

Interview with an Instacart Personal Shopper

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Background

Instacart is a US\$13.7 billion company (Hall, 2020) founded in 2012 by Apoorva Mehta, a previous employee of Amazon, Blackberry and Qualcomm who specialized in order fulfillment (Carson, 2017). Originally serving only San Francisco (Demicheva, 2013), the company currently operates throughout the US and Canada. While known primarily for delivering groceries, Instacart also offers delivery of office supplies, household items and alcohol (Redman, 2019). Instacart's pricing model includes, in addition to the price of items purchased and any tax, a delivery fee, a service fee, and a gratuity (Cain, 2020). Delivery fees range from US\$3.99 to US\$7.99, while service fees are a flat 5% of the amount purchased and gratuities are set by the customer, but cannot be (after March 20, 2020) less than 10% of the order (Cain, 2020).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Instacart employed approximately 142,000 workers, of whom only about 12,000 were classified as employees (Gurley, 2020). The company hired an estimated 300,000 new workers between mid-March and mid-April 2020 to handle increased demand due to the pandemic (Sonnemaker, 2020). As is typical of companies in the "gig economy," Instacart has a history of contentious labor issues. These include a suit over treating employees as independent contractors in March 2017 (Del Rey, 2017a), unrest over its payment system short-changing workers in 2016-2020 (Del Rey 2017b, 2018; Hanbury, 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Hawkin 2019; Captain, 2019), union-busting (Gurley, 2020), and lack of PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic on March 30, 2020 (referenced below; Olson & Anderson, 2020).

Methodological Note

The authors interviewed an Instacart personal shopper (what Instacart calls their workers, as opposed to their "employees") on August 5, 2020. The shopper, who we will refer to as "Brett," began working for Instacart on March 10, 2020, a few days before the state of Indiana entered a widespread stay-at-home order on March 16, 2020. The interview was conducted under IRB Protocol 1907006008. The interview was not recorded, but notes were taken during the interview by both authors and subsequently checked by "Brett" for accuracy. One day before the interview, "Brett" was sent a Study Information Sheet (SIS) and a list of the interview questions. He was verbally consented immediately prior to the interview and was reminded at that point of key information on the SIS including his right to remain anonymous, to refuse to answer any question and to stop the interview at any point. He was also reminded that he would not be compensated and he was invited to choose a pseudonym. He declined to choose a pseudonym, thus "Brett" is our invention.

Interview

Authors: When did you start working for Instacart? Is it your main employment?

Brett: The Wednesday or Thursday before Spring Break (March 11 or 12, 2020). Yes, it is my main employment now. I still do a little ride share work (did none for the first 2 months after the pandemic hit and then maybe 10 riders since middle of May). I did one today as a matter of fact.

Authors: What prompted you to start working for Instacart? What other types of jobs have you worked in in the past?

Brett: I was working rideshare and that pretty much dried up, so especially with the restaurants closed it seemed the best way to make a living. I worked as a corporate accountant for 25 years and then started working Uber/Lyft. I also worked for a local ride share started by two IU grads. I did Doordash, but that wasn't really my thing and like I said, the restaurants closed.

Authors: Are you self-employed as an Instacart shopper? What are some of the benefits? Drawbacks?

Brett: Yes, I am self-employed. Instacart very much wants it that way – they keep you at arm's length. You get email blasts from them and there is protocol [for how to fill orders], but that is about it.

Benefits: I can make my own schedule. The flexibility is nice. (It's not quite as flexible as being a rideshare driver). Still have to follow the market though in creating my schedule.

Drawbacks: Customers can be difficult. The physicality of it (I have a bad back). And, of course, during the pandemic the stores can be wiped out and you have to make substitutions all the time. I don't know what it would be like without the pandemic. I have health insurance through the marketplace or that would be a concern.

Authors: Let's talk about shortages. Can you walk us through the shortages (or not) of (author supplied list):

Brett:

Vinegar: that's recent (Figure 1). A lot of times when things are scarce, I send a picture to the customer so they can see what they have to choose from of see what is available.

Toilet paper: March 13 until today (Figure 2). It's coming around, but there is still no variety, it is whatever came in on the truck. Same with paper towels.



Figure 2: Paper product shelves, 6 August 2020. Photo by David Novak

Napkins have always pretty much been available, although again not a lot of variety.

Bleach: I haven't really experienced this. Disinfectant wipes and sprays are still in shortage (Figures 3 & 4) and when there is any there is no variety. I should clarify that if you order something, we are "led" to it by the app. If it's there, we get it and if not we either work with you to choose a substitute or refund it. Also, while Instacart attempts to mirror store inventory, my experience is that it is not 100% accurate.

Meat: I haven't noticed any shortage in meat. Poultry was a little tricky for a while. Mostly it is that particular cuts are missing. Prepackaged cold cuts/deli meat were gone. Sometimes even now the shelf is 70% empty.

Dairy: Again spot shortages, but nothing continuous.

Yeast and Flour: There was no yeast for about 3 weeks. There has been flour, but not a lot of variety. Like a lot of times you can't get King Arthur flour or you can't get certain types of King Arthur flour, you have to get Kroger brand – that sort of thing. With yeast there are fewer choices so they run out faster.

Fruits and Vegetables (of any kind): Early on, there was a lot of trouble with canned vegetables and beans. There were no diced tomatoes for two weeks and beans are still hard to get. Frozen vegetables were also scarce early on. People were buying them up because they can be stored for a long time.

Other: Well there was one day early on when I walked into the College Mall Kroger and, like, the entire green produce wall was empty. That was pretty shocking. While I was shopping, they announced over the loudspeaker that the produce truck had arrived so they wanted the employees to go back and unload it. It's mostly been spot shortages; a lack of variety; whatever came in on the truck; the supply chain is clearly severely disrupted. At the north side Kroger I asked about something and the employee there said they have been ordering it for the last three weeks, but it just never comes in on the truck.

Authors: How do most folks take delivery (no-contact, chat at the door, etc.). How do you feel about that?

Brett: It's mostly no contact. I like that. I'm kind of an introvert. Some people will open the door and wave through the glass or yell "thank you" as you make your way back to your car.

Authors: Do you feel that stores are safe for you to shop in or that you are taking a risk as an Instacart shopper?

Brett: I've blocked that out. There are people who crowd at the store though. And you see a lot of people who are really vulnerable in the store shopping. They shouldn't be



Figure 3: Cleaning solution shelves 6 August 2020. Photo by David Novak



Figure 4: Liquid hand soap shelves 16 August 2020. Photo by David Novak

there. I wish they'd leave that to somebody else. I suppose they do that just to get out – stores are where people can go. I try to avoid people though. If an aisle has a lot of people in it, particularly if they are all in one spot looking at the same thing, I go to another aisle and then come back to it later.

Authors: Do you know other people who work for Instacart? Do you interact with other Instacart workers/ discuss problems or tips outside of work?

Brett: Not really. I know a few of the others. You see them in line checking out and sometimes we chat in line as we check out. But we don't give each other tips or anything. At a certain level we are competing. And I don't report inventory levels or anything. They'll figure it out. If it is sold out, it is sold out.

When I did ride share a lot, [the local rideshare startup] had a groupme so we could communicate with other drivers. And there are things like

Rideshare guy and Postmates that provide general advice for gig workers. I got started with Instacart because of a [blogpost] on Rideshare guy.

[The local rideshare startup] is a local/tight-knit group. Reddit and mailing lists (Rideshare guy) allow us to share tips to maximize earnings.

Authors: Did you hear about the nationwide Instacart strike? What did you think about it?

Brett: Yes, I heard about it the day before from one of my customers or maybe my mom in North Carolina – she saw it on the national news. I usually get the point of labor strikes and why they're useful. I understand that you get what you want when people are desperate, but I disliked the timing. It's distasteful [to strike] during a pandemic. I understand it isn't a noble quest, but there is a feel good aspect to it [working Instacart – helping people out]. When I stopped working as an accountant I thought about buying a business, but I wouldn't own a vape shop. I couldn't sell something that was a carcinogen. I wouldn't want to be responsible for that.

Authors: Can you speculate on how things may change after the pandemic?

Brett: Pay for convenience has been growing. It will continue to grow. Maybe too many gig workers will hold it back. Sometimes there are too many workers for shoppers to make a decent living. Quality of the workers/product might be a concern, but as the less qualified gig workers leave, the quality will rise. Some workers may leave after the pandemic.

Authors: Is there anything else you'd like to add that you think would be useful for our research?

Brett: Yes. It has been interesting to watch the ebb and flow. There has been some hysteria too (the guy and the disinfectant spray). It's been interesting and spooky – no greens in Kroger. The hoarding (the manager and customer at Aldis with the 40 packages of hot dogs and the manager not being willing to sell 40 packages of hot dog buns and calling the police). And I worry about the smaller brands making it. Kroger will recover, but what about King Arthur.

I don't get freaked out at the store. I still ride share. I get freaked out thinking about ride share. I have an SUV and can hold 5-6 people in it, but there is no way I'd do that. 1-2 is okay if it is a nice day like today and I can have the windows down, but on a summer day when it is 90 and I have the AC on and windows up? ...

Authors: Thank you very much for your time.

Conclusion

Services such as Instacart have become key players in food provisioning strategies for those vulnerable to COVID-19 who can afford to pay for grocery delivery. Because of the nature of the pandemic, vulnerability is especially tied to age, thus many well-to-do seniors have converted to Instacart use. While we cannot see the future, Robinson et al. 2020 note that increasing use of grocery delivery may be one phenomenon that continues beyond the current pandemic.

This has important implications for the future of the food system. First, it means that any company that can organize home delivery may be able to take advantage of the new willingness by those that are able to pay a premium for convenience. One outcome of the pandemic is that as the industrial food chain hiccuped, the local food chain largely did not and this opened an opportunity for local producers who were agile to pry some of the grocery business (especially vegetables in season, bakery, dairy, eggs, poultry and meat) away from large national, industrially-dependent food suppliers. Second the pandemic has seen, because of the new emphasis on no-contact delivery, major growth in the “gig economy.” This raises a number of equity issues, especially those surrounding fair wages, health insurance, and the equal distribution of wealth within the US.

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