anthropological Literature	IFTF Toolkit
Worker Experience	Developing Trends
Organization and Relationships	Individual's Turning Points
Platform-Defined Indicators of Quality	Narration of Alternative Futures
Platform-Specific Features	Establishing Historical Context
Reputation Building Avenues	Establishing Modern Context
Risk Identification and Mitigation	Scalable Signals from the Margins
Trust	

Table 2. Code categories from the two different sets of codes used in analysis.

Like most ethnographers, I used a recursive approach to code generation (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 83), developing codes both deductively from academic literature and my community partner's interests and self-published literature, as well as inductively from my interviews and participant observation. The goal was to develop codes that identified emergent

behaviors that could scale up, unforeseen consequences of changes, and identify patterns that show drivers of future scenarios. I discuss these concepts and their use further in the Insights and deliverables section below.

Deductive Code Generation

In the Summer of 2018, The Institute for the Future offered me a scholarship seat in their Foresight Practitioners' training at their headquarters in Palo Alto, California. The training sessions focused on the Institute's methodology and presented all participants with a ring-bound deck of cards detailing exercises and providing instructions and sometimes documents required to complete them.

In addition to providing a deeper understanding of my community partner, this exposed me to the Institute's forecasting toolkit. I considered the kinds of data that are needed to work through the exercises from the Foresight Essentials toolkit and distilled them down to a few questions that could elicit signal or driver information for the most useful tools. My futures-focused questions aimed to elicit alternate potential futures, a well-established method in futures thinking in which participants are asked to envision different futures based on certain scenarios. These include scenarios of continuation, collapse, constraints, and radical transformation (Dunagan 2010). These scenarios are meant to be used by foresight practitioners in forecasting exercises, but their open-ended nature made them useful interview questions as well. because eliciting alternative scenarios clarifies values and shows culturally constructed mechanisms of change which are of particular interest to anthropologists and futurists alike (Textor 1989).

My first step in code generation was to review the Institute's Foresight Practitioner Toolkit. I considered the kinds of input data the tools required and created codes based on those

needs. I kept these codes separate from my other codes as I used them in a separate coding process, but they did influence the kinds of codes that I developed from the remaining material. I reviewed relevant IFTF literature I collected over the life of the project to identify relevant concepts. This generated the codes listed in Figure 2, as well as refamiliarized me with my client's relevant conceptual frameworks and writing style. This review also helped me identify which models to address in my analysis and resulting blog post.

Inductive Code Generation

Using an initial reading of my interviews, I generated a small body of codes that contained common themes, as well as evidence of behaviors or ideas that I had not encountered in literature. As part of my participant observation activities, I took notes after each session spent on one of the services. I noted the parts of the experience that struck me as unusual, unexpected, and if they conformed or diverged from the practices on other platforms. Many of my notes were comparative, pointing out differences of process, content, and values between the two platforms.

Conclusion of Analysis

I used these sets of codes to find areas of overlap between my two codebooks as well as identifying edge cases I felt could scale based on my own background research, as well as my informants' responses. This consideration was a balance between the behavior being emergent, as well as prevalent enough in my research, in the form of multiple respondents and the continuation of or reaction to a trend, to convince me that it would scale. Based on this data, I identified several insights, but had to focus on the most impactful to highlight for my remaining

deliverables to the Institute for the Future. The following section details my primary insights and how they informed my ultimate deliverables.

INSIGHTS AND DELIVERABLES

Following my analysis, I moved into the process of aggregating small insights into larger concepts that I could use to develop my blog post, in which I focused specifically on how my insights support or contrast with the Institute for the Future's theoretical frameworks, especially those from 2018's Remodeling Trust Forecasts, and broader anthropological theories about trust and reputation as described earlier in this work. The most prevalent was applying Kreit and Skvirsky's (2018) concepts of the changing nature of credentials to reputation-building strategies in the platform gig economy. As not all insights into drivers or emergent behaviors that were not fully understood or lacked sufficient data, I highlighted some of those potential signals in the Ethnofutures Training Cards.

In the following sections, I describe my research findings in relation to my research findings and relevant concepts, as well as the three high-level insights I developed from both informant interviews and participant observation. Then I discuss how these insights informed the final deliverables and how those deliverables were each delivered to The Institute for the Future. Following the conclusion of this chapter is a discussion of the changing context of this area and future research opportunities to expand on my findings and those of others cited in this report.

Key Concepts

In aggregating the insights from this research, I focused on finding insights that would inform the Institute for the Future's methodology. As the data was elicited with this goal in mind,

I prioritized cases on the margins and scalable behaviors that showed emergent behaviors around utilization of trust and reputation. These primarily included the development and evaluation of on-platform reputations of workers.

Reputation is a particular expression of trust in which actors decide to enter vulnerable states based on the reputation of the other party. Trust is built in the gig economy via reputation, and workers are dependent on building robust reputations that will convince clients to risk time and resources. Even as professional reputations meant to secure long-term employment change, moving onto the platform gig economy creates a new setting and set of constraint for building a reputation. As I went through my interviews, I saw that expressions of these concepts broke into three major categories based on original conception of the topics above and research goal of better understanding how trust and reputation are used, expressed, understood, and built-in the constraints of the platform gig economy.

Primary Insights

My research generated several answers to my open-ended research objectives, but I needed to focus on turning those data and insights into useful deliverables in the time available. This is a departure from standard academic research reporting. As a result, I could not explore all the potential insights for this project. Rod Falcon and I designed the LOTT to be a preliminary dialogue to help me refine my later analysis through guiding my focus toward points of interest for my partner. Having this feedback before I developed my code book allowed me to code for findings that would lead to useful insights for the Institute. The normal *Future Now* post is around 800-1000 words, which restricted me to a few main points for my article. While my

analysis was important in curating and polishing the ethnographic data examples, the final product was effectively summarized raw data.

The insights I shared with my partner organization fell into three main categories I developed based on various concepts discussed above: tethered reputation, restricted expression, and impacts of system flaws. Tethered reputation refers to the findings that *workers' reputations are now effectively limited to the platform on which they exist*. Workers on the platform experience Restricted Expression because *platform-specific reputations constrain how workers can present their qualifications to a potential employer*. Finally, *the design flaws and glitches exacerbate the power disparity between workers and other stakeholders* by disproportionately impacting those with the least amount of agency, the workers.

Tethered Reputations

Tethered reputations in the platform gig economy are non-transferrable, and despite being publicly available, few hiring clients look for a worker's experience outside of the platform. Barney held a master's degree and had been tutoring on online platforms for several years prior to expanding onto Upwork to augment his income with his design skills. Despite these credentials, clients would not hire him for work at pay rates commensurate with his experience. They only seemed to consider his work on the platform, and as a result, he could only find work doing simple tasks by undercutting more established competing workers on pricing.

I was doing a lot of undercutting, that's for sure. And I started out looking at the beginner-level jobs. I mean obviously I'm supposedly a master in a field, but I'm looking at jobs like, "Put this in this box. Can you handle it?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I can handle that." So just picking up all the little crumbs really. Little jobs too. Five Dollars for writing an article. I mean stuff that I would never do. You kind of have to do it in order to earn your stripes.

Even experienced workers must undercut others to build a reputation of minimal reliability on a platform before they can hope to land jobs that they would expect to hold off the platform or on a platform where they held even a minimal work history. By only looking at on-platform reputation to judge the trustworthiness of a worker, clients unwittingly contribute to a system of constant undercutting. Barney also reported a lack of interest in the kinds of tasks clients required on Upwork, they just wanted to see that a worker had completed some work.

I have X amount of jobs or X amount of hours because I've actually had people where they don't really care too much about your professional credentials. They'll hire you solely because you have more hours or more jobs completed. Even if those jobs were data entry. So, that's how I built it. I started taking crummy jobs and doing it as much as I could just to bolster my rep on here.

This system both creates a platform-specific army of disposable labor, keeping wages low, and increases the cost of a worker switching to a new platform where their reputation will not follow.

Restricted Expression

The concept of restricted expression is based on the work of Kreit and Skvirsky (2018) who showed that while some sectors of the hiring economy allowed for greater freedom of expression, increasingly granular reputations were metric heavy and could restrict workers' control of their reputations. In the platform gig economy, workers are restricted by platforms' reliance on customer service-based reviews and other metrics meant to help hiring clients choose workers. However, this model is inherently problematic, as discussed above, show as much about a worker's loyalty to the platform as their ability to perform a task or role. The variation in reputation systems across platforms is indicative of a set of assumptions about reputation and the meaning of indicators that is still under negotiation from stakeholders, and these negotiations are significantly restricted by the built structures of the platforms, contrasting with the increasing

freedom of expression in the traditional hiring market noted by Kreit and Skvirsky (2018), and putting total faith in the reliability of crowdsourced metrics as Zaloom (2009) showed was problematic for decision makers.

Impacts of System Flaws

The platforms' processes often disadvantage workers both when they work properly and when they do not. Due to workers' relative lack of power when compared to the platform and clients, glitches in the system often affect them more acutely and the employees of platforms might not be willing to believe them. Workers on TaskRabbit set their own hours by setting certain windows of time to available and blocking clients from hiring them outside of those timeslots. Lilly, an experienced tasker, has regular days blocked off to work on her other profession. When a client hired her during one of the blocked off days, she had to reject the task, at the expense of her reputation. When she contacted TaskRabbit about the issue, they were skeptical, but agreed to remove the rejection from her record as a one-time fix. Lilly was not happy about their distrust.

I'm like, "No not this one time. Any time I have a problem like this. Because I'm not going to lie to you. I'm sure you can see what I mark. Look at it." They didn't really give me a reason, but they're just like. "We'll do it this time." You're gonna do it anytime it happens like that. I'm not a bitch, but I'm gonna defend myself. I didn't do anything wrong here. I look at it as part of my job. I don't want to get written up or [inaudible] anything weird happening.

Workers in these situations will often contact the client directly to avoid tarnishing their reputation by rejecting the work. Some clients are not willing or able to change the job.

Despite these issues, some workers are adapting by integrating their positive gig economy reputation into traditional resumes. Kristen, a worker who was only working in the gig economy while she pursued a more traditional employment situation, realized that she had the freedom to add her gig economy reputation and ratings, which a potential employer could look

up, to her traditional resume. After thinking about it, she concluded, “I don't see why not. Especially if I keep a hundred percent. I could just put "100% positive rating from all clients." That's a pretty good metric to have. If they ask, I can show them, and it just shows my customer service skill.” This freedom is not available to those who move between platforms, but by integrating gig reputation and traditional employment application materials, Kristen can reclaim some of her reputation from the platform.

This dynamic is reinforced through a lack of accountability for requesters (Amazon's Mechanical Turk), compelling workers to accept jobs even if they felt unsafe (TaskRabbit), and differing levels of risk for each party (all). Every one of the workers I interviewed pointed out at least one issue with the reputation system that impacted their ability to maintain a positive reputation. This disparity includes both functional glitches, and structural problems, such as platforms subjecting workers to background checks, but not clients who hire workers into their homes. For example, workers on TaskRabbit are penalized for rejecting work but have no say in who hires them. While Taskers are required to pay a twenty-five-dollar fee to cover the cost of a background check, clients are not subjected to any upfront scrutiny. Kristen felt knowing that clients were not screened reinforced the steps she took to protect herself on the job, “Knowing that there is no verification for people from the client end [...] makes me feel good that I'm thinking about all of those things when I'm going on jobs. That I'm thinking, "Ok. Do I have a weapon?" in case I need to defend myself.” While lowering the hurdles for customer entry makes good business sense, TaskRabbit's policies on this process explicitly protect clients, but does not extend the same safety and peace of mind to workers. Power disparities are part of every employment agreement, but these systemic disparities enable dangerous situations for workers entering clients' home alone.

These insights into the present and potential future of the platform gig economy all worked their way into my deliverables in different ways, as each product required different inputs to achieve the stated goal. In addition to these insights, I identified several additional findings that either did not have enough data to pull meaningful insight from them or led to insights which were less impactful than those selected. These unused findings included the lack of worker communication despite the efforts of TaskRabbit to build a community of workers. That itself was despite the company's fear of unionization. These platform efforts at organization and knowledge sharing present several potential futures. However, only my platform-employed interviewees mentioned these events. Without an understanding of how workers will want to interact with each other in future, I did not have enough information to know if this signal would scale.

In addition, my respondents, particularly clients, displayed a wide disparity in the way they interpret the platform-defined reputation of workers, indicating a lack of consistency and little communication to workers or platforms which would make these assumptions known, prompting changes. Multiple workers also mentioned gaming the reputation system to improve their numbers to achieve elite status or other perks, showing further gaps in the system, as well as avenues through which workers resist their lack of agency on platforms that privilege clients. Each of these could be further explored to build new forecasts, but I did not have the opportunity to explore those areas in the limited space of my deliverables.

Lunch on the 'Tute (LOTT) Presentation

As discussed above, the first of my deliverables was a LOTT or "Lunch on the 'Tute." These are regular events that the Institute hosts to welcome external presenters with a catered lunch. I was fortunate to attend a LOTT featuring then-little-known presidential candidate

Andrew Yang in early 2019. I presented my talk in late November of 2018. Several attendees recorded the session, allowing me to use the recording for notes and suggestions from my clients. As the talk took place between the completion of fieldwork and formal analysis, my presentation opened with my research design and which IFTF literature informed my preliminary analysis. From there, I discussed preliminary findings and potential analysis foci such as the concept of third parties coordinating digital workforces for clients, a focus in the gig economy on competence as the primary need for reputation, the disconnection of workers from the community, and strategies aimed at reducing personal risk. I also presented initial insights into the future of education's role in the development of worker reputation. The presentation, questions, and resulting discussion lasted just under an hour.

My objective in the LOTT was to get feedback and help with structuring my analysis based on my preliminary insights. The attendees were particularly interested in how metrics played into reputations, expanded my understanding of skills tests based on previous IFTF research, and that the platforms were pushing for worker organization for the purposes of skill building and strategy sharing. Considering the other feedback, I refocused on other kinds of indicators of competence, and actors' considerations of safety, both physical and otherwise. I have included the slide deck from the LOTT as an appendix at the end of this report [Appendix B].

Future Now Post

Using existing posts on the IFTF blog, *Future Now*, as a model, I wrote a blog post in which I used my findings to evaluate and expand upon recent institute forecasts. I primarily considered the 2018 forecast "Remodeling Trust" and literature IFTF published based on those

concepts. Included in these is “Beyond Degrees and Grade Point Averages” (Kreit and Skvirsky 2018), which forecasts the rise of increasing complexity and more frequent verification of credentials and other granular data about an individual job seeker. The short format of the blog post restricted the number of insights my research produced. A professional blog is a new format for me and required that I settle on broader theme to discuss three to four insights and constrain my forecast to an area.

My first drafts of the blog post were detached and analytical. The result was a somewhat sterile, unimpactful analysis. I worked to better weave in examples of my informants’ experiences, making the piece more human and helped the validity of my research in the eyes of non-anthropologists. This is a common issue for anthropologists working in interdisciplinary research (English-Lueck, personal communication), and sharing the experiences of workers and clients shows that my research was out in the field discussing these issues with people living them.

In discussing tethered reputation, I invoked Barney’s experience to illustrate the challenges that worker experience when switching platforms:

An issue with outsourced authority is that the third party owns these continuously verified credentials. Unlike traditional third-party certifications (e.g., university degrees), the reputations that workers build on the platforms are not currently transferrable to other situations, including other gig work services. One of my interviewees, Barney, an experienced contract worker in his mid-thirties, was struck by how little his experience meant as a new worker on Upwork. Potential clients cared more about how many jobs he’d completed on Upwork than other widely accepted credentials, like years of work experience in a relevant field. To attain jobs that better aligned with his skills and degrees, Barney took “crummy jobs” in a variety of areas and undercut other applicants on price to help raise his Upwork-specific reputation.

The draft submitted to IFTF for consideration/publication focused on my insights around reputation as a platform-specific construct. This primarily focused on workers’ lack of agency in

the presentation, development, and transfer of their own reputations. After discussion of these insights, I discussed my forecast, specifically focusing on the power dynamics and emerging issues around ownership of reputation that will be negotiated over the next few years. While I was initially aiming to stay under eight hundred words, the result I submitted to IFTF was just over twelve hundred [see Appendix C].

Ethnofutures Training Cards

In support of the new Ethnofutures Training curriculum, I used my data to develop curated sets of excerpts of ethnographic data for participants to use. These sets allow trainees to work with real ethnographic data that would be impossible to create during a training session and time-consuming to extract from raw data. I began by pulling out excerpts of my interviews that I coded as signals useful for forecasting. Using these raw quotes, I summarized them down to a short paragraph or two, prioritizing concision readability, and quotations from interlocutors. Not all excerpts lent themselves well to using direct quotes, but worked to use as many as possible as I felt that they would make the cards more agreeable and human, similarly to the logic used to improve my writing for *Future Now*.

To match the Institute's style more closely in their normal products and specifically training materials, I further simplified the cards to improve accessibility for trainees. The activities in IFTF trainings are usually no longer than forty-five minutes, and we didn't want people without experience extracting insights from raw data to have to spend too much time on each card, losing the chance to synthesize and discuss their findings.

5-----

⊗ **Impact**

Each gig work platform has its own reputation management system that is not transferable to other services. When a worker starts on a new service, they appear to potential clients as though they've never worked before and must start building their reputation.

❖ **Perspective**

Barney - Mid-thirties, Experienced Upwork Worker

Barney, who worked on several gig platforms, was struck by how little his experience meant when he joined Upwork. He was frustrated by only getting low-paying, low-skill jobs. Potential clients seemed to care more about how many jobs he'd completed on Upwork than other, more widely accepted credentials.

△ **Behaviors**

Barney took "crummy jobs" in a variety of fields and undercut other applicants on price. This strategy helped raise his Upwork-specific reputation to a level where clients would consider him for jobs in a field in which he held a master's degree.

Figure 3. An Ethnofutures Training Card

I identified key points to describe each data excerpt: Impact, Experience, and Behaviors. These facets of each selection came from considering that these strategies and behaviors were reactions to wider outside forces experienced by each interlocutor through their lens. By explicitly stating each, the end-user for the cards can more quickly understand that. "Impact" captured the constraint or opportunity that sparked a change in strategy or behavior for the interlocutor. "Experience" was an ethnographic description of the informant's lived experience illustrating their thinking behind adaptive strategies or why some constraints are insurmountable. "Behaviors" articulated what behaviors the respondent had adopted to respond to the previously described impact. For the sake of simplicity, I worked to keep the behaviors specific to the individual whose experience I included on the card. Occasionally, I needed to point out that an adaptation was in contrast with other stakeholders' views or that these were like others. This was usually to illustrate a potential conflict or pattern end-users might have a hard time seeing otherwise.

I formatted both the content and prototype design of the Ethnofutures Training Cards to conform to the toolkit from the Foresight Essentials Training. I worked hard to reduce selections of ethnographic data to the smallest piece possible. To be inclusive, I both color-coded and chose identifying symbols for each category. This both fits in with IFTF norms and helped inform the eventual final design by IFTF personnel. The Ethnofutures Training Cards can be found in their entirety in Appendix D.

Following completion of the cards, I considered the preliminary curriculum Drs. English-Lueck and Jeffrey developed to see where my card deck could aid in the activities. I paired this with activities in the Foresight Essentials to develop a prototype set of activities, aimed at helping trainees understand the place of ethnographic data in forecasting.

In early 2020, the Institute for the Future looked like they would delay the launch of the Ethnofutures Training course while they prioritized other initiatives. When the COVID-19 outbreak moved all IFTF researchers to work from home, their plans to develop this training were put on an indefinite hold. To maintain some momentum on this project, Dr. English-Lueck suggested that we pilot the training as a tutorial at the annual meeting of the Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference (EPIC), an organization devoted to ethnographic practitioners working in industry. EPIC accepted our proposal for the tutorial, and I will work with Dr. English-Lueck and Rod Falcon to develop the curriculum for this training session. I am excited to have the opportunity to directly aid in this process of curriculum development and execution of the training. This experience will aid in my own skill development and professional exposure to the futures research and business anthropology communities.

THE FUTURE AND CONCLUSION

COVID-19

During the completion of my deliverables and concurrent writing of this report, the western world started reacting to the increasing threat of COVID-19, forcing many in the United States into shelter in place orders. This legally required non-essential organizations to either close or drastically change the way they conducted business to comply with social distancing and hygiene rules. Organizations allowed employees to work from home, but not every job allowed for this flexibility. Bars and restaurants were among the hardest hit, laying off most or all employees.

An unfortunate impact of this crisis is the stark contrast between affluent, white-collar knowledge workers and those who work jobs requiring their physical presence. The social safety net has been slowly dismantled since the 1980s, and its gaps were highlighted with millions of low-wage workers suddenly out of a job. States expanded unemployment benefits, but the changes were far from uniform. Ohio expanded unemployment benefits to those laid off, those in quarantine, and those whose employer had barred them from work because of the virus but did not initially provide for gig workers.

While the immense impact on workers was clear, San Francisco classified gig workers “essential operations” due to the city’s reliance on food delivery and transportation services (Dickey 2020). This exemption allowed services relying on gig work to continue to function and for gig workers to keep working despite remaining without basic worker protections, with companies only offering two weeks of sick leave if a worker tests positive for the virus. Many workers have no choice but to continue working to ensure they can pay bills in an uncertain time.

The exemption of gig workers to shelter in place orders that also include doctors and pharmacies have shows our incredible reliance on the most vulnerable workers in our society.

The federal response is still ongoing, but many seem to be embracing different versions of universal basic income (UBI). This was a somewhat fringe position even after popularized by Andrew Yang in the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary race. However, the onset of orders preventing work in many states caused widespread adoption of payments to all Americans to help cover bills and stimulate the economy. While there is significant variation among plans to do this, this is a transformational shift in the view of the role of government, and it is difficult to forecast how forms UBI and similar concepts like universal basic assets, a favorite of the Institute for the Future's Workable Futures Initiative and its successor, the Equitable Futures Lab, might be embraced in the long-term. While it will be difficult to forecast the results of this crisis on the broader economy, much less the platform gig economy, what is clear is that the vulnerability many people face as a result of their work arrangements has been thrown into sharp relief.

Future Research

As with any successful research project, I was left with more questions than answers. I did not expect to encounter the amazing amount of variability between platforms and kinds of workers, and this range requires both more breadth and depth of inquiry to get a better handle on the potential scalable signals in this sector of the economy. A primary method for improved depth of research would be another project with a renewed focus on a working life in the gig economy, especially across platforms. Most of my worker respondents knit together livings from multiple platforms, and all had tried several platforms at different times. I had very little success

as a worker on the platforms, and a deeper understanding of that lifestyle could unearth insights and signals that no other method could.

In addition to that depth of understanding, the breadth of different regional understanding of gig work would provide more context about which behaviors will scale, and how. Even within the United States, attitudes and norms around work and employment vary significantly between regions (Gershon 2018, 176). While remote gig work, like the job posts on Upwork is less impacted by these variations, they then run up against global variations in attitudes, language, and employment laws.

Lastly, the functions of the gig economy are in an almost constant state of flux. California's Assembly Bill 5 and its resulting push back already created uncertainty and instability. The addition of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting "burning platform moment" caused major shifts in economic policy and employment law. It is difficult to forecast how short- and long-term changes to the social safety net, employment law, healthcare policy, and economic thinking will shift in the next year. However, it is important to note that important policies impacting the platform gig economy are within the control of states and often, large municipalities.

It is both exhilarating and humbling to work on a topic so relevant to both understanding current events and considering the potential outcomes of the current crisis. This research is a snapshot of the current state of many signals and drivers, some decades or even centuries old, which highlight the lack of progress we have made. Conversely, the even changing headlines around governmental response to this virus show me how ephemeral the phenomena we capture through ethnography can be and how one seismic change in the political landscape can push conservative politicians into voting for a provision that closely resembles universal basic income.

We cannot see the end of this pandemic, but I hope that through spotlighting the unnoticed signals of change that anthropologists can help stakeholders exert their agency and improve the future.

Conclusion

In this project report, I identified some of the emerging cultural behaviors in the gig economy, linked insights related to those behaviors to the forecasts developed by the Institute for the Future, and developed tools to use those insights to deepen the Institute's understanding of the lived experiences of gig workers. This manifests primarily by putting human faces on the forecasted scenarios developed in the multidisciplinary environment of the Equitable Futures Initiative and the Future of Work Commission. In the process of doing this work, I also created tool for connecting non-anthropological forecasting methods with ethnographic data, so that future forecasters can more effectively use ethnographic evidence, and so that ethnographers could practice using their forecasting imagination. Since so many forms of anthropological application involve futures thinking, including design thinking, urban planning, and business strategy, the learning tool I developed can lend itself to training practitioners to use ethnographic evidence to develop their plans, designs, and strategies.

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Appendix A: Interview Instruments

Semi-Structured Interview Plan - Workers

Objectives of the Interview:

1. Understand how remote gig workers develop professional relationships
2. Understand how remote gig workers view the people in their professional network
3. Consider how the transition (if any) from full-time employment to gig work affected trust in their professional network.
4. Understand how trust or distrust (in contacts or platforms) affects the way workers go about finding, winning, and completing gigs.
5. Understand how trust is utilized in managing workers' professional lives.

Background

How do people enter the knowledge-work gig economy?

Probe: Where did you work before you started doing gig work full time?

Probe: What do you do in addition to this to augment your income?

Probe: How long have you been working through [platform]?

Who does the respondent view working in the gig economy?

Probe: Why did you begin working in the gig economy?

Where do people have control in their work?

Probe: Talk me through a normal work day

Professional Networks

How do professional networks grow?

Probe: Are there people you have recurring professional contact with?

What kind of relationships do they have with professional contacts?

What role does an individual's professional network play in finding gigs?

Probe: Do your TR contacts play a role in finding more work?

Which of their contacts do workers trust or distrust?

Probe: Tell me of a time someone did something that made you trust them

Probe: Tell me about an interaction you had that showed you that someone wasn't trustworthy.

Do you ever read or contribute to [platform] forums on sites like Reddit?

Reputation

What kinds of things do you do to do to manage your own reputation?

What do you consider a bad review?

Do you ever have to make cost-benefit analyses about things due to how they'll affect your rating?

How do you feel about the current rating system on [platform]?

How did reputation affect you starting out?

What did you do to overcome those challenges?

Have you left people bad reviews?

Have you taken offline work from a previous UpWork?

How do you retain professional connections?

The Platform(s)

How do workers think about the platforms they use to find work? Are there different views of each platform?

Probe: Have you ever had to deal with anyone at (name of platform) directly? Was that a good experience?

What affects their views?

How do they trust the platform? Distrust?

Do you use platforms other than [platform]?

Future

Ideally, what would change about your work situation in the next five years?

What do you think will change about the gig economy in the next five years?

How would (choose a process mentioned earlier) have changed ten years from now?

Semi-Structured Interview Plan - Clients

Objectives of the Interview:

1. Understand how clients evaluate prospective workers
2. Understand how clients view the development of relationships with workers and how those relationships develop over time
3. Find out if/how clients manage their online reputation as hiring clients.
4. Understand how clients view workers' trustworthiness and how that changes over time.

Background

Why did you first choose to use [platform]?

How many times have you used [platform] to get work done?

What kinds of work have you hired people to do?

Reputation

How do/did you evaluate whether or not you should hire individuals?

Did you not hire anyone because of what you saw on their profile?

Did you check anyone's online presence outside of the [platform]?

Do you have any company guidelines on how to evaluate workers?

The Platform(s)

How did you feel about the rating system on [platform]?

Do you feel that anything was missing from the rating system on the platform?

Have you ever had to deal with anyone at [platform] directly?

Future

Do you think you will continue to use these services in the future?

Have you considered using other kinds of services for work not provided by [platform]?

What do you think will change about how you use these services over the next 5 years?

Appendix B: LOTT Slide Deck

Alternative Work: Landscapes of Trust

Andrew Marley
San Jose State University

Research Methods

Ethnographic Interviews

- Workers
- Clients
- Platform Employees
- Career Counselor

Participant Observation

- Amazon's Mechanical Turk
- Hiring Workers for Interviews

Ethnographic Interviews

6 Workers - 4 TaskRabbit, 2 UpWork

4 Platform Employees

5 Clients

1 Worker who also Hires Others

1 Local University Career Counselor

Participant Observation

Amazon's Mechanical Turk



Hiring on Two Platforms



IFTF Forecasts

Voices of Workable Futures: People Transforming Work in the Platform Economy - 2016

Work, Interrupted: The New Labor Economics of Platforms - 2015

Beyond Degrees and Grade Point Averages - 2018

Preliminary Findings

Digital Workforce Coordination

Proof Of Competence

Disconnection From Community

Mitigation of Risk

Education for Future Employment

Digital Workforce Coordination

Work, Interrupted

- Automation of tasks
- Machine intelligence matching

"The future of work is coordination"

-Fidler 2016

Voices of Workable Futures

- Entrepreneurs exploit the possibilities of branding within the platform

Digital Workforce Coordination

- UpWork Groups as Firms
- Businesses That Outsource Most Work
- New, Global Marketplace



Proof of Competence

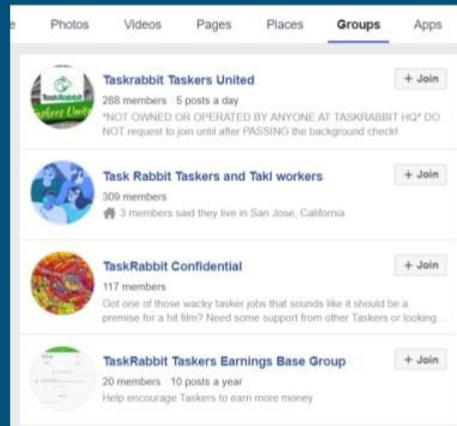
- Competence Tests Ineffective
- Portfolios Gain Importance
- Private “Ratings”
- Redundancy in Hiring

“I don't think it's accurate... because so many of those answers are online. How many people take the test with two windows open?”

-Barney, UpWork Worker

Disconnection from Community

- Workers Disconnect
- Platform Initiatives
- Lack of Worker Participation



Mitigation of Risk

- Strategies Aimed at Reducing Risk
- Repeat Clients
- Varied Vetting Effort
- Redundancy
- Escrow Payments



Education For Future Employment

- Shift to Skill Building
- Degrees Less Important as Credentials
- Education Reaction



Surprises

- Lack of Strategic Thinking
 - Scheduling Problems
 - Uneven Distribution of Risk
 - Power Dynamics Baked into Platform
-

Next Steps

My Project

- Finish Transcribing and Coding Interviews
 - Analyze Data Fully
 - Develop Article for 2019's *Future Now*
 - Write Project Report For SJSU
-

Next Steps

Research

Compare Findings with More Established Freelancing Industries

What's New in the Metrics of Reputation?

Look for Differences Across Types of Work

Monitor the Organization of Labor (or lack thereof)

Next Steps

IFTF

Consider the Effects of these Intermediaries in Models of Employment

Evaluate How Much Trust People Place in Current Reputation Metrics

Consider How Reputation Changes if the Worker has More Agency

Thanks

Rod Falcon

Namsah Kargbo

Dr. Jan English-Lueck

The Institute for the Future

Feedback
&
Questions

Appendix C: *Future Now* Blog Text

Crowd-Sourced Reputation: Credential Presentation in the Platform Gig Economy

The advent of the platform gig economy coincided with the Great Recession, which plunged many people into financial precarity. This increase in available workers on these platforms resulted in an explosion of different metrics that platforms and clients use to predict the reliability and skills of workers. However, the ways services define and present these indicators vary widely. This shift is part of a broad change in evaluating worker credentials and skills chronicled in the 2018 IFTF *Remodeling Trust* forecasts. Bradley Kreit and Sara Skvirsky (Citation) specifically highlighted the creative changes companies are making to search for better signals of potential employees' success. These shifts have been toward a more granular and dynamic look at applicants' skills because the post-secondary degrees that used to signal reliability and ability to potential employers are less informative than the newly available data. However, stakeholders in this area are still negotiating the signals emerging from a more connected and digitized world.

As a graduate student at San Jose State University and alumnus of the Institute for the Future's Foresight studio, I have been studying trust and reputation in the platform gig economy. In the Fall of 2018, with IFTF's support and funding, I interviewed nineteen people connected to the platform gig economy. My interviewees were workers, hiring clients, employees of a platform service, and a university career counselor. Additionally, I registered as a worker and client on three platforms to gain a deeper understanding of what those involved in this economy experience on a daily basis.

While people everywhere are dealing with the emergence and negotiation of new indicators of skills and signals of competence, we don't see the same level of freedom of expression in the gig economy. Instead, workers and platforms use a set of new, evolving ways to display skills that integrate more continuous verification and outsourcing of authority to third parties. The platforms define these in pursuit of what they think clients want to see, not what workers want to present. In the conventional job market, applicants submit some combination of a resume, cover letter, and portfolio. These documents might pass through an automated filter but are generally open to interpretation, and many applicants experiment with different formats or unique content to stand out from the pack. As an applicant in the conventional job market, I've been told to apply for positions that require more experience than I have. A company may be willing to take a chance on someone who shows that they can perform the role based on unexpected experiences. However, gig economy platforms have parameters that exclude applicants entirely based on lack of experience, making it impossible to apply for a job that would be a stretch, thus losing the opportunity to convince a potential employer that a requirement isn't a reliable indicator of success in the role.

Almost all the workers I interviewed shared an issue they had with the reputation system on their platform. Rose voiced her frustrations with clients who said they were dissatisfied with her work without leaving feedback on specific issues. Arjun was once hired for three jobs in the same time frame and feverishly worked with clients to reschedule so he wouldn't have to reject any and hurt his job acceptance metric. One of Bianca's first clients never marked the job as "complete." This affected several of her metrics and kept her from applying to job postings that required a certain length of work history.

An issue with outsourced authority is that the third party owns these continuously verified credentials. Unlike traditional third-party certifications (e.g., university degrees), the reputations that workers build on the platforms are not currently transferrable to other situations, including other gig work services. One of my interviewees, Barney, an experienced contract worker in his mid-thirties, was struck by how little his experience meant as a new worker on Upwork. Potential clients cared more about how many jobs he'd completed on Upwork than other widely accepted credentials, like years of work experience in a relevant field. To attain jobs that better aligned with his skills and degrees, Barney took "crummy jobs" in a variety of areas and undercut other applicants on price to help raise his Upwork-specific reputation.

The Not-So-Distant Future

As time goes on, the quantified and filtered reputations that platforms provide will better match what clients want to see and what workers want to present. Further normalization of the platform gig economy will likely result in more accurate and helpful indicators of a worker's fit for a job. Client search results might adapt to each party based on past feedback or search preferences. This functionality may include highlighting weak social connections between client, worker, and a third party. Many online dating services already use this model to show users shared Facebook friends, providing additional information about their cultural fit and inclusion in a social network.

Universities training the workforce of tomorrow are already preparing students to think of their reputations like established professionals. More programs focus on group projects, often with external clients or other actors, so students graduate with work histories that fit into the new economy. Resume development is still a focus, but university career counselors are also encouraging students to think about how to present themselves in different media. They are told to develop professional brands, elevator pitches, and view certifications and credentials other than university degrees as ways to improve their public, professional selves. College programs will increasingly work with students to navigate occupational instability and plan for the long-term by integrating these ideas into their curricula.

Workers moving between conventional work situations and the gig economy will find creative solutions and merge these two forms of reputation within the constraints of a platform or employer. During my interview with Kristen, she said she would integrate gig work experience onto her conventional resume. She wanted to avoid the appearance of a gap in her employment and thought that including her 100% customer rating would not just explain the gap but illustrate her skill in customer service. It's important to note that different platforms already have differing reputation systems and select different metrics to highlight publicly. As a result, each of these services will integrate into the broader credential market in different ways, and some may not work at all. However, it remains to be seen if such integration is a competitive disadvantage or not.

Gig workers' lack of agency may prevent them from wresting more control of their reputations from platforms. The evolution of the power dynamics between workers, clients, and platforms will significantly impact how workers present themselves and how employers evaluate applicants. As more workers present their reputations with both conventional and emergent metrics, they might turn to a different management system if they don't think the metrics are

calculated fairly or prevent them from finding attractive work. To recapture the power to present their experiences on their terms, workers need to convince clients to consider experience from other sources than a single hiring platform. Over the next few years, this change will occur as clients, and other employers become more accepting and aware of these different forms of reputation, forcing platforms to adjust.

Appendix D: Ethnofutures Training Cards Prototype Deck

Ethnographic Signals for Forecasting

Framework for Use of Cards

Pre-Work from “Prepare” Foresight Essentials Activities

- Refreshing literature on concept of signals and drivers if needed
- Identify X signals and Y drivers in the platform gig economy

Activities

“Generate drivers and signals from a body of evidence within a domain (food)”

Expand on their identification of drivers by doing Foresight Essentials Exercise 1.4 (Identify Drivers of Change)

- Emphasis on STEEP model

Foresight Essentials Exercise 1.5 (Catalogue Signals of Change)

- Use the examples cards for signals

Follow up Questions:

- What drivers you identified from previous events are evident in the samples?
- Do you see evidence of other drivers that you/we had not identified before?
- What behaviors are signals?
- Do any cards interact to create signals that aren't evident on their own?

“Futurize ethnographic data: extract findings relevant for foresight; practice interpreting data in light of the future”

Use identified drivers and signals of the group to develop a proto-forecast - FE Exercise 2.1

“Design a process for communicating forecasts appropriate to their audiences”

How does the presentation of ethnographic data help tell a story more effectively than aggregated quantitative data?

Additional Thoughts:

How much does the anthropologist's theoretical lens (or even just mine in particular) impact the data that participants will see? Many of the cards were chosen to show significant power disparities between stakeholders, but these people may not latch on to that, and non-anthropological ethnographers might present data that doesn't highlight those disparities.

Instruction Card

These excerpts of ethnographic data were curated by a researcher studying trust and reputation in the gig economy. The excerpt is broken into three sections: Impact, Experience, and Behaviors.

Codes

⊗ **Impact**

Novel or existing constraints on the professional lives of the informants of other individuals that necessitate an emergent behavior. Novel constraints can be signals or drivers.

❖ **Perspective**

Name, Approximate Age, Role and Experience Level in the Gig Economy

Information or quotes about the interlocutor's viewpoint, providing contextual information on how they approach the constraints and why they choose certain strategies for mitigation or exploitation.

△ **Behaviors**

How actors are changing their behavior, strategies, or thinking to account for the impact(s) above.

1-----

⊗ **Impact**

With fewer full-time, long-term jobs available, career paths are less predictable than in previous decades. Students of today will likely travel more winding career paths than their parents' generation.

❖ **Perspective**

Alfred - Mid-fifties, University Career Counselor

Alfred, a career counselor at a Silicon Valley university, explained that in addition to traditional lessons on how to format a resume and act in an interview, the career center provides training on online representation and personal branding to prepare students for today's professional world.

△ **Behaviors**

The career center advises students to keep an open mind about temporary, short-term, and less than ideal jobs. Counselors encourage students to consider how these kinds of short-term opportunities can augment their professional brands to help them both achieve their long-term goals and provide for short-term needs. This shows students how to take control of their career development and actively pursue skill growth even if they don't land their dream job.

2-----

⊗ **Impact**

Professional reputation is becoming much more granular. Employers look for evidence of specific skills and place less value in broader credentials, like university degrees.

❖ **Perspective**

Alfred - Mid-fifties, University Career Counselor

Alfred tells students to seek any credentials that open additional doors for career opportunities or increased income. He advises students, “This micro-credentialing approach could really help you, and I think that kinda goes along with the whole gig economy thing too. It’s all part of your branding. What can you put in your career portfolio that would help a potential employer see that you’ve got something to offer? And the more diverse that portfolio is, the more options you’ve got to consider.”

△ **Behaviors**

University career counselors are encouraging students to integrate all relevant credentials to improve their attractiveness to employers without pursuing time-consuming and costly additional degrees.

3-----

⊗ **Impact**

Professional reputation is becoming much more granular. Employers look for evidence of specific skills and place less value in broader credentials, like university degrees.

❖ **Perspective**

Alfred - Mid-fifties, University Career Counselor

Alfred talked about the push in some disciplines toward integrating project-based assignments in their curricula. “In our classes, at least in the school of business, lots of classes are project-focused. They’re really good about that, and so the resumes that I review, almost every business student has projects to highlight.”

△ **Behaviors**

Many university degree programs and classes are switching to project-based assignments, so students have several professional experiences by the time they graduate. This allows students to add experience lines on resumes as well as build professional portfolios and networks before leaving school.

4-----

⊗ **Impact**

With fewer full-time, long-term jobs available, career paths are less predictable than previous decades. Students of today will likely travel more winding career paths than their parents' generation.

❖ **Perspective**

Alfred - Mid-fifties, University Career Counselor

"We teach about the transferable skills, like critical thinking and collaboration and time management, and other things like that. The hard skills they learn in their programs. I'd like to see departments looking more at, 'How do we get our students ready if they can't get a full-time, permanent job? How can they find at least a stream of income through part-time work?' And work that's meaningful to them and not just, 'Ok, I guess I'll drive for Uber. to earn some extra money.'"

△ **Behaviors**

University academic departments who train students for non-traditional working situations include, as part of their curricula, non-work skills students will need to survive in their chosen career. These include financial management and skill diversification.

5-----

⊗ **Impact**

Each gig work platform has its own reputation management system that is not transferable to other services. When a worker starts on a new service, they appear to potential clients as though they've never worked before and must start building their reputation.

❖ **Perspective**

Barney - Mid-thirties, Experienced Upwork Worker

Barney, who worked on several gig platforms, was struck by how little his experience meant when he joined Upwork. He was frustrated by only getting low-paying, low-skill jobs. Potential clients seemed to care more about how many jobs he'd completed on Upwork than other, more widely accepted credentials.

△ **Behaviors**

Barney took "crummy jobs" in a variety of fields and undercut other applicants on price. This strategy helped raise his Upwork-specific reputation to a level where clients would consider him for jobs in a field in which he held a master's degree.

6-----

⊗ Impact

Many platforms use standardized tests to evaluate workers' skills in specific areas. Workers' scores are then integrated into their profiles.

❖ Perspective**Barney - Mid-thirties, Upwork Worker**

Barney took a few of those tests early on and had the scores posted on his profile. He took them because the platform encouraged him to when he signed up. Barney pointed out a problem with how the tests are taken. "I don't think it's accurate. It can't be accurate. So many of those answers are online. How many people take those tests with two windows open? So, it's not testing how well you do on these subjects; it's testing how well you search."

△ Behaviors

Upwork recently removed these tests as a result of user feedback, but many other sites, including non-gig focused ones like Indeed, still provide these tests and their corresponding endorsements.

7-----

⊗ Impact

Freelancers apply to more jobs than they can work, knowing that clients are unlikely to be hired for every application. Sometimes, they receive too many jobs or don't feel confident completing a component of a project.

❖ Perspective**Barney - Mid-thirties, Upwork Worker**

Barney routinely farms out parts of jobs that he doesn't have the time or expertise to perform himself. He first tapped his existing personal and professional networks for workers. On the unusual occasion that his old network couldn't take on the work, Barney preferred to hire online freelancers with whom he had worked before.

△ Behaviors

Workers will outsource work to trusted contacts before reaching out to unknown workers on sites, as the hiring worker's reputation depends on the quality of the subcontracted worker's deliverable.

8

⊗ **Impact**

One of the metrics TaskRabbit considers when conferring “elite” status and recommending workers to potential clients is a job acceptance rate. Unlike other platforms, on TaskRabbit, clients hire workers based on their profile. The worker then has a few hours to accept or reject the task. Rejecting tasks negatively affects a worker’s reputation metrics.

❖ **Perspective**

Lilly - Late-thirties, Experienced TaskRabbit Worker, Elite Tasker

Lilly, an experienced “Elite Tasker” on TaskRabbit, has a standard gig work schedule to subsidize her art career. She blocks Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays on her gig work availability to finish art projects. Despite this, Lilly once had a request come through for Saturday, which she had to reject. TaskRabbit was skeptical about the flaw in their system but agreed to erase the rejection from her record. They made it clear to Lilly that this was a one-time change. Lily said, “No, not this one time. Any time I have a problem like this. Because I’m not going to lie to you.’ They didn’t really give me a reason, but they’re just like, ‘We’ll do it this time.’ You’re going to do it anytime it happens. I’m not a bitch, but I’m going to defend myself. I didn’t do anything wrong here. I look at it as part of my job. I don’t want to get written up.”

△ **Behaviors**

Workers have little recourse in these situations and often must work around the system by asking the platform to admit fault and correct the issue, or reach out to the customer to move or cancel the task, sparing the worker’s metrics.

9

⊗ **Impact**

The reputation systems are unique to each platform, and all have design flaws that can have serious impacts on the workers’ ability to find and secure work.

❖ **Perspective**

Emily - Mid-twenties, New Upwork Worker

Early in Emily’s time on Upwork, she completed a job and received payment for it. However, the client never marked the task as completed. As a result, the finished job does not count toward her reputation on the platform and has contributed to preventing her from applying to jobs requiring a minimum number of completed tasks.

△ **Behaviors**

Emily did not actively work to correct the issue, but other workers will remind clients to rate their work at the end of the task to help improve their numbers.

10-----

⊗ Impact

Upwork has a parameter for each job posting telling potential workers the client's preferred skill level and corresponding price point. Parameters include Entry-level, Intermediate, and Expert.

❖ Perspective**Emily - Mid-twenties, New Upwork Worker**

Emily found these designations unclear. These parameters made it challenging to know whether clients would consider her for jobs. The lack of clarity frustrated Emily, who wasn't sure where her off-platform experience placed her in the hierarchy. She said, "If you have experience in that area, but not on Upwork, it's kind of vague. [...] Are they going to consider you "expert" if you are an expert, but you just haven't done that many Upwork gigs in that area? That whole system is just kind of confusing to me, so I just don't really know sometimes which ones I should apply for. Are they even going to consider me?"

△ Behaviors

The uncertainty made Emily hesitant to use her "connects" (a limited number of tokens required to submit proposals) and time to apply. She had not yet developed a strategy for dealing with this uncertainty.

11-----

⊗ Impact

Posting a task on a platform and then paying via a different method to avoid service fees is against the terms of service on all platforms. However, this does happen. To show their value in securing payment, Upwork allows clients to put money in escrow to guarantee that potential workers will be paid on completion of the job.

❖ Perspective**Celine - Mid-forties, Experienced Upwork Worker**

Workers on Upwork noted that they felt more comfortable applying for a job when the payment was already in escrow. Yet, some workers do take payment off the platform to save money on service fees. Celine has one client who pays through PayPal to save them both money. This is not the norm. She said that it took quite a while before she was comfortable moving the payment off Upwork.

△ Behaviors

Workers are hesitant to allow payment outside of the platform unless they have developed a relationship with the client to build up trust.

12-----

⊗ Impact

Health Insurance is tied to employment in the United States. As a result, gig workers face a difficult situation without employer benefits, especially if they are single or their spouse's employer does not provide benefits.

❖ Perspective**Celine - Mid-forties, Experienced Upwork Worker**

Celine's large family had very limited health insurance due to her and her husband's employment status. She shared, "It would be great if somehow there was some kind of health insurance we could get into as a group or something. Because that's just stressful. [W]e have to buy our own health insurance because he's a pastor, which is also considered self-employed. So, we have lousy insurance. It covers nothing, basically, until you spend \$14,000. So that's just kind of a stress. That's a nice part about not doing freelance. It's just all of those extra perks."

△ Behaviors

Few respondents discussed this issue, and it is unknown how or if workers will mitigate these problems. One respondent had recently left the gig economy to pursue a job with benefits, and another was applying for jobs to do the same thing.

13-----

⊗ Impact

Workers are subject to existing client biases. These affect the kinds of work they can get and the rates they can charge.

❖ Perspective**Kristen - Early-thirties, New TaskRabbit Worker**

Kristen, has established herself with several jobs, but her rates are lower than her husband's prices for manual labor partially because he's been on the service for a longer period, and partially because men make more for more physically demanding tasks. She said, "I actually do think there's a gender thing there. If you're a man, you're going to get hired for the heavy lifting and the moving help more often at a higher rate than a woman, even though I carry two-hundred-pound boats for my job. Even if I put that in my little profile, someone will see a picture of a woman's face and, 'Aw, she looks too sweet. She can't pick up heavy things.'"

△ Behaviors

Kristen kept her rates lower than her husband's and other men because that was the only way clients would hire her for physically demanding work.

14-----

⊗ Impact

One of the metrics TaskRabbit considers when conferring “elite” status and recommending workers to potential clients is their job acceptance rate. Unlike other platforms, on TaskRabbit, clients hire workers based on their profile. The worker then has a few hours to accept or reject the task. Rejecting tasks negatively affects a worker’s reputation metrics.

❖ Perspective**Kristen - Early-thirties, New TaskRabbit Worker**

Kristen and her husband, Arjun, had an issue with multiple requests coming in for the same block of time. He worked with the clients to reschedule some but had to reject others at the expense of his metrics.

△ Behaviors

When a conflict occurs, workers will contact clients to ask them to reschedule and cancel a job they can’t or won’t accept to avoid the hit on their metrics. Kristen noted that she wished she felt comfortable rejecting jobs that felt unsafe or were less desirable due to the kind of work or number of hours booked.

15-----

⊗ Impact

Working in the gig economy is often an isolating experience. This is especially true for workers who only perform remote work through computers.

❖ Perspective**Kristen - Early-thirties, New TaskRabbit Worker**

Very few of my interlocutors had worked on projects with other workers. Those who did had varying experiences. Kristen did learn how much her colleague was making for the same job and told her husband to increase his rates significantly.

△ Behaviors

This move resulted in clients hiring him for the same number of jobs but at a much higher hourly rate. She raised her rates as well, but not as much. Few workers communicate with other workers during their jobs, but sharing knowledge and information is often valuable. This is especially true for inexperienced workers.

16-----

⊗ Impact

Workers are usually subjected to some level of background check, but clients are rarely subjected to the same scrutiny.

❖ Perspective**Kristen - Early-thirties, New TaskRabbit Worker**

Kristen shared a situation when she went to the apartment of a man to reorganize his kitchen. She felt uncomfortable following a large man into his apartment by herself. While she would've left the job immediately if it felt unsafe, Kristen feels that she must be on guard when working, and said, "Knowing that there is no verification for people from the client end [...] makes me feel good that I'm thinking about all of those things when I'm going on jobs. That I'm thinking, 'Ok, do I have a weapon?' You know. Or whatever, in case I need to defend myself."

△ Behaviors

Workers are often on guard when going into a client's home but have little agency to force the platform into scrutinizing potential hiring clients.

17-----

⊗ Impact

Every platform has their own reputation management system that doesn't translate well to other platforms or to more traditional documents, like resumes. Few clients seem to be willing to look at multiple locations for an applicant's work history.

❖ Perspective**Kristen - Early-thirties, New TaskRabbit Worker**

Kristen was looking for permanent employment outside of the gig economy. She wondered how she would integrate her gig work experience onto a conventional resume, but came to a conclusion during our interview. She said, "I will definitely put it because there's this gap in my employment, and I want to be able to say that I was working during that time. [...] I never thought about it until now, but I don't see why not. Especially if I keep a hundred percent, I could just put '100% positive rating from all clients.' That's a pretty good metric to have, and if they ask, I can show them."

△ Behaviors

Kristen decided to integrate her gig economy experience onto a conventional resume, as it was a better alternative than having a gap in employment on her resume. She also felt it reflected well on her customer service skills.

18-----

⊗ **Impact**

The metrics platforms select to highlight rarely provide enough information for hiring clients to settle on a freelancer to hire.

❖ **Perspective**

Cassie - Early Thirties, New Client

Cassie didn't want a first-time worker and looked for experience in the specific task at hand. She wanted to see "poison ivy removal," not just "landscaping experience." Cassie also said that she took the worker's word for whatever was on the profile, and that it could have all been made up.

△ **Behaviors**

Clients and platforms are still figuring out what indicators are valuable in predicting a worker's suitability for a job. Clients read reviews and profiles looking beyond general metrics for signs of a worker's fit for the specific task. They also look for red flags that might drop them from consideration.

19-----

⊗ **Impact**

Platforms rely exclusively on internal reputation with little consideration for external experience, endorsements, or certifications.

❖ **Perspective**

Cassie - Early Thirties, New Client

For Cassie and her husband, the need for TaskRabbit is in a narrow range between relying on family members and hiring more experienced professionals. She explained, "The way the profile is set up is it's a customer service. Like, oh, this many people had a positive rating. And then how many tasks have I done, but that doesn't necessarily tell me the complexity of the task. Now he did say he's done tasks in the general subject of what we're asking for. But if I wanted someone to come in and do plumbing work, you maybe want a space for certifications that would show that you're qualified to not ruin my home."

△ **Behaviors**

Some clients will only consider platform gig workers for a narrow range of work and would not trust them for higher-skilled tasks. This is partially as a result of the structure of the reputation systems.

20-----

⊗ Impact

Most facets of gig economy reputation rely on client ratings and reviews. Some platforms also confer an elite status on successful workers and promote them over other workers in their best categories.

❖ Perspective**Cassie - Early Thirties, New Client**

As Cassie had only hired once on TaskRabbit, she didn't rate the tasker. It did not seem like a priority to her, and she realized that she is used to tipping and rating after an Uber ride, but that impulse didn't carry over to this interaction. She thought that part of this might have been a lack of understanding of how her tasker rated compared to others.

△ Behaviors

Despite the widely acknowledged importance of reviews, it is common for clients to not rate workers, either accidentally or intentionally.

21-----

⊗ Impact

A short-term on-demand workforce has allowed organizations to bring in short-term workers, more easily.

❖ Perspective**Amelia – Experienced Client**

Amelia hires workers to help around her workplace when they need low-skilled labor to set up for events. The demand for that kind of work is not enough to justify hiring a full-time employee. It doesn't make sense for highly skilled colleagues to take time to do this work instead of adding value for a client. Her employer has used workers from temp agencies for stints up to a few months, but she likes being able to try people out for this kind of work in a low-risk way.

△ Behaviors

For many organizations, the gig economy provides the opportunity to bring in help for irregular events or other needs. This is especially true in a smaller organization without enough work to justify an additional full-time employee.

22-----

⊗ Impact

Many platforms use standardized tests to evaluate workers' skills in specific areas. Workers' scores are then integrated into their profiles.

❖ Perspective**Amelia – Experienced Client**

Amelia was skeptical of the ability of such assessments to accurately gauge a person's ability to complete a task. She mentioned that she felt they were irrelevant because the platform wouldn't feature anyone who couldn't complete a task. She also said that she assumed that the tests would be biased by whoever created them and that she did not trust the model in general.

△ Behaviors

Neither workers nor hiring clients put much stock in these standardized tests. They tend to comb through reviews and the worker's profile to look for indicators of job fit. These test scores are usually ignored entirely.

23-----

⊗ Impact

Client need drives the availability of work on each platform, and clients come to each platform due to an understanding of the kind of workers on the site.

❖ Perspective**Howard – New Client**

Howard, a first-time client, used an Upwork predecessor to have an article translated for his private research. He didn't want to pay for a professional translation, because the finished project was only meant for his comprehension. Even on Elance, many of the proposals were from professional business translators and charged more than he was willing to pay. He explained, "So, I ended up picking someone who was kind of [in the] middle of the pack in terms of skill and price. I didn't want to go for the entry-level, the cheapest one. I think this was like the second or third cheapest. But, the product, the result was ok."

△ Behaviors

Clients hire gig workers because they charge less than experienced professionals for adequate products but acknowledge the need for professionals in certain areas when the projects warrant the additional expense.

24-----

⊗ Impact

Not every worker is qualified for every task, regardless of how well they performed on prior work for a client.

❖ Perspective**Nadia – Experienced Client**

Nadia, the owner of a translation company, outsources most work to freelancers. They often find new translators on gig platforms, but only if their established roster cannot complete a task. This need can be the result of lacking a required skill for a project or availability. Nadia's company has a significant bench of translators, but they still need to recruit regularly. She said, "We've developed a good bench of people, but then we're constantly recruiting based on different project requirements. So, it's kind of like when our existing folks don't fit the needs, then we turn to Upwork and other sources."

△ Behaviors

Clients, especially businesses that utilize large numbers of gig workers, often have a group of workers that they trust for specific tasks based on past performance on their assignments. They select these workers based on their internal understanding of a worker's reputation, usually eschewing the platform-curated reputation.

25-----

⊗ Impact

Most reputation systems aggregate all jobs a worker has performed on the platform, meaning many are generic. Even category-specific ratings can ignore the nuances of different tasks under the same umbrella and only show customer satisfaction for tasks performed in that category.

❖ Perspective**Nadia – Experienced Client**

When considering whether to hire a freelancer she hasn't worked with before, Nadia looks at several factors. These include the worker's online reputation, including their client satisfaction rating, educational background, and project history. Also, she considers the quality of the writing in their proposal and their responsiveness to follow up communication.

△ Behaviors

Hiring clients often find that highlighted metrics aren't enough to decide whether to hire a worker. They often read a profile carefully, looking for details relevant to the project at hand. This includes their communication, specific experience, and other factors the client feels are essential to the job at hand.

26-----

⊗ Impact

Reputation is not simply a set of metrics platforms devise and manage. Once a worker has worked for a client, that relationship and details of the work history stand-in for all or part of their platform reputation.

❖ **Perspective**

Nadia – Experienced Client

Nadia's company has an internal project management system with a star rating. While she and her colleagues still refer to external forms of reputation if considering a new translator for a job, they refer to internal records for existing relationships.

△ **Behaviors**

Some hiring organizations have formalized these internal reputations, while others have informal discussions around workers they do and don't feel fit their jobs well when considering rehiring.

27-----

⊗ **Impact**

Hiring clients approached writing public feedback for freelancers' work in a variety of ways.

❖ **Perspective**

Nadia – Experienced Client

Nadia had a particular way of thinking about rating workers. She explained, "If I have negative feedback, I tend not to share it as openly as if I had positive feedback. [...] It's hard because I feel like in some ways, it's my responsibility to the community to be very open and honest, but I also want to allow for the possibility that something that happened on my project is not necessarily indicative of how they will always be. [...] But positive feedback, I'm very generous with. My justification for that is that I won't hire somebody that doesn't have feedback. So, if let's say somebody has done four projects unsuccessfully and four people like me have chosen not to review, then I'm not going to hire that person because they have no feedback. So, it works almost like negative feedback, but just a little bit more neutrally."

△ **Behaviors**

Using no feedback as negative and reading it the same way from a potential hire's profile is not consistent with the views of my other interviewees but may be a common assumption among hiring clients and shows a significant disagreement in the assumptions people make about how to read reputation.

28-----

⊗ Impact

Some platforms offer functionality for full-time, ongoing employment, but the functionality is still limited to workers in the United States.

❖ Perspective**Nadia – Experienced Client**

One of the workers in this study discussed a desire for longer-term work through the platforms. Nadia confirmed that her company utilizes new functionality on Upwork to manage full-time employees, but that it is limiting, because its use is restricted to the United States. She said, “Well, for us, since we work with employees all around the world, we actually have sought out some full-time employees at Upwork. And Upwork now has this payroll option, but it’s only for US-based employees. So, the fact that it doesn’t have international payroll options is a negative for me. I would say that’s the one wish right now for it.”

△ Behaviors

Clients and workers both show interest in on-going work arrangements through these platforms. The platforms are adapting by launching new functionality to support these arrangements.

29-----

⊗ Impact

Workers sometimes receive negative feedback without explanation, something that can severely damage their ability to find more work or achieve special “elite” designations.

❖ Perspective**Rose – Mid-thirties, Experienced TaskRabbit Worker**

Rose received several negative reviews on TaskRabbit. Rose knew that these reviews impacted her visibility on the TaskRabbit platform and she noted a strong desire to reach “elite” status for the corresponding higher pay rates. She hired herself for several jobs, which was effective in increasing her average rating. Rose also began pushing back on jobs she didn’t want to accept, by asking the clients to cancel them. Rejecting the work would impact her acceptance rate, a primary metric for achieving elite status.

△ Behaviors

Workers have changed the way they interact with clients to improve their ability to find work at the highest wage possible. In addition, some have gamed the system to artificially increase their metrics.

30-----

⊗ Impact

Workers on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk routinely have a difficult time making US minimum wage. This makes cost-benefit decisions about work very important.

❖ Perspective**Andrew the Researcher**

Andrew, the anthropologist who conducted this research worked on three platforms both as a part-time job, and a research method. While working on Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, he found that checking work for errors after completion severely cut into his ability to make a wage that approached the wage offered by traditional part-time employment. With many tasks paying less than 10 cents, the few additional seconds required to check his work ate into his earnings. However, forgoing the check meant he risked rejections, a major part of the reputation system. A high percentage of rejections can prevent a worker from accessing higher paying tasks.

△ Behaviors

Mechanical Turk users have organized databases of client ratings and reviews so they can focus on the jobs that compensate at a higher rate for more palatable work. The most well-known of these is Turkopticon, which aggregates reviews into ratings including “generosity” and “fairness” that a client has displayed in the past.

31-----

⊗ Impact

Applying to work on a platform comes with application fees and background checks. This places a financial burden on workers who may already be in precarious situations.

❖ Perspective**Andrew the Researcher**

Andrew, the anthropologist who conducted this research worked on three platforms both as a part-time job, and a research method. He found that TaskRabbit charged a one-time \$25 registration fee, while Upwork recently changed their policy to charge 15 cents per job proposal. While Upwork estimated that few workers will pay more than \$3 each month, he applied to 15 or so jobs, without being selected for any work, meaning he was out more than twenty seven dollars without having any income or reputation built to help win jobs.

△ Behaviors

Gig economy workers have little agency to affect changes to these policies and place themselves in more precarious situations by gambling that they will find employment that mitigates the initial financial outlay.

Appendix E: Proposal to EPIC

Tutorial: Calibrating Ethnofutures



Jan English-Lueck



Rod Falcon



Andrew Marley

Instructors:

J.A. English-Lueck, San Jose State University

Rod Falcon, Institute for the Future

Andrew Marley, San Jose State University

Sunday, 25 October

25 participants

Overview

This tutorial introduces Ethnofutures to ethnographers who want to integrate forecasting methods and tools into their current professional practices, where the goal is to translate ethnographic material collected in the present, or even recent past, into imaginative, but grounded, scenarios of their future users, services and products. Tutorial leaders will review essential skills and methodologies from applied foresight research: signals (aka horizon scanning), drivers (aka megatrends) and scenario building. Practitioners, such as designers and business strategists, must imagine futures based on existing signals of change. Those signals can come from the activities of individuals, the organizations in which they work, as well as the larger social events around them. The forces fomenting change can be highly localized, such as a specific municipal policy on gig workers or also be global in scope, pointing to the role of gig

work as a facet of contemporary transnational capitalism. Moreover, the future itself is scalable: Organizations toggle between data-rich forecasts that extend less than a year, to more speculative futures that consider impacts decades into the future. Each practitioner must judge what scope to use to create a design fiction or develop a business strategy.

The training will utilize a “cooking show” approach: practicing methods together but instructors will bring pre-prepared materials to accelerate our pace. We will begin by drawing on recent research done by the Institute for the Future that explores the range of practices and practitioners that pull futures perspectives into their organizational work. In breakouts, participants will share how they can use ethnographic data to build scenarios that interpret the experiences of producers and consumers. For the sake of clarity, participants will work on a shared exercise during the tutorial. We will review the basic principles of Ethnofutures, practice, and give participants a chance to work with pre-curated ethnographic data, in this case collected on the experiences of workers in the gig economy, to build future scenarios. Finally, we will ask participants imagine a use case for Ethnofutures in their own work, identifying optimal temporal and spatial scales. The participants will leave with new tools for exploring and communicating futures perspectives in their organizations.

Instructors will draw on years of experience teaching the skills of foresight to students, clients, and stakeholders of many disciplinary backgrounds. The tutorial consists of extensive hands-on group work followed by discussion and unpacking.

In this tutorial, participants will learn to:

- Develop a forecasting framework using ethnographic data.
- Identify how different social scales (individual, networked, organizational), different spatial scales (local, regional, national, global), and different temporal scales (near-term, mid-term and long-term) change with the kind of question the organization is trying to address.
- Reframe their own professional identities as futures-oriented practitioners.
- Discover use cases for Ethnofutures approaches within their organizations. Participants will be asked to complete a light reading assignment and two simple (10-30 minute) exercises prior to the tutorial to help us make the most of our time together.

Instructors

Jan English-Lueck is a Professor of [Anthropology at San Jose State University](#) and a Distinguished Fellow at the [Institute for the Future](#). She has written ethnographies about the anthropology of work, science and technology among California’s alternative healers, and China’s scientists. She is also the author of several books on Silicon Valley including [Cultures@SiliconValley](#) (second edition), winner of the American Anthropological Association’s 2006 Diana Forsythe Prize for the anthropology of science and technology. English-Lueck is Past President of the American Anthropological Association’s Society for the Anthropology of Work. As a member of the graduate

faculty in applied anthropology, she integrates ethnographic design futures into her students' training with partners ranging from the [Silicon Valley Alliance \(Renault Nissan Mitsubishi\)](#) to [Japantown Prepared!](#)

Rod Falcon brings his extensive experience directing research and teams at IFTF to his current role co-leading IFTF's [IFTF Vantage Partnership](#). With a deep background in public health policy, he has served in several different capacities at IFTF since 1995, including leading the [Food Futures](#) and [Health Futures](#) programs and leading research for the [Tech Futures](#) program. In the course of his work, Rod speaks to executive audiences and helps them find innovative strategies for participating in the global economy. His research focus areas have included personal health technologies, communication and messaging practices in the workplace and home, social networks and abundant connectivity, and health-aware environments.

Born in Oakland, California, in a time and place of great social change, Rod attended nearby UC Berkeley to better understand what was happening. There he earned a BA in American history and a Master's of Public Policy. After working one summer enforcing the Voting Rights Act for the Justice Department, Rod realized that public policy was not as future oriented as it might be and was inspired to do something about it. He came to IFTF to forecast the future of the California health care safety net and ended up staying on.

Andrew Marley is a graduate student in Applied Anthropology at San Jose State, currently researching the future of reputation in the gig economy. Before returning to graduate school, he spent several years leading various process improvement projects in a manufacturing environment. He left to improve his understanding of how the way we do business affects the lives of all stakeholders. Andrew's past projects include process improvement, building bridges between departments in a global manufacturing company, and research into transportation strategies informing the development of autonomous vehicles.