

# From anchors to scripts: reframing career theory for the microtasking era

Career  
Development  
International

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Received 16 July 2024  
Revised 17 April 2025  
Accepted 1 July 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study examines how French microtaskers construct their career within the context of an online labor platform (OLP).

**Design/methodology/approach** – A mixed-methods approach combining a survey of 1,853 microtaskers with qualitative platform analysis tests Schein’s career anchors model in the gig economy context.

**Findings** – Schein’s career anchors inadequately capture microtaskers’ career orientations. These workers exhibit motivational structures aligning with boundaryless and protean career concepts. We propose an integrated theoretical framework incorporating Barley’s career scripts to explain how microtaskers develop careers at the intersection of individual agency and platform constraints.

**Originality/value** – This study advances digital labor literature by challenging traditional career models’ applicability to platform-mediated work and introduces a framework accounting for the socio-technical dynamics of OLPs.

**Keywords** Career anchors, Microtasking, Protean career, Boundaryless career, Crowdwork, Career scripts

**Paper type** Research article

## Introduction

The rise of the gig economy, driven by Online Labor Platforms (OLPs) such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Fiverr and Upwork, is reshaping traditional employment and career development (Affolter *et al.*, 2024; Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023). Among the various forms of platform-mediated work, *crowdwork* has emerged as a distinct model, characterized by flexible, short-term tasks performed entirely online (Bellesia *et al.*, 2024). This study focuses on a specific subset of crowdwork: *microtasking* – low-skilled digital tasks like data entry and image labeling (Blohm *et al.*, 2018). Microtasking platforms emphasize efficiency and scale, often at the expense of worker compensation and protections (Berg *et al.*, 2018), raising critical questions about how individuals construct careers in these precarious environments (Akkermans *et al.*, 2025).

Microtaskers are typically young, educated and highly skilled individuals who are classified as self-employed and excluded from standard labor protections (Mangold, 2024). Despite poor working conditions and limited support for career progression, participation continues to grow, suggesting the urgency of understanding how these workers navigate their professional trajectories (Morgan *et al.*, 2023). In this study, we focus on France, which provides a compelling context for exploring these dynamics. Its labor market, underpinned by strong worker protections, stands in contrast to the deregulated nature of platform work (Casilli and Posada, 2019). This institutional tension invites inquiry into how digital labor is reconciled with traditional career expectations. While prior studies have concentrated on

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**Declaration of interest:** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.



Career Development International  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
e-ISSN: 1758-6003  
p-ISSN: 1362-0436  
DOI 10.1108/CDI-07-2024-0317

Anglophone contexts, French platforms such as *Wirk* remain underexplored, offering a valuable site for extending career theory into new socio-cultural terrains. Our central research question is: *How do French microtaskers construct and pursue careers within the constraints of an online labor platform?*

Much of the existing literature portrays crowdworkers as flexible and self-directed, drawing on models such as [Schein's \(1990\)](#) career anchors to explain their motivations ([Taylor and Joshi, 2019](#)). Using a mixed-methods approach – surveying *Wirk* users and analyzing the platform's discourse – we tested Schein's model but found that it lacked construct validity in this context. This led us to reconsider prevailing assumptions about career agency in platform work. As a response, we draw on boundaryless and protean career theories ([Arthur and Rousseau, 1996](#); [Hall, 2004](#)), and [Barley's \(1989\)](#) concept of *career scripts*, which foregrounds the interplay between individual agency and institutional constraints. Microtaskers' careers are not linear but emergent, shaped by platform dynamics and socio-economic forces. Our study contributes to growing debates at the nexus of gig work and career theory, illustrating the need to situate digital labor within broader cultural and policy frameworks.

The rest of the paper situates crowdwork within the gig economy and then examines contemporary career theories, focusing on Schein's career anchors and Barley's career scripts. The methodology section explains our mixed-methods approach centered on the French platform *Wirk*. Empirical findings reveal the limits of Schein's model for microtasking and propose an alternative framework combining boundaryless and protean career theories with Barley's career scripts to capture the dynamic between structural constraints and individual agency. The paper concludes with theoretical implications, future research directions and practical guidance for career counselors and platform designers.

## Careers in flux

### *Digital labor landscapes*

Microtasking – a form of crowdwork involving low-skilled digital tasks mediated via OLPs – has become a defining feature of the gig economy. Scholars have explored this space through worker demographics, motivations and working conditions ([Deng and Joshi, 2016](#); [Lehdonvirta, 2018](#); [Kincaid and Reynolds, 2024](#)). Crowdworkers are diverse in age, education and geography, with motivations ranging from income supplementation and skill development to flexibility and task variety ([Pichault and McKeown, 2019](#); [Rani and Furrer, 2021](#)). Yet microtasking also entails precarity: income instability, lack of social protection and algorithmic oversight ([Duggan et al., 2022](#)). Being classified as independent contractors rather than employees, microtaskers face limited rights, chronic insecurity and psychological strain ([van Doorn, 2017](#)). This precariousness is intensified by the neoliberal design of OLPs, which favor profit over worker welfare.

Despite these challenges, microtasking offers labor market access to marginalized groups, such as caregivers or people with disabilities ([Berg et al., 2018](#)). This duality – flexibility versus insecurity – captures the paradoxical nature of crowdwork. To cope with uncertainty, workers often rely on occupational online communities for support, information-sharing and connection ([Ye and Jensen, 2022](#)). Understanding how workers navigate this terrain requires us to engage with career theory.

### *Career theories and gig work*

Career theory has evolved to reflect shifts in work structures. Concepts like the boundaryless ([Arthur and Rousseau, 1996](#)) and protean ([Hall, 2004](#)) career highlight self-direction and mobility across organizational boundaries – ideals seemingly suited to platform labor. However, such theories often underplay structural constraints, which are acute in gig work ([Guest and Rodrigues, 2014](#)). As [Yao et al. \(2014\)](#) show, the benefits of boundarylessness can

diminish over time, a pattern echoed in microtaskers' evolving priorities from flexibility to stability. For some, gig work is a necessary supplement to other income sources; for others, it is a deliberate career choice rooted in autonomy (Kincaid and Reynolds, 2024). Yet the long-term viability of such paths remains unclear (Kost and Fieseler, 2025). Recent scholarship has shifted from focusing solely on upward mobility to mapping diverse transitions – lateral, downward or across domains (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022). Such fine detail is important in the microtasking context, where conventional trajectories are rare and empirical research remains limited.

### *Schein's career anchors model*

To explore microtaskers' career motivations, we draw on Schein's (1990) career anchors – a model identifying eight core orientations: autonomy, security, competence, managerial potential, entrepreneurship, challenge, lifestyle and service. These anchors are summarized in Table 1.

Traditionally applied in organizational settings, Schein's model has proven useful in understanding stable career identities, particularly among knowledge workers and professionals (Costigan *et al.*, 2018). Despite its potential significance, the concept has received limited attention in the context of contingent work arrangements, particularly microtasking. A key exception is Taylor and Joshi's (2019) study of IT crowdworkers, which applies Schein's model and suggests that career anchors may manifest differently in digitally mediated labor environments.

This model offers three advantages. First, it captures enduring career motivations beyond organizational affiliations. Second, it aligns with the motivational diversity seen among gig workers (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Third, applying it in microtasking – particularly in the French context with stronger labor protections – extends its relevance to algorithmically assigned and fragmented work (Wood *et al.*, 2019). Although recent revisions of the model emphasize flexibility (Schein *et al.*, 2023), it remains anchored in psychological work identities, making it apt for investigating how microtaskers articulate career intentions.

**Table 1.** Schein's career anchors

Career anchor	Description	Examples
Autonomy	People who are attracted to freedom and flexibility in the way they organize and complete their work	Professors; Consultants; Private practice physicians; independent contractors
Security/stability	People who prefer durability and permanence in their jobs	State employees
Technical/functional competence	People who are attracted to the content of their work	Engineers within R&D teams; Accountants
Managerial competence	People who favor the tasks of organizing and leading an organization	CEOs, top management team members; consultants; executive coaches
Entrepreneurial creativity	This anchor is for people who love the thrill of solving challenges of launching a start-up	Entrepreneurs; Intrapreneurs
Dedication to a cause	People who want to make their values as the central part of their work	Nurses; Employees of social enterprises or non-profits
Pure challenge	People who want to prove themselves to the world by solving complex business problems	Consultants
Lifestyle	People who are attracted to a family-friendly workplace environment	Dual-career families

**Source(s):** Authors' work

*Career scripts*

Beyond individual motivation, careers are also shaped by shared expectations and institutional norms or *career scripts* (Barley, 1989). These scripts are collectively held interpretive frameworks that outline the stages, decisions and achievements considered necessary for career success within specific institutional settings (Afiouni, 2014). Unlike formal rules or individual plans, career scripts serve as socially embedded knowledge structures that help individuals interpret “how things are done” in their profession or field (Laudel et al., 2019). Scripts help individuals make sense of their paths and navigate the absence of clear trajectories, especially in gig work where traditional organizational scaffolds are missing.

Barley (1989) highlights how scripts evolve as collective choices reinforce or reshape norms. This is salient in the gig economy, where fluid work arrangements challenge established career ladders. Although interpretations of career scripts vary – some focusing on institutional programs (Cappellen and Janssens, 2010), others on individual interpretations (Dany et al., 2011) – their value lies in explaining how workers reconcile agency with structural constraints (Garbe and Duberley, 2021). Laudel et al. (2019) show that scripts become visible at career turning points, revealing alignment or divergence from dominant expectations. However, empirical studies applying the concept of career scripts have yielded inconsistent results. Since Barley’s initial theorization, researchers have operationalized the concept in divergent ways. For instance, Dany et al. (2011) interpret scripts as individualized readings of promotion norms, whereas Cappellen and Janssens (2010) treat them as institutionally defined career programs. Valette and Culié (2015) critique this conceptual ambiguity, observing a tendency among scholars to prioritize either structural or agentic dimensions, rather than maintaining the mediating role of scripts. One notable exception is Laudel et al.’s (2019) work with early career researchers, which identifies shared scripts through references to community expectations and recognizable patterns in decision-making, such as publication strategies or mobility requirements. These studies show that career scripts become most visible when individuals face turning points or dilemmas in their careers (see Ibarra, 2003), as their decisions often reveal alignments or departures from established paths.

Despite the complexity of career scripts, we selected to test Schein’s career anchors model as it provides a systematic starting point for identifying career motivations. Schein’s established taxonomy offers analytical categories sufficiently detailed to capture the heterogeneous motivations documented among gig economy participants (Lehdonvirta, 2018). It also permitted analysis of subjective career orientations that operate independently of organizational affiliations, hence representing a context mirroring microtaskers’ detachment from traditional employment structures (Taylor and Joshi, 2019). This theoretical continuity allows us to investigate career decision-making in environments lacking conventional institutional scaffolding.

In the following sections, we introduce Wirk – the OLP under study, along with its population of gig workers, and the research methods used in our research.

**The Wirk platform: French microtasking**

In France, the microtasking workforce comprises three main groups: approximately 15,000 active microtaskers working weekly, 50,000 routine microtaskers engaged monthly and 250,000 casual microtaskers who alternate between periods of activity and inactivity (Le Ludec et al., 2019). These workers are predominantly between the ages of 25 and 44, and around half hold higher education qualifications. Despite their education, one in five lives below the poverty line, earning on average just €21 per month from platform work (Berg et al., 2018). For many, microtasking serves as a secondary source of income as over 60% of microtaskers also hold full-time jobs.

Our study focuses on Wirk (formerly known as Foule Factory) which is currently the leading microtasking platform in France and a significant player in the national gig economy (Le Ludec et al., 2019). Founded in 2014, Wirk not only connects clients with workers but also

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creates a technological context that influences work characteristics through its features and algorithmic infrastructures. This includes matching algorithms suggesting jobs to workers, control algorithms monitoring performance and rating algorithms computing workers' scores. It offers services such as data entry, image and audio transcription, content moderation and market research surveys—similar in function to Amazon Mechanical Turk, but designed to comply with French labor regulations and tailored to local expectations. Wirk positions itself as an ethical alternative within the microtasking industry (Le Ludec *et al.*, 2019). The platform emphasizes fair compensation and transparency, offering workers a pay rate of €10 per hour or more depending on the project which is significantly above the global average for similar platforms (Berg *et al.*, 2018). Workers can also rate projects, contributing to accountability and quality assurance. However, in a bid to avoid worker burnout and reduce dependency on the platform, Wirk caps annual earnings at €3,000 per worker.

To maintain equilibrium between task supply and worker availability, Wirk strategically limits the size of its workforce. Demographic data reveal a balanced age distribution: 36% of workers are aged 28–37, while the 18–27 and 38–47 age groups each represent 24%. Workers over 47 make up the remaining 16%. The majority are well-educated: over 75% have at least a secondary school diploma, and half are university graduates. In summary, Wirk represents a distinctive model in the global microtasking landscape: one that combines platform-based flexibility with regulatory compliance, ethical labor practices and a deliberate approach to workforce management.

### Methodology

We adopted a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Creswell, 2023) integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative analysis of the Wirk platform. This design captures both individual career orientations and the structural context of platform-mediated work, responding to calls for methodological innovation in studying careers within socio-technical environments (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022).

#### *Primary data collection*

We distributed a survey directly on the Wirk platform, offering financial compensation following ethical norms in crowdwork research (Lovett *et al.*, 2018). From 2,142 responses, we retained 1,853 valid submissions after removing incomplete and unusually fast responses. The sample predominantly comprised French metropolitan residents (98.4%) with balanced gender distribution (54% female). Respondents were mostly young adults (48% under 34) with high educational attainment (46% held university degrees). Most participants (44%) maintained full-time conventional employment alongside platform work, while others reported fixed-term contracts (6.5%), self-employment (6%), student status (10%), unemployment (26.5%), retirement (5%) or temporary employment (2%). The majority (84%) worked less than four hours weekly on the platform, consistent with global participation patterns in microtasking (Berg *et al.*, 2018). In terms of professional background, respondents reported an average of 6.3 years of overall work experience (SD = 4.2). Of these, 38% had under 6 years of experience, 52% had 6–10 years and 10% had over a decade of experience.

#### *Career anchor measurement*

To assess career anchors, we employed the abridged 25-item scale developed by Igarria and Baroudi (1993), with participants rating each item on a 5-point Likert scale. Following Cerdin and Pargneux (2010), we distinguished between geographic and job security anchors. A double-blind translation-back-translation process ensured linguistic equivalence.

We conducted a pilot study with 200 Wirk microtaskers to validate our measurement tools prior to the main survey, refining the instrument to better align with the microtasking context.

*Secondary data analysis*

Our qualitative component examined the Wirk platform through Internet publications, official documents and public forums. We analyzed the platform’s interface, task design, compensation mechanisms and evaluation systems to understand structural constraints. Discourse analysis of official communications and user discussions revealed prevailing narratives about career perceptions. This qualitative component provided an interpretive frame for contextualizing survey data and identifying emergent career scripts.

**Data analysis and results**

We used descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze our data. Descriptive statistics summarized sample characteristics, while inferential techniques like factor analysis and reliability tests validated career anchor constructs in microtasking. [Table 2](#) displays descriptive statistics and correlations among career anchors, highlighting lifestyle (mean = 12.04), service (mean = 11.07) and autonomy/independence (mean = 11.06) as the most significant anchors for microtaskers.

We analyzed correlations among career anchors in [Table 3](#), noting significant associations: general managerial competence with pure challenge (0.49;  $p < 0.01$ ) and entrepreneurial creativity (0.5;  $p < 0.01$ ); autonomy/independence with service (0.55;  $p < 0.01$ ) and lifestyle (0.53;  $p < 0.01$ ) and service with pure challenge (0.45;  $p < 0.01$ ). These correlation patterns suggest that microtaskers’ career orientations do not exist as discrete anchors but rather as interconnected motivational clusters. The strong correlations between autonomy/

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics

Anchors	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Technical/functional	3.0	15.0	9.35	2.4
Managerial	3.0	15.0	8.42	3.0
Autonomy	3.0	15.0	11.05	2.09
Security (job tenure)	2.0	10.0	7.51	1.85
Security (geographic)	2.0	10.0	6.65	2.35
Dedication to a cause	3.0	15.0	11.06	2.42
Pure challenge	3.0	15.0	9.16	2.59
Lifestyle	3.0	15.0	12.04	1.89
Entrepreneurial creativity	3.0	15.0	8.10	3.55

**Source(s):** Authors’ work

**Table 3.** Correlations among career anchors

Career anchors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Technical competence	1							
2. Managerial competence	0.08**	1						
3. Autonomy	0.16**	0.14**	1					
4. Security (job tenure)	0.30**	0.09**		1				
5. Security (geographic)	0.28**	-0.14**	0.07**	0.20**	1			
6. Dedication to a cause	0.13**	0.30**	0.55**	0.21**	-0.05*	1		
7. Pure challenge	0.09**	0.49**	0.21**	0.05*	-0.08**	0.45**	1	
8. Lifestyle	0.17**		0.52**	0.16**	0.22**	0.35**	0.09**	1
9. Entrepreneurial creativity		0.50**	0.33**	-0.21**	-0.14**	0.26**	0.32**	0.110**

**Source(s):** Authors’ work

independence, service and lifestyle (all exceeding  $r = 0.50$ ) indicate that microtaskers who value freedom in work arrangements simultaneously prioritize serving others and maintaining work–life balance. This pattern challenges Schein’s conceptualization of career anchors as relatively independent constructs and points to a complex motivational structure among microtaskers. The correlation matrix further suggests that traditional organizational values (managerial competence) significantly correlate with entrepreneurial and challenge-seeking orientations, suggesting microtaskers may approach platform work with a blend of conventional and non-conventional career values.

We selected Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) rather than Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) to examine the underlying factor structure of career anchors among microtaskers without imposing a priori assumptions about construct relationships. This decision acknowledges Dries’ (2020: 157) methodological observation that CFA may overly emphasize factor independence, which would be problematic given the unexplored territory of career orientations in microtasking. EFA permits the identification of latent constructs that might differ from those established in traditional organizational settings, allowing the data to reveal patterns that could otherwise be obscured by the constraints of confirmatory approaches (see Howard, 2023). The exploratory stance aligns with our research objective to investigate whether Schein’s career anchors manifest similarly in microtasking contexts or require theoretical reconceptualization. Our sample size of 1,853 substantially exceeds the recommended threshold of 300 for robust exploratory analyses (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019), providing statistical power for reliable factor extraction.

We applied Principal Components Analysis (PCA) to the career anchor inventory using FactoMineR package in R (Lê *et al.*, 2008). To assess data suitability for PCA, we examined the correlation matrix (Table 3), finding several instances of significant correlations higher than 0.4, indicating appropriateness for factor analysis. PCA identified two principal components with eigenvalues greater than unity, visualized in a factor map (Figure 1) to

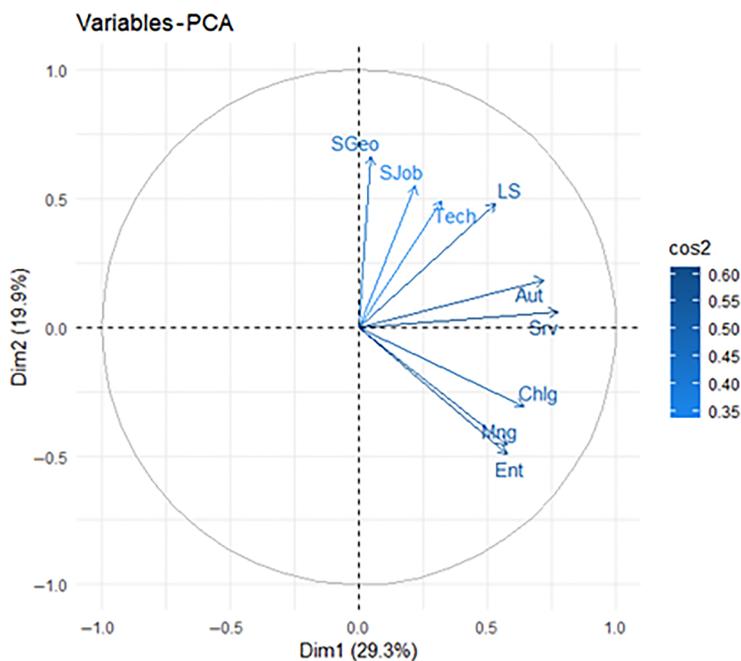


Figure 1. Factor map. Source: Authors’ work

illustrate anchor clusters. We used  $\text{Cos}^2$  as the gradient of quality to highlight the most important anchors in explaining the variations retained by the principal components (Kassambara, 2017). This approach allows for an intuitive understanding of the relationships between different career anchors in the context of microtasking. In interpreting these results, we remained aware of the exploratory nature of our analysis.

Table 4 shows factor loadings of career anchors on orthogonally rotated principal components. We employed orthogonal rotation (varimax) to maximize the variance of the squared loadings of each factor on all the variables in a factor matrix, which often results in interpretable clusters of factors (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019).

The analysis suggested two distinct components:

- (1) Component 1: This component showed strong positive correlations with service (0.78), autonomy (0.76), pure challenge (0.72), entrepreneurial creativity (0.70), managerial competence (0.68) and lifestyle (0.65). These anchors seem to cluster around themes of personal growth, independence and value-driven work.
- (2) Component 2: This component was strongly correlated with both aspects of security – geographic (0.82) and job (0.80) – as well as technological competence (0.75). This cluster appears to represent a focus on stability and technical expertise.

The PCA yielded statistically significant results with the two extracted components cumulatively explaining 63.7% of the total variance in the data (Component 1: 41.3%; Component 2: 22.4%). This partition of variance exceeds the conventional threshold of 60% considered adequate for social science research (Hair et al., 2019). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.83, indicating the data were highly suitable for factor analysis, while Bartlett’s test of sphericity was significant ( $\chi^2 = 4257.36$ ,  $df = 36$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), confirming that correlations between variables were sufficiently large for PCA. The robust loading patterns (all exceeding 0.65) within each component and minimal cross-loadings confirm the statistical distinctiveness of these two career orientation dimensions among microtaskers. The emergence of only two components, rather than Schein’s eight separate anchors, provides statistical evidence that microtaskers’ career orientations operate differently than in traditional organizational contexts, coalescing around broader themes of agency/values (Component 1) versus security/expertise (Component 2).

To prioritize significant relationships, factor loadings below 0.4 in Table 4 were omitted, aligning with standard EFA criteria (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2019). This approach helps in identifying the most salient relationships between variables and factors. The emergence of these two distinct components suggests that microtaskers’ career orientations are complex. The first component aligns with contemporary career concepts like protean or boundaryless careers (Hall, 2004; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), emphasizing flexibility, personal values and continuous learning. The second reflects traditional career values centered on security and specialized skills. This dichotomy raises questions about careers in the gig economy, where

**Table 4.** Varimax rotated component matrix

Component 1			Component 2		
	Correlation	p.Value		Correlation	p.Value
Srv	0.78	0.00	SGeo	0.65	0.00
Aut	0.72	0.00	Sjob	0.55	0.00
Chlg	0.64	0.00	Tech	0.49	0.00
Ent	0.58	0.00			
Mng	0.58	0.00			
LS	0.53	0.00			

Source(s): Authors’ work

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microtaskers may value aspects of both modern and traditional paradigms. These statistical findings suggest limitations in applying traditional career models to microtasking contexts, requiring further analysis to understand the complex motivational structures underlying platform-based careers.

### *Beyond anchors: further analysis*

Our PCA analysis indicated that the career anchors model does not fully capture the career orientations of microtaskers. Additionally, some statistical indicators also raised concerns about the model's applicability to our sample. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients for multiple anchor subscales fell below the conventional threshold of 0.70, indicating inconsistent measurement. Furthermore, high inter-correlations between theoretically distinct anchors (as shown in [Table 3](#)) suggested poor discriminant validity, undermining the distinctiveness of these constructs. These technical shortcomings, combined with qualitative insights from our platform analysis, prompted us to question whether the psychological constructs underpinning traditional career anchors adequately reflect the realities of microtaskers in digital labor platforms.

Further data analysis of the same survey data provided a clearer picture of microtaskers' motivations and preferences. While 28% of participants reported working across multiple platforms, a striking 90% still viewed platform work as a long-term career choice. The primary appeal of microtasking lay in its autonomy and flexibility: 88% valued time flexibility, and 98% appreciated location independence. Importantly, 45% expressed non-utilitarian motives, echoing [Lehdonvirta's \(2018\)](#) notion of gig work as "serious leisure". In addition, 78% of respondents felt personally responsible for shaping their career trajectories, reflecting [Hall's \(2004\)](#) protean career orientation. Many also embraced new experiences and diverse project engagements, aligning with [Arthur and Rousseau's \(1996\)](#) concept of the boundaryless career. Collectively, these findings show that microtaskers' career orientations are more complex and fluid than traditional models account for, indicating the need for a complex theoretical framework.

Having explored career orientations at the individual level, we now shift our focus to the platform-level discourse to examine how institutional narratives influence workers' perceptions of their careers and shape identity construction.

### *Wirk's career narrative*

Our secondary analysis of Wirk's website and associated discourse indicates how the platform frames and shapes the workers' career perceptions. Discourse analysis was selected as the methodological approach for examining Wirk's platform content because it allows us to understand how the platform actively constructs and shapes career narratives for microtaskers through language, presentation and structural features (see [Bennett, 2022](#); [Jones et al., 2015](#)). This approach is consistent with our theoretical framework of career scripts, which positions career development at the intersection of individual agency and institutional structure. By analyzing the discursive elements of Wirk's platform, we can identify how the platform mediates between structural constraints and worker agency through its communication practices, task descriptions and promotional materials. This discursive framing lens allows examination of how microtasking platforms not only reflect existing career scripts but actively participate in their construction and legitimation. Furthermore, this methodological choice complements our quantitative survey data by situating individual career orientations within the broader structural context that the platform discursively establishes and maintains.

For instance, Wirk's CEO portrays workers as "free workers", emphasizing the platform's mission to generate gig work while empowering workers. The platform's website stresses workers' freedom and flexibility to choose tasks and work schedules, positioning gig work as an alternative to traditional hierarchical labor relations ([Renault, 2018](#)). This is evident in their translated tagline from French: "Wirk, the platform that gives you the freedom to work

whenever you want, wherever you want”. Similarly, Wirk frames itself as providing opportunities for workers facing mobility or availability constraints, appealing to a diverse workforce. The platform states: “Whether you’re a student, job seeker, retiree or simply looking for extra income, Wirk is for you!” Hence, the discourse and practices of Wirk generate its unique aspect which is ethical crowdsourcing. The platform ensures that all tasks are priced at or above the French minimum wage, addressing some of the concerns about worker exploitation often associated with global microtasking platforms (Casilli and Posada, 2019). Wirk proudly declares: “We guarantee a minimum remuneration of €10 per hour of work”.

An external online forum allows peer interaction among Wirk workers, creating a sense of belonging and shared experience. One forum user wrote: “Wirk isn’t just about making money, it’s about being part of a community. We help each other out and share tips. It’s like having colleagues, but without the office drama!” This community aspect suggests that microtaskers’ career trajectories are not solely individual but also shaped by collective experiences and peer support (Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019). The discursive framing of microtasking on Wirk’s platform and associated forums provides workers with an interpretive scheme to contextualize and justify their career choices. This aligns with the concept of “identity work” in non-traditional careers, where individuals construct narratives to make sense of their work experiences (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). As one Wirk worker shared on the forum: “I used to feel lost in my career, but Wirk has given me a new identity. I’m not just a job-hopper anymore; I’m a flexible professional of the digital age.”

This qualitative analysis triangulates the survey’s quantitative findings by substantiating the statistical evidence of career orientations. The platform’s discourse analysis corroborates the survey’s factor analysis results, particularly the identified components of autonomy and security. The platform’s narrative of “free workers” and emphasis on flexibility directly confirms the survey’s observation that microtaskers value both contemporary career concepts (autonomy, flexibility) and traditional career values (security). However, the observation of Wirk’s infrastructure also informs us that this freedom is simultaneously enabled and constrained by algorithmic mechanisms. By examining platform communications, worker forums and official materials, the research methodology bridges individual perceptions with structural constraints, thereby validating the statistical findings through contextual interpretation.

## Discussion

Our study identifies complex career orientations among microtaskers that challenge traditional career models. The findings suggest that microtasking platforms provide opportunities for pursuing diverse goals often unavailable in conventional employment settings (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017; Hanna *et al.*, 2024; Retkowsky *et al.*, 2023). Schein’s career anchors model proves inadequate in this context for several reasons. Unlike traditional employment, microtasking transcends organizational boundaries, creating discontinuous labor relationships (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Workers participate across multiple platforms simultaneously, constructing personalized work portfolios that resist categorization into singular motivational anchors. Microtaskers’ motivations shift contextually – from economic necessity to skill development and social engagement – rendering static models insufficient (Wood *et al.*, 2019). Algorithmic management further complicates career development as reputation metrics, not human appraisal, determine advancement opportunities (Jarrahi *et al.*, 2021). Bellesia *et al.* (2024) characterize this as *algorithmic embeddedness*, where workers perceive employment as contingent on algorithmic operations. Additionally, occupational identity becomes diffused, as workers identify more as autonomous agents than organizational members (Durward *et al.*, 2020).

This misalignment necessitates theoretical alternatives reflecting digitally mediated work realities. Our factor analysis identified two distinct components: one aligned with



(subjective career choices) and structure (platform architecture), through the mediating mechanisms of career scripts.

Our framework surpasses Schein's model in three ways. First, whereas Schein assumes career stability (Schein *et al.*, 2023), the scripts perspective captures ongoing structural negotiation (Garbe and Duberley, 2021). Second, Schein's model is rooted in organizational settings with clear hierarchies (Costigan *et al.*, 2018), while our framework addresses the fragmented realities of platform labor. Third, our analysis indicates microtaskers' career orientations are emergent scripts shaped by socio-technical environments rather than internal anchors (Duggan *et al.*, 2022). This advancement contributes to career theory by explaining how microtaskers construct careers through interaction with digital platforms while balancing contradictory values like flexibility and security. We also introduce OLPs as influential actors shaping career scripts, an area underexplored in existing literature. While our data come from French microtaskers, our findings can inform understanding of gig careers in other contexts with similar labor market and digital infrastructure features.

Our study contributes to debates on career implications of gig work (Affolter *et al.*, 2024; Hanna *et al.*, 2024). While much literature emphasizes digitalization downsides (Wood *et al.*, 2019), our findings reveal complexity. For some, microtasking fulfills career needs by offering income, skill development and flexibility. This challenges traditional notions of career success and progression. The importance microtaskers place on autonomy and lifestyle suggests career satisfaction increasingly exists outside hierarchical advancement (Holtschlag *et al.*, 2013). Finally, our study advances literature on career self-management (Gilbert *et al.*, 2008) by showing how microtaskers construct careers without formal organizational support. Unlike professionals reinventing long-standing careers (Hallpike *et al.*, 2025), microtaskers create novel scripts from scratch – offering fresh perspectives on emergent forms of work and identity in the digital economy.

### Managerial implications

Our research offers applications for practitioners engaging with platform-mediated work. Career counselors should integrate our two-component model of career orientations when advising clients about microtasking opportunities. This involves assessing both Component 1 motivations (autonomy, service, challenge) and Component 2 motivations (security, technological competence) to develop targeted guidance. For young, educated workers using microtasking as supplementary income, counselors should focus on developing platform-specific technical skills, reputation management strategies and portfolio documentation methods that transform fragmented experiences into coherent career narratives.

For talent managers in traditional organizations, our findings suggest approaches to retain employees who might otherwise gravitate toward platforms. Organizations can implement hybrid arrangements that balance Component 1 needs (autonomy, lifestyle integration) with Component 2 security – for instance, through formalized policies that accommodate supplementary platform work. Wirk's success despite its €3,000 annual earnings cap indicates workers value complementary income opportunities rather than seeking complete employment alternatives. Platform designers should note that microtaskers respond positively to ethical positioning and community-building. Platforms can reduce worker turnover by establishing transparent advancement pathways while maintaining the flexibility that initially attracts workers.

### Limitations and future research

Despite our theoretical contributions, several empirical limitations warrant acknowledgment. Our cross-sectional design cannot capture the evolution of microtaskers' motivations over time. Self-selection bias may have affected our sample, as respondents potentially differ from

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non-respondents in platform engagement and career orientation. The French context limits generalizability, particularly given the rapidly evolving nature of platform governance and regulations. Additionally, while PCA served as a useful dimensionality reduction technique, its linear assumptions and component orthogonality may oversimplify interrelated social phenomena.

These limitations suggest promising research directions. Longitudinal studies could identify how career scripts evolve through changing motivations, while cross-cultural research might uncover how diverse socio-economic contexts shape microtasking careers. Qualitative approaches could examine how microtaskers define success and failure in platform work. Methodologically, future studies could employ structural equation modeling or non-linear techniques to better capture the multidimensional nature of platform-based careers. Instruments that simultaneously measure structural aspects of platform work (algorithms, reputation systems) and agentic dimensions of career self-management (identity work, boundary management) would advance our integrated framework. Multi-level analyses linking platform dynamics to individual career narratives would provide valuable insights into how algorithmic management shapes career development.

### Conclusion

Our analysis extends beyond microtasking to address how algorithmic management reshapes career development at the intersection of individual agency and platform governance. The integration of boundaryless and protean career theories with Barley's career scripts offers an analytical framework for understanding careers where organizational boundaries dissolve and algorithmic systems mediate labor relations. Conceptualizing careers as dynamic scripts rather than static anchors accommodates the fluid nature of platform work while acknowledging the constraints imposed by algorithmic management – revealing platform work's paradoxical nature as simultaneously liberating and precarious.

This framework also informs labor policy by highlighting how platform design affects career opportunities. Policymakers might consider balanced regulatory approaches, such as portable benefits or credentialing systems, that protect workers while preserving flexibility. Though focusing on French microtaskers, similar dynamics likely exist globally, particularly where digital platforms intersect with varying labor regulations. As platform-mediated work expands, the concept of "career" transforms from a linear path to an improvised script shaped by workers, platforms and social forces – raising questions about how emerging sociotechnical structures can enable meaningful work while sustaining livelihoods in the digital economy.

### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

### Acknowledgments

The completion of this research paper would not have been possible without the support of Louis Florin.

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