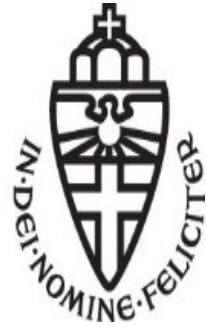


The well-being of high-skilled workers in the gig economy

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the effects of several factors on the well-being of web developers working in the gig economy. Five factors were considered: Viability, Career path certainties, Organizational challenges, Relational challenges and Work identity. This study followed the GIOIA methodology through qualitative research by conducting in-depth interviews. A sample of seven respondents who work as a web developer on the platform of Fiverr. After the coding process, it became clear that the viability of the gig workers negatively impacts their well-being. Furthermore, their organizational challenges were also found to have a negative effect. On the other hand, the relational challenges are almost non-existent. Therefore, their well-being is positively affected. Next to this, the troubles concerning their career path and work identity are also almost non-existent. Thus, their well-being is also positively impacted. This thesis gives a greater explanation of how these factors affect the well-being of web developers working as gig workers.

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Introduction

The gig economy is growing into one of the labor markets of the future. More specifically, the gig economy can be seen as ex-ante-specified, paid tasks carried out by independent contractors mediated by online platforms (Koutsimpogiorgos, Slageren, Hermann, & Frenken, 2020). Gig workers enter a formal agreement with on-demand companies to provide service to the company's clients. Prospective clients request services through inter-based technological platforms or smartphone applications that allow them to search for providers or to specify jobs. Providers, or in this case, the gig workers engaged by the on-demand company, provide the requested service and are compensated for their jobs. Generally, the engagements are short-term (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). The demand for online gig work has increased yearly by twenty percent, with most jobs in technology, followed by graphic design and writing (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018).

While the gig economy can be divided into low-skill and high-skill segments, both segments bear the risk of precarious working conditions: Low-skilled gig workers typically perform routine tasks such as delivery services or cleaning services. These tasks do not require a high level of expertise or training. On the other hand, high-skilled workers perform tasks that require specialized knowledge and skills, such as software development. They tend to have advanced education, training, or certification (Kalleberg A. L., 2011). Moreover, high-skilled gig workers tend to acquire their skills through autodidactic learning and from their prior job experience, covering their old traditional jobs and prior gig jobs (Hermann, Zaal, Chappin, Schemmann, & Lüthmann, 2023). High-skilled tasks give workers high flexibility, autonomy, task variety and complexity. Mechanisms that give employees the possibility to control their job. However, these mechanisms can also result in downsides such as low pay, social isolation, having irregular work hours. This leads to overwork, sleep deprivation and exhaustion (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019).

Gig work has become a prevalent form of employment for many industries, enabled by digital platforms that connect workers with customers (Kuhn & Galloway, 2019). Despite the growing attention to the gig economy, only a small portion of today's research has examined the potential mental health consequences of platform-mediated gig work could have. Accordingly, several studies have found platform workers are especially vulnerable to job insecurity. However, other research is available that contradicts this statement. At the same time, research also shows that some platform workers enjoy autonomy and flexibility. This result can be associated with improved well-being. Moreover, by allowing workers to have autonomy over the timing and duration of their work, platforms can help achieve a more balanced work-life balance while assisting in other personal goals (Glavin & Schiemann, 2022).

In current literature, the focus almost always lies mainly on the perspective of low-skilled gig workers (Dokko, Mumford, & Schanzenbach, 2015). Thereby, the literature only gives insights on how to tackle the challenges of low-skilled gig workers. In general, studies of high-skill online gig workers and their well-being are scarce. To address this gap, this thesis focuses on high skilled gig workers.

While literature discusses the well-being of online gig workers to some extent, it ignores considerable heterogeneity in platform workers' studies and differences that could shape their experience working for an online platform (Dunn, 2020). Also, studies have taken a platform perspective when researching gig work. Studies taking a worker-centric perspective are both more appropriate and lacking (Dunn, 2020). It is thus timely to gain insights from a worker-centric perspective and a diverse group. These are the two distinct perspectives that this research will be taking.

To address these gaps in the literature, the purpose of this research will be to examine the mental well-being of high-skilled workers in the online gig economy by answering the following research question:

How do high-skilled online gig workers evaluate their mental well-being?

This research will focus on Dutch high-skilled gig workers because they are most accessible to the researcher. Furthermore, the Netherlands has a well-developed gig economy, with a significant number of high-skilled gig workers, with the rise of various platforms (Spencer, Huws, Syrdal, & Holts, 2017). Specifically, gig workers performing the "Web developer" job will be investigated. This is because it is a profession in high demand, it is known for its tight deadlines and one needs to continuously update their skills (Green, Walker, Alabulththim, Smith, & Phillips, 2018). Dutch web developers can exceptionally provide promising insights into their well-being. This group of online gig workers is high in demand but also faces pressure to deliver high-quality work consistently.

As a result, this study will contribute critical societal insights: Policymakers often struggle to create good working conditions for gig workers or the proper legislation to make this possible. This research will give insights into the mental well-being of high-skilled gig workers. This study contributes insight into which areas within gig work could and should be improved. Thus, this will enable platforms to create better working conditions for their gig workers, but also legislation can come in place to oblige platforms to treat their gig workers in a more comfortable manner. Moreover, knowledge is created for workers to deal with their job demands and resources.

Finally, the research findings also contribute to the existing literature on well-being. Through this study, we are able to determine the factors that impact the well-being of gig workers.

These findings help identify specific factors contributing to their satisfaction, happiness and fulfilment. Consequently, a framework can be developed to predict and explain the outcomes of these factors.

Literature review

The well-being of workers is affected by many aspects. Most of these aspects are related to the job characteristics, organizational culture, social support, work-life balance and personal factors of workers.

The work of Peter Warr (1999) was amongst the first to provide such an overarching perspective rather than to delve into single aspects of well-being. Accordingly, he discusses in the book: “Well-being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology” several features that impact the well-being of workers. In this book, he shows the variety of features that influence well-being. It entails the opportunity for personal control and skill use, where autonomy, freedom of choice and skill utilization are essential. High degrees of autonomy and skill utilization will result in higher levels of well-being (Warr, 1999). Other positive features that affect worker well-being are job variation and availability of money. Workers perform different tasks and have good financial resources (Warr, 1999). Moreover, opportunities for interpersonal contact and valued social positions contribute in positive manners to the well-being of workers. Lastly, Peter Warr also discusses the features of externally generated goals and entailing aspects such as workload, responsibilities and the feature of environmental clearance, which discusses the aspects of job future ambiguity and consequences of behavior on mental well-being (Warr, 1999).

Of these numerous factors that might influence worker well-being, the Job Demand-Resources model (JD-R model) by Bakker and Demerouti has been used most to study well-being in the workplace, as it provides the most parsimonious summary. Figure 2.1 gives an overview of the JD-R model, which will be elaborated on in this paragraph. The JD-R model proposed by Bakker and Demerouti in 2007 is a theoretical framework that helps predicting employee well-being and job performance using their job characteristics (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013)

With **job demands**, this model includes aspects such as workload, emotional demands and time pressure. The **job resources** are about the aspects of the work that can help employees to control their work process and outcomes. It consists of resources such as autonomy, opportunities, skill development, social support and feedback (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). Therefore, the JD-R model is helpful for this research because it provides a framework to understand the interplay between demand and resources. Thus, giving insights into the well-being of workers. The JD-R model has been used in previous studies about gig work. These studies tested the relationship between high job demands and low job resources on physical well-being and vice versa (Gwendolyn et al 2021). This study showed that high job demands in combination with low job resources have drawbacks on the state of employees.

Job demands and job resources have got different effects on workers. **Job demands** entail the aspects that require effort by workers and could lead to tension on a physical, cognitive, or emotional level e.g. sleeping problems and exhaustion which can lead to burnouts. These are aspects such as workload, the experience of time pressure, or emotional demands. **Job resources** play a significant role in aiding workers in achieving their objectives, managing job

demands and facilitating learning and personal growth. Additionally, these resources contribute to enhancing motivation and include social support, performance feedback and autonomy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

According to the JD-R model, job demands and resources affect worker outcomes differently. These outcomes depend on the interaction between the two categories of the JD-R model. The model proposes that high job demands will lead to burnout and other adverse outcomes, e.g. dissatisfaction with their job. If job resources are high enough, workers can manage high job demands and stay motivated, resulting in positive outcomes on overall well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Previous research has shown that freelance workers face numerous challenges, often challenges that regular workers do not face.

Individuals face challenges with budgeting and planning because of inconsistency of their income, which is commonly referred to as income instability (FREELANCING IN AMERICA, 2017).

Next to this income instability, freelance workers tend to do more for less pay (Templeman, 2016). Secondly, they find difficulties in finding and securing work. The challenge lies in attracting a good number of jobs from clients at competitive fees (Gobinda & Shrivastava, 2020). Gig workers commonly face challenges that differ in nature or intensity from those experienced by traditional organizational workers. Most of these challenges work on a cognitive aspect and are almost non-existent in traditional organizations. The journal article; “Working on my own: Measuring the challenges of gig work” (Caza, Reid, Granger, & Ashford, 2022) discusses these challenges mentioned above. Other challenges gig workers tend to face are, for example, the lack of benefits and protections that gig workers face compared to traditional employees (FREELANCING IN AMERICA, 2017). Furthermore, gig workers face challenges sustaining client relationships, meeting deadlines (for overseas clients) and coping emotionally to work with clients from different cultures and geography (Gobinda & Shrivastava, 2020).

The challenges discussed in the above paragraph affect the well-being of highly skilled online gig workers. Furthermore, the effects can be translated into the JD-R theory developed by Bakker and Demerouti. Based on their conceptual model (figure 2.1), a new conceptual model has been developed (figure 2.2), considering the above challenges.

The first challenge gig workers face is **viability**. Having a constant and decent rate of pay helps workers to deal with their jobs in a comfortable manner. Workers who have job security are more likely to be provided with a higher quality of life (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Gig workers worry about their finances and income stability. Employees in organizations generally have steady, predictable pay (Caza, Erin, Ashford, & Ganger, 2022). For gig workers, this differs. They are economically dependent on others. They struggle with increasing their rate of pay, do not always get paid on time and most importantly, it is difficult for them to maintain a steady cash flow (Webster, 2016). This challenge of viability fits with job resources. Gig workers have got the freedom to set their salary. They need to

manage their finances in such a way that they can generate a stable income. Using this management, a stable situation can be created which positively affects their well-being.

The second challenge that gig workers face, related to their job resources, is **career path uncertainty** or the inability to predict what they will do for work in the future (Caza, Erin, Ashford, & Ganger, 2022). In a typical organization, careers will provide helpful structures for the *members, a clear picture* of their responsibilities, earning, rewards, relationships and future aims. However, gig workers' careers are uncertain and do not provide an adequate structure. Gig workers often struggle to meet the expectations of their clients, which can be unrealistic at times. Unfortunately, they may perceive this as a personal failure instead of seeing this as challenge they face in their work (Webster, 2016).

This second challenge fits best with the **autonomy** of gig work. They have the freedom to conduct their work and free will to decide which gigs they want to perform. It is up to the gig workers to get new and returning customers while simultaneously managing the expectations of these customers. Fewer uncertainty in dealing with all these things will likely translate into higher well-being. Therefore, the challenge of career path uncertainty fits with job resources. In the conceptual model, it will be altered to career path certainty.

The third challenge online gig workers face is **organizational challenges**. They struggle with efficiently conducting their work without having administrative ecosystems that exist in organizations. Moreover, gig workers often find it stressful to deal with the unpredictability of their workload, which interferes with their personal time outside of work.

(Caza, Erin, Ashford, & Ganger, 2022). In other words, they struggle with maintaining their productivity outside of the conventional work environment. This challenge interferes with workers' flexibility. There is no consistency in the amount of work; not having a traditional work environment can be stressful. Thirdly, working from home and alone can raise stress regarding meeting deadlines. Lastly, platforms raise organizational challenges for gig workers (Keith, Harms, & Long, 2020). This third challenge aligns with the demands of gig workers who have to juggle multiple responsibilities

The lower their organizational challenges are, the less their well-being is affected negatively. Hence fitting with job demands.

A fourth challenge that gig workers face is **relational challenges**. The independence of gig workers leads to gig workers having a lack of work and actual interaction with colleagues. They do not have any routine of social interactions in a typical work setting. Furthermore, gig workers must manage client relationships (Caza, Erin, Ashford, & Ganger, 2022). These relational challenges make gig workers feel isolated and lonely because most are usually alone. Moreover, due to the little social contact, they struggle with finding clients and having a consistent client base (Caza et al, 2022). The fourth challenge fits with the aspects of job demands and job resources proposed by the JD-R model. The lack of social contact between co-workers and customers has emotional consequences for the workers. However, having these relations with co-workers and customers fits with the support aspect, fitting with job resources. Seeing that relational challenges can fit both the resource and demand side; it is split up. On the demand side, relational challenges can best be explained by **emotional**

instability due to lack of relations. On the resource side, it can best be explained as **emotional stability** due to the existence of relations.

The fifth challenge that gig workers face is related to their **work identity**. They lack clear anchors for their sense of self about their work and feel constant pressure to perform (Caza, Erin, Ashford, & Ganger, 2022). Gig workers tend to find it challenging to give declarations about their job. Moreover, they experience complex or layered work identities due to working for many different organizations; they must wear several hats (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018). Next to this, education is a vital aspect of every person’s individual development, not only in their work but also in their personal lives (Adams & Crafford, 2012). In other words, personal development, goals and guidance are important for developing identity. This challenge fits with their job demands and replaces the mental aspect. Workers have difficulty finding the right mental state to deal with their job demands and, for example, experiencing stress when performing the job or being able to deal with stress. This challenge will be added as Troubles in work identity for this research and to fit the conceptual model.

In Figure 2.2, the conceptual model can be found, which has been translated using the conceptual model in Figure 2.1. As stated and confirmed by studies, job demands can be managed to promote employee well-being. Excessive workloads must be avoided to comply with this. Communication and collaboration are also essential. Furthermore, workers need to be able to have control over their work. They need opportunities for social support and feedback with training and development opportunities. The above will help to reduce job demands and increase job resources. Therefore, reducing stress, enhancing motivation and productivity and positively influencing worker well-being (Schaufeli W. B., 2018).

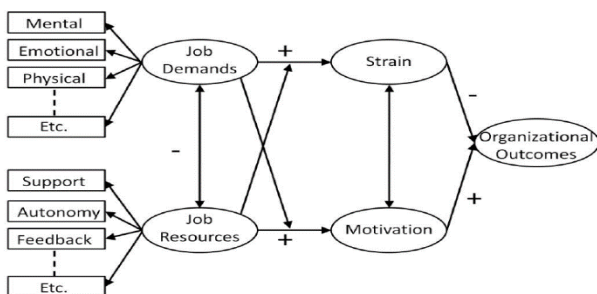


Figure 2.1: JD-R model

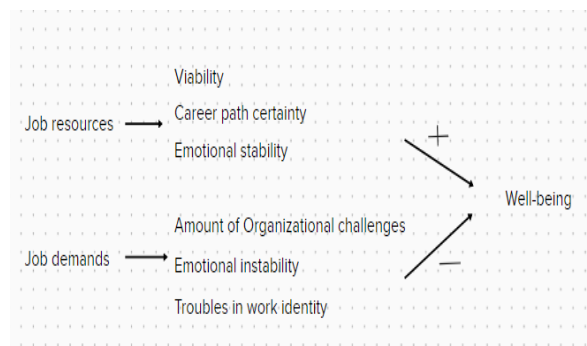


Figure 2.2: JD-R model translated to gig work.

Method

This thesis aims to provide a more in-depth insight into how high-skilled gig workers evaluate their mental well-being in the gig economy. Moreover, it tries to explain this through the gig workers' demands and resources of their job. The research is executed qualitatively. A qualitative approach is more suitable than a quantitative approach as it gives an understanding of the emotions and related actions of the interviewees (Vennix, 2019). This research will make use of semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow questions to be adapted to the situation giving participants the room to give the most elaborate answers and descriptions of their situation (Gillham, 2005).

The population of interest in this study is Dutch high-skilled online gig workers. This is because gig work is upcoming in the Netherlands, making Dutch gig workers a relevant group to study (Ter Weel, 2018). To be more precise, the interest was in Dutch high-skilled gig workers performing the gig job of a web developer. This is because, as stated in the introduction, this type of gig work is prone to tight deadlines and is known for its high demand. Therefore, these gig workers could give the most extensive indicators about the well-being of high-skilled gig workers in the gig economy. Next to being Dutch and a web developer, doing gigs on Fiverr for at least six months was also a criterion. The choice for choosing Fiverr was because Fiverr was one of the only platforms on which someone could message others. Therefore, it was easier to find people willing to participate in this study. Using the criteria of being active for at least six months on Fiverr, the participants of the interviews could give a well-established picture of the current situation. To recruit these gig workers, a message was sent to them on the platform Fiverr (**Appendix 3.1**). In the end, seven interviews (five male and two female gig workers) were conducted. Even though this is not the recommended amount of ten interviews, theoretical saturation was met. The goal was to find as many participants as possible to interview until interviewing new participants did not lead to gaining any new relevant information and this was indeed the case after interview seven. Reaching this saturation point positively affects this research's overall validity and quality. All the participants had some diploma or educational background fitting with their current gig work. In the figure below, more details of the participants can be found.

	Sex	Age	Type of service on Fiverr	Months active on Fiverr
Interviewee 1	Male	33	Web, UX, Logo developer	9
Interviewee 2	Female	27	Web development	6
Interviewee 3	Male	25	Web development	26
Interviewee 4	Female	24	Front end back-end development	7
Interviewee 5	Male	30	Web development	24
Interviewee 6	Male	31	UX-designer	6
Interviewee 7	Male	25	App development	6

Figure 3.1

To ensure that all the interviewees had a common understanding of the purpose of the research, a small explanation was given to the interviewees on the topic of this thesis before conducting the interview. Moreover, the interviewees were given space to ask questions before the interviews. It is important to consider ethical issues when conducting issues (Qu & Dumay, 2011). Seeing that people are interviewed during this research and their answers will influence the outcomes of this research, it is of great importance to address the research ethics that go with this project. Participants of the research will appear both in the transcriptions and results anonymously, therefore protecting their identity. Moreover, their answers will only be used for this research to protect their integrity. Moreover, in Appendix 3.3, an “informed consent for the interview can be found.” Therefore, emphasizing the protection of the interviewee.

The interviews consisted of approximately 20 questions. This number was not fixed due to the fact of having semi-structured interviews. In Appendix 3.3, the interview guide can be found. In this Appendix, it can be observed that during the conduct of the interviews, questions were altered or deleted. The reasoning for these alterations or changes can be read in Appendix 3.2. The interview guideline consisted of 8 sections. These eight sections considered all the aspects of the JD-R model as discussed in this thesis. The first section was an introductory section. Interviewees briefly explained their starting point as gig worker and their experience up until now. This gave a better understanding of their situation and broke the ice between the interviewee and interviewer. Ensuring a smooth interview. The second section until the seventh section consisted of questions that gave insights into the aspects of the JD-R model. These sections gave insights into the demands and resources that gig workers cope with to perform their job and live fulfilling life. A clear picture of their viability, organizational challenges, work identity, goals and customer and personal relationships were established. Lastly, an outro question was asked. Simply if there were anything, they would like to add. Questions ranged from how questions, to get elaboration on, for example, how they manage their finances and deadlines, but also have questions to get a clear picture of the challenges they are facing. At the end of the interviews, the interviewer and interviewee often had a conversation together at the end of the interview. Talking about both their experiences with the concept of the gig economy.

The data analysis of this research will follow the grounded theory development of Straus and Corbin (1998). The data analysis will be done by means of using the GIOIA methodology, which uses a three-step coding process (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). After all the interviews have been conducted, transcriptions will be made of each interview. After the transcribing process, the data analysis process will start by means of the GIOIA method. With a first-order analysis of ordering the codes and concepts. Then the second-order analysis will proceed with ordering themes, seeking similarities and differences among the different categories. After this has been done, the objective will be to distill the second order-themes into aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012). In the end, there will be a basis to build an adequate data structure. A brief outline of this table can be found in the figure

below. Note that this is not the entire codebook but shows the means of working for this research.

Quote	1 st order concept	2 nd order theme	Aggregate dimension
<i>“You just can not expect to get a stable monthly income on Fiverr.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customers expect work can be done cheaply. - Wage is too low for European standards. - Cheap foreign competition - Wage too low compared to a regular job. - People expect to get a bargain. - No fulfilling salary with gig work 	The wage is too low.	Viability
<i>“I have got a customer and yeah, I am their standard freelance app developer.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partnership with one/two customers - Keeping in touch with some customers - Parttime operational manager IT - Building trust - Regular web developer at companies 	Have returning customers	Career path certainty
<i>“Planning costs much time and you do not get anything in return” and “You need to plan together and this needs to be aligned with the customer.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparation costs much time and nothing in return. - Planning together brings stress. - Time zones make it difficult. - Messages come at a wrong time 	Stress factors deadlines	Organizational challenges
<i>“I have got a buddy whom I can contact if I need any help”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Through LinkedIn contact - Active on Discord or other forums - Working at flex office - Working with others keeps you motivated 	Interact with work field	Emotional stability
<i>“Also dealing with clients remotely can be challenging as miscommunication and delays can arise”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Night and day job responding to messages. - Miscommunications due to remote contact - Customers turning away. 	Difficulties customer relationship	Emotional instability

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not being able to grant the wishes of the customer 		
<p><i>“My hobby project is more or less my course to learn new things”</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Most skills self-taught - Doing online courses, watching videos - Communicating with network to update skills. - Doing hobby projects 	Personal development	Work Identity

Figure 3.2

Results

This chapter is dedicated to the result of the coding process as stated before, the well-being of high-skilled gig workers performing the job of a web developer was explored through interviews. After these interviews, the data were analysed to gain insight into this well-being.

The following paragraphs will thoroughly discuss the research findings. It has become evident that viability harms the individual's well-being. Relying solely on Fiverr for employment hinders the ability to lead a fulfilling life. In contrast, career certainties which provide a sense of predictability, positively affect well-being. The organization's challenges harm their well-being because too many factors influence them on many levels. However, the emotional stability they experience, mainly due to the many social interactions they experience, has a positive impact on their well-being. Lastly, the respondents report no difficulties in their work identity, indicating that their well-being remains unharmed.

This study's results shed light on why individuals choose to start gig work. Many participants desired greater autonomy and control over their work and schedule. They are looking for flexibility. *"I wanted to have more control over my work schedule and the projects I work on"* (Interview 2). However, also, entrepreneurial aspirations are reasoning for starting with gig work. One participant stated, *"At the beginning, without any experience, it can be challenging to get work"* (Interview 6.), while another also stated, *"I can get gigs where people can serve as a reference for me and well that enriches my portfolio"* (Interview 5.) This shows that gig work can be used as a steppingstone. Lastly, some participants stated they were recommended to work using platforms, while others were told they needed more jobs. *"I use Fiverr, for example, as a platform because I needed more customers"* (Interview 1). These reasons for starting with gig work show that it is a well-considered choice, not an obligatory one.

For most respondents, the wage for gig work is too low. Customers or people expect the work to be done cheaply or to get a bargain. Furthermore, the wage is too low for European standards, mainly because of the cheap European competition. One respondent stated that gig work cannot lead to a fulfilling salary. *"You just can not expect a stable monthly income on Fiverr"* (Interview 5). For most respondents, the wage for gig work is too low because web development is a competitive business. Without any prior experience, you are not hired very often. Moreover, web development is an expensive business, so people who want to hire do research heavily. Thirdly all participants stated that platforms tend to have primarily foreign gig workers. It is hard to compete against these gig workers because their wage is far lower than Dutch gig workers; this participant stated, *"The problem is state the wage what you get on Fiverr is far too low, you are competing against people for example from India and you just can not compete against their hourly wage"* (Interview 4). This experience of the wage being too low aligns with the theory portrayed in "Freelancing in America 2017". Freelance workers tend to do more for less pay. Therefore, negatively affecting their viability.

Only making use of Fiverr or just only doing gigs is not the end deal for most of the participants. Only a tiny portion of their work seems to come through Fiverr, with other platforms also delivering their gigs *"Fiverr is not the only platform for which I am signed up;*

other platforms also deliver me gigs” (Interview 3). While others also did Gigs more as a side job because, for example, they have a regular job “I have a regular job and from my boss, I am not allowed make too many hours doing gigs” (Interview 4). Seeing that gig workers need to be active on other platforms, or keep a traditional job on the side, shows that they struggle with maintaining a cash flow but also being dependent on others, which is in line with “Webster 2016”. Therefore, negatively affecting their viability. Moreover, the number of hours you work is very irregular. Hence your income never becomes stable, but this does work as a motivational tool. “I do not really think you ever will get a stable income ... you got to deal with the whims of the market (Interview 7). Confirming literature states that gig workers cannot predict their pay, negatively affecting their viability.

Fiverr also seems to have the image of being a low-cost profile that can deliver gigs for low prices. Gigs are far too cheap; the quality of the deliverables is low. Some respondents think that because platforms have the image, they can deliver work for a low price. *“In the past, everything needed to be done for a low price and that is still the idea most people have got with Fiverr, getting much done for low cost” (Interview 1). So, it seems that, indeed, platforms have a drawback effect on the viability of gig workers, particularly in this case, on the viability of web developers.*

On the other hand, some respondents thought the wage could be satisfying. The wage can be satisfying by sticking to the Dutch price standards and your wage preferences. Moreover, by paying attention to gigs that pay well, the pay can be even better than one would get for the regular job. You only take the gigs that fit your hourly wage or are large enough to get decent pay. Income does fluctuate to a great extent with gig work. Some customers tend to tip, while others do not. *“People from the USA, for example, almost give a Tip every time” (Interview 4). Web developers try to look for ways to make their gig work viable.*

Furthermore, the respondents have considered making a stable income with their gig work. Having long-term relationships or regular customers can help you to budget your income. *“Building long-term relationships does really help because then I know what to make and I know I can expect to get gigs” (Interview 7). Secondly, you can make it easy by doing the same tasks often or creating bots to do specific tasks for yourself. “You should try and create something that can work on the background to make it easy for you” (Interview 3). Lastly, some respondents tend to do gigs without acknowledging Fiverr because then they do not need to give a commission to Fiverr. They are working on the side. “We found each other through Fiverr, but now outside of Fiverr, we still work together with each other” (Interview 1). These practices provide a framework that can help gig workers live fulfilling and viable lives, which contradicts what is written in the literature.*

Getting new customers for gigs is one of the most challenging and uncertain things for a gig worker. *As one respondent said, “Gigs tend not to find the worker” (Interview 3). This means that gig workers must put much effort into finding the gigs. Portraying their skills well and showing what positive effects their work can do on the company should help gig workers in finding new customers as one gig worker says to his customers, “I am a 100% sure that with the website I will make for you, you will make 5% more profit. (Interview 6). Moreover, usually snowballing when done with a customer or sending cold e-mails to customers should*

also deliver gig workers more gigs. This confirms theory that gig workers have the autonomy to decide what gig work they want to do and it is up to them to hail in new gigs. It also confirms the theory of the unpredictability of what kind of work they will do in the future.

Having returning customers is also one of the difficulties gig workers tend to face. However, the respondents did mention having returning customers. For example, they have partnerships with companies. Someone, for instance, mentioned, *“I have got a customer and yeah, I am their standard freelance app developer” (Interview 7)*. It was mentioned that the work is never done with web development, so you tend to keep in touch with a couple of your customers. The respondents of the interviews were all aware of how to get returning customers. Getting people to know and build trust with customers is essential. *“Traditional customer relationship is missing, so trust is important in our work chain” (Interview 1)*. Furthermore, with web development, companies can become more dependent on their web developers, but certain technologies are relatively niche, as one gig worker stated. *“They will need to learn all the new codes within the company, get known with the software, this will all lead up to more cost for a company, hence strengthen your position” (Interview 7)*. This paragraph shows that getting returning customers in Web development is undoubtedly possible. Moreover, it contradicts the literature, disconfirming that gig workers experience difficulties getting returning customers and being dependent on customers. In web development, it seems more like customers are more dependent on the gig worker.

Meeting the expectations of clients is another of the uncertainties gig workers face. The respondents mentioned several ways to meet their customers' expectations. For example, they give surplus task time and cost so customers do not get discouraged by delays. Furthermore, they can clearly understand their wants and budget by heavily interviewing their customers. *“You need to interview people to see what they want, but simultaneously also discover if they have got budget” (Interview 6)*. Furthermore, the respondents are capable of dealing with unrealistic expectations of their customers. Simply by selling a no, not going from their path, or just as simple as one gig worker stated: *“We did not agree to that; if you want more, you need to pay more” (Interview 5)*. It is clear that web developers can deal with the expectations of their customers, mainly due to the fact by their abilities. This somehow fits with the literature, as “Webster 2016” stated that if client expectations are not met, gig workers have the tendency to see this as an inability of themselves.

The job that needs to be done for the gig can differ heavily. However, most gigs are often small, can be done in a short amount of time and are accessible. However, the flow of gigs is not constant, or respondents are not getting enough gigs, which results in stress. Respondents are constantly building up their savings or a rainy-day check. Furthermore, it occurs that potential customers do not respond anymore. One of the interviewees explained it quite well. *“As I said before, there is just no long-term vision with gig work (Interview 3)*. However, there are ways for gig workers to know when to expect more gigs. Gig workers who tend to be online often will get offered more gigs. Next to this, one message leads to more messages. Also, *“Now that I have got some reviews, I see that I am getting more gigs” (Interview 5)* shows some prediction in the number of gigs one can expect. Moreover, portraying your experience well, having many skills and updating and developing these skills regularly,

should also help to get more gigs. *“Well-performed gig workers are better valued... they are rated with a better class on Fiverr” (Interview 1)*. It shows that exiling yourself leads to more gigs. This paragraph confirms the theory by “Caza et al 2022” that there is no consistency in the amount of work, leading to stress. However, there are ways to get more gigs, but this still does not result in consistency.

Working from home was, for all the respondents, a purposeful choice. Having too much social contact was something they did not like. Next to this, they experience enough social connections at home. Secondly, working at the office often lead to more stress. Working at home gives them the autonomy to decide what to do, or like one respondent said, *“There is no boss to keep satisfied” (Interview 2)*. At the same time, the respondents also see the downsides of working at home. The difficulties mainly lie in balancing their private life and social life. This is mainly due to irregular working hours and messages that come at an unfortunate time. Respondents mentioned that even during holidays or social occasions, they still need to respond to messages or do a task. Working from home also has a downside *“There is nobody there to hold your hand” (Interview 3)*. This is a striking depiction of loneliness in gig work. Whatever uncertainty you face, you will need to resolve it yourself. Even though the respondents seem to enjoy working at home, stress levels do rise because of working at home. Their workloads interfere with their non-work time, which aligns with the theory.

Meeting the deadlines of the gig jobs by the gig workers goes hand in hand with difficulties and stress. The stress lies in the fact that *“Planning costs much time and you do not get anything in return”* and *“You need to plan together and this needs to be aligned together with the customer” (Interview 4)*. Moreover, as said before, responding to messages all the time also leads to stress. It is also difficult to meet deadlines simply because customers are missing their deadlines or gigs are too large to be performed by one person. However, the respondents did share several ways to meet their deadlines. They do delicate work for others if a gig is too large to do on their own, or they work together with others for the entire gig. They make use of software such as *“I am happy with making use of Asana” (Interview 6)* or *“I tend to use Trello to keep an eye on the milestones” (Interview 1)*. Moreover, web development seems to be a business that has an absence of deadlines. Companies often do not have a hard deadline because finding the right gig worker can take time. Moreover, they do not know how much time-specific tasks can cost. Therefore, there is always some leeway to work around. This paragraph is not in line with the theory. They struggle with efficiently conducting their work; though they can handle these deadlines, they have somewhat of an administrative ecosystem.

Besides the organizational challenges of deadlines and the characteristics of being a gig worker, Fiverr as a platform also has its stake in the organizational challenges that gig workers face. Fiverr has several bad qualities, such as *“If I put my account on hold and then come back again, I will need to start at the bottom again” (Interview 5)*. This means gig workers can not just go on holiday without being disturbed by work issues. A second lousy quality mentioned was *“Fiverr is not the quickest platform” (Interview 6)*. Respondents were not overly happy with the functioning of Fiverr as a platform. Furthermore, Fiverr influences

raising the stress levels of gig workers. As mentioned, taking large commissions and needing to exile heavily are of considerable influence in this case. Moreover, Fiverr's strict response rate also has a significant stake in raising stress levels. This confirms the findings by Keith et al. 2020, that platforms also influence the stress levels of gig workers.

In this results section, it has been mentioned that gig workers do tend to work with others. *"Yes, so working with others is quite normal"* (Interview 3.) This happens in cases such as *"I have got a buddy whom I can contact if I need any help"* (Interview 1), *"I also tend to work with others.... To meet demands"* (Interview 2). This shows that web developers working on Fiverr tend to work together. To stay in contact with people from their profession, the respondents mentioned being active on LinkedIn. Discord or other forums also helps them keep in touch with their colleagues or even help each other. Even flex offices were mentioned as means to encounter other colleagues. Next, to interact with the work field, gig workers also interact with their customers. This is not only done through the platform but can also be done over the phone or even by going to the actual office of their customer. Nevertheless, it depends on how large the gig is. There is much contact; with small gigs, there is little contact between the customer and the gig worker. This interaction with customers and colleagues contradicts the literature stating that they do not have any routines of social interactions. Due to these social interactions, there is emotional stability and their well-being is positively affected.

Gig workers do face difficulties with their customer relationships. It is a night and day job regarding responding to messages. Secondly, *"Also dealing with clients remotely can be challenging as miscommunication and delays can arise"* (Interview 2). However, also, not being able to do the job is challenging. *"I promise to resolve some issue and, in the end, it does not work out, that can be very challenging"* (Interview 4). However, the respondents know how to manage their customer relationships simply by not beefing with their customers and not getting defensive. Secondly, as almost everyone mentioned, *"That is just open and honest communication"* (Interview 4). One can keep having well and transparent communication with their customers. Lastly, the respondent gave their insights on how to have a positive relationship with their customers. By complying with customers, you can build up goodwill; sometimes, you just got to do what to got to do. It is as simple as *"Compromising is part of the game"* (Interview 3). This paragraph shows that gig workers must manage their customer relationships, which demands many of them. Therefore, it does lead to emotional instability. Therefore, negatively influencing well-being. However, overall, they are very capable of managing this customer relationship, making this effect of emotional instability redundant.

Next to experiencing stress in their relationships, gig workers also face stress in performing the gigs. This has to do with the work hours differing, the extensive responsibilities lying on their shoulders, but also characteristics such as *"Work is sometimes more sales than actually doing the job"* (Interview 6) and *"I was on vacation and I still had contact with potential clients and needed to work for two days"* (Interview 7). Nevertheless, they do have means to deal with this stress. Taking breaks on time is very important; talking with others and creating a separate workplace tends to help relieve stress. This passage fits with the theory.

Confirming that gig workers experience stress while performing gigs but can simultaneously deal with this stress. Therefore, coming in a stable mental state.

Web developers seem to be capable of explaining their job to others. People seem to be known what a web developer is. However, gig work is unknown to everyone, but this issue is resolved by *“I say that I am a freelancer as a web developer, so I build websites” (Interview 5)*. The only problem that remains is that people tend to have the image that gig work is a side hustle or more a hobby. “Ashford et al 2018” stated that gig workers experience difficulties with giving declarations about what their job is about. This does not seem to be the case for web developers. They are capable enough to explain what their job entails and the functioning of a gig worker. They are well aware of their own work identity.

As made clear, the web developers of this interview all have some educational background, even though they are still developing somehow. The gig workers stated that their skills are self-taught, for example, by *“Following online courses or watching videos to fresh up my mind” (Interview 6)*. Alternatively, *“My hobby project is more or less my course to learn new things” (Interview 7)*. Just like their personal development, the interviewees were clear about what their personal goals are. Seeing their company grow, getting (more) partnerships and keeping the freedom they enjoy now were the most common goals mentioned. In this personal development and goals, it did become clear that *“If you could fall back on someone who is the same position as me, that is something I would love to have, but I have not got that at the moment” (Interview 7)*. In other words, having some kind of mentor can help to a great extent in the performance of all levels of gig workers. They are, indeed, seeing that some gig workers have got some type of mentorship/mentor. Web developers primarily educate themselves after obtaining a diploma. They are capable enough to develop and improve their own work identity. However, some guidance can be of great help.

Positive points of gig work over regular work could be identified during the interviews. These positive aspects are flexibility, having no boss around and being able to do the jobs you like to do. However, also, you tend to meet far more people than in the regular business life, which leads to more business opportunities. Hence, their well-being is also positively influenced due to these factors.

Conclusion + Discussion

The research question of this master thesis is “How do online high-skilled gig workers evaluate their mental well-being?” In order to shed light on this question, the mental well-being of web developers was evaluated using different factors. The five factors were: Viability, Career uncertainties, Organizational challenges, Relational challenges and Work identity.

After the data was analyzed, the following conclusions could be drawn from the different factors. **Viability:** Currently, doing only gig work as a web developer can not lead to a fulfilling and viable life. The pay is too low for people from Western countries mainly due to the competition of low-wage foreign gig workers. Secondly, web developers seem to work as gig workers more as part-timers than as full-timers. Gig work is a part of their own company or is a job on the side. Furthermore, platform work has the image for the customers that jobs can be done for low prices. Hence the wages are lower than in regular jobs. Web developers seem to have found ways to make it possible to get a full-time income from gig work, for example, using long-term relationships. However, for the time being, the viability of web developers working as gig workers negatively impacts their well-being. Gig work does not provide the same stability and security as permanent employment. Nevertheless, it does provide opportunities for people who face barriers to accessing the traditional labor market (Saxena & Sen, 2019). **Career uncertainties:** The career uncertainties for web developers lie in getting new gigs. However, they do find ways to get these new customers. They seem to have certainties regarding returning customers and dealing with their client’s (un)realistic expectations. Hence the career uncertainties that web developers face are sooner of positive influence on their well-being instead of being of a negative impact. As previously mentioned, web developers are in high demand. Therefore, they can somewhat rely on businesses and organizations coming to them. Moreover, since web development is a competitive business, web developers must continuously develop their knowledge and skills (Fustos, Morris, & Haga, 2016). Therefore, they can deal with client expectations. **Organizational challenges:** Despite the various avenues available to gig workers to secure more gigs, achieving consistency in their workload remains challenging. This lack of predictability leads to stress as they constantly worry about having enough work. Additionally, working from home was a deliberate choice for many respondents. It encroaches upon their non-work time, further contributing to heightened stress levels. Although web developers experience stress when facing deadlines, they have developed strategies to alleviate this pressure. However, Fiverr significantly adds to their stress due to inherent drawbacks. Consequently, the organizational challenges web developers encounter significantly impact their well-being, increasing their stress levels. There are too many internal and external influences causing organizational challenges. Just like the literature states, the instability of the environment of employees causes stress and deteriorates the quality of life (Yeong, Yeasun, & Eunju, 2023). **Relational challenges:** Web developers working on the platform Fiverr tend to work with others and engage in social interactions. They tend to use platforms such as LinkedIn, Discord and forums to stay in touch, seek assistance, or collaborate. Although web developers face challenges in their customer relationships, they demonstrate an understanding of how to manage these difficulties. Overall, the findings of the relational challenges suggest that web

developers have the skills and strategies necessary to manage these interactions successfully. They do work together with others, have enough social interactions and maintain positive customer relationships, contributing to their emotional stability and overall well-being. Relationships between social support and a positive workplace directly affect the overall quality of life (Yeong, Yeasun, & Eunju, 2023). **Work identity:** Web developers tend to experience much stress when performing gigs, mostly because gig work is different from regular work in terms of time constraints, the performance of the job and responsibilities. However, they have found ways to relieve this stress, keeping them in a comfortable mental state. Furthermore, web developers can very well explain their job to others as gig workers, although they need to dumb it down a bit. Web developers are also always on the go with developing and improving their skills, positively influencing their work identity. Overall, web developers seem not to struggle with their work identity and therefore their work identity positively affects their well-being. Workers who can meet their interpersonal demands and express their vocational identity overall have better well-being (Strauser, Lustig, & ÇİFTÇİ, 2008).

To conclude, viability negatively impacts worker well-being because web development is not viable for gig work. Secondly, the organizational challenges web developers face as gig workers are too large at the moment, raising their stress levels and negatively influencing their well-being. On the other hand, some factors positively influence the well-being of web developers as gig workers. Web developers' career uncertainties are small enough not to impact their well-being negatively. Thus, positively influencing their well-being. Furthermore, web developers do not experience the relational challenge as elaborated in the literature and they have emotional stability, therefore positively impacting their well-being. Lastly, web developers working as gig workers do not experience troubles with their work identity. They can develop themselves while also portraying themselves as a dedicated web developer.

The results of this research can give recommendations to platforms (in particular, Fiverr), policymakers and gig workers (in particular, web developers). In this research, the effect of platforms' quality on the well-being of gig workers was not considered initially. However, it became clear that this affects well-being. Fiverr needs to change its image to a high-cost image platform. Secondly, it should lower the commission they take on gigs and lastly, they need to put less pressure on gig workers regarding response rates and similar rates. For policymakers, it has become clear that they must create a research agenda for the new world of work. They need to help individuals navigate their viability, seeing that gig work is not entirely viable. Moreover, they can put more pressure on the platforms to act responsibly. This can remove stress from gig workers regarding challenges they face, both financial and non-financial. Thus, improving their overall quality of life. The findings of this research can also help gig workers overall how to act. It has provided insights into how they can get more gigs, make some living out of it, have good contact with customers, get in touch with colleagues and express their vocational identity.

The chosen research design of this research aligned well with the research question and objectives. The qualitative approach made an In-depth understanding possible. It was

possible to delve deeply into data, uncovering rich and detailed insights about the factors influencing the well-being of the discussed gig workers. Using the GIOIA method, complexity could be more easily detected due to the well-established coding process. Context could be given to the findings, making it possible to generate a theory/build on the existing theory. Lastly, a solid methodological point of this research is that theoretical saturation was met. The limits of this research are that getting participants for the interviews was a complex process. Not everyone responded to the messages that were sent. Moreover, people were willing to cooperate with the research but did not want to do an interview, therefore, not useful for me, unfortunately. Furthermore, one could argue the case of theoretical saturation. There is always a possibility that a participant can give new insights. Another area for improvement of this research is the generalizability. The focus was on Dutch high-skilled gig workers performing the web developer job on the platform Fiverr. Therefore, it is difficult to state the situation of foreign gig workers. This can differ from Dutch gig workers, as the living standards, that participants mentioned. Secondly, the situation can also be different for gig workers in another profession or those active on other platforms.

If one decides to do further research on this topic, several suggestions can be made that could give new and intriguing insights. First, other gig economy professions could be researched to discover if their challenges differ from web developers. Could particular challenges (non) exist only in specific professions? Secondly, this research has shown much competition from countries such as India. Hence, a cross-cultural analysis could be conducted. How people live in countries like India is far more different than in the Netherlands. Therefore, it is likely that gig work has far other effects on their well-being. Lastly, applying intervention strategies is an exciting way to emerge for further research. The results of the well-being of web developers have taught us that particular challenges can be overcome with several ways of doing. Thus, one could investigate the effectiveness of interventions.

As a business administration student, it was my first time using a qualitative approach to such an extent for this research. I have used a qualitative approach several times, but the number of interviews was far lower than in this research. Furthermore, it was my first time using the GIOIA method for my research results. Therefore, I experienced difficulties with the first coding step at the beginning of the coding process. By looking at past research and looking back at old courses, in the end, I was able to conduct an efficient and effective coding process. Another challenge during this research was the writing up of the theory. Finding an approach that aligned with this research's goal but utilizing snowballing, I found the relevant theory. I experienced doing interviews as a joyful way of gaining insights into my research topic. Especially seeing that the insights I gained were not always in line with theory. Secondly, I had almost a natural conversation with some participants, which positively impacted the amount of wisdom I gained. In the beginning, I struggled a bit with taking the lead with the interviews, but you need to grow into this. Next to this, sometimes, when I had all asked the questions, I ended the recording, but it happened on two occasions; I had a long conversation about gig work with the participant. This resulted in not all the insights being considered. In the end, I think I did not experience too much stress while writing my thesis. Due to the excellent guidance and well-prohibited deadlines, I kept well on track with working towards the end of my thesis without it intervening with other aspects.

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Appendices

Appendix 3.1 (Advertisement)

Good day,

My name is Lars van Bergen and I am a master's student at Radboud University doing a master's in business administration. My thesis topic is on the well-being of high-skilled gig workers performing the job of a developer. For this, I will need to interview DUTCH people who perform this job and already have experience with working on Fiverr. The interviews will have a duration of approximately 25 – 35 minutes. I would be very happy if you would like to participate.

Kind regards

Lars van Bergen

Appendix 3.2 (Interview guide)

Interview guide

Section 1: Introduction

- How did you start with gig work, and what is your experience so far?

Section 2: Viability

- How do you manage your finances as a gig worker?
- ~~Which challenges related to your income stability do you face?~~ > This question was deleted. It became apparent in the interviews that people already made this clear in the first question. Furthermore, during the discussion of, this topic was also raised already in the first question.
- What steps do you take to maintain a steady cash flow?
- How do you negotiate your rates with clients?

Section 3: Organizational Challenges

- Can you describe how you manage your workload as a gig worker?
- What tools or resources do you use to keep track of your tasks and deadlines?
- Have you ever faced challenges in managing your work outside of a conventional work environment?
- ~~How do you deal with stress and burnout as a gig worker?~~ > This question was later changed to how you deal with stress as a gig worker? It did not seem appropriate for me to ask people about burnout. Moreover, during the interviews, it did become clear that they all experienced some stress. Therefore, I could get more fulfilling answers and picture from them by asking how they deal with stress.

Section 4: Work Identity

- Have you ever faced any challenges in defining your job or describing your work to others?
- How do you manage to have multiple work identities due to working with different clients?
- Do you feel pressure to constantly perform as a gig worker?

Section 5: Career path uncertainty

- Can you describe your long-term goal as a gig worker?
- ~~—Have you ever faced any challenges predicting or planning your future work opportunities?—~~ **-> This question was split into two new questions. 1: Which challenges do you see about predicting your future work? 2: What opportunities do you have in your work compared to a regular job? The choice to split up this question was because people did not understand the question, or answers were given that did not satisfy me in terms of being able to sketch the situation.**
- How do you deal with the uncertainty of your career path?
- How do you manage your professional development as a gig worker?

Section 6: Relational challenges (1)

- ~~—How do you manage social interactions as a gig worker?—~~ **-> This question was deleted because it is similar to the third question in this section.**
- Have you ever felt isolated or lonely due to a lack of social contact?
- What steps do you take to stay connected with others in your field?

Section 7: Relational challenges (2)

- How do you manage client relationships as a gig worker?
- Have you ever faced any challenges in building a consistent client base?
- How do you deal with difficult or unrealistic client expectations?

Section 8: Conclusion

- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a gig worker?
- ~~—Do you have any advice for others who are considering a career as a gig worker?—~~ **-> I deleted this question because it did not seem relevant to my study. Moreover, people were already advising the interview. How newcomers to the gig economy should manage their career**

Appendix 3.3 Consent form
[Mental well-being of high-skilled gig workers]

[Lars van Bergen]

Radboud University

Contact: [lars.vanbergen@ru.nl]

To be filled in by the interviewer before beginning the interview:

0.1.a. Participant number:

0.1.b. Date of interview:

0.1.c. Name of interviewer:

0.1.d. Company Name:

Participant`s Statement

Before we begin with the interview, I need to inform you of your rights, even if these seem self-evident to you.

Our interview is carried out under the following conditions:

- Your participation in the interview is voluntary.
- You have the right to raise any questions related to this survey.
- You are free not to answer any question if you do not feel comfortable with it.
- You can interrupt and withdraw from the interview at any time.
- You need to be at least 18 years old to participate in this interview.
- The information collected in the interview, as well as all actors that participated in the start-up process, will remain anonymous – unless you give us permission to personally quote your statements in any publications that may result from this research.
- We would like to record this interview so that we can use it for reference while proceeding with this study. We will not record this interview without your permission. If you do grant permission for the interview to be recorded, you have the right to revoke recording permission at any time.

Do you give permission for your interview to be recorded?

Yes

No

If you make particularly insightful statements, do you wish to have them quoted with mention of your name?

Yes, I want to be quoted with mention of my name.

No, I want to be quoted anonymously and without reference to my name.

Final Consent

(Please feel free to indicate either your professional or private address.)

hereby confirm that I agree with the abovementioned conditions of this interview.

I,

First Name and Surname:

If applicable, Company Name:

Address:

City / State:

Postal Code:

Country:

E-mail:

Tel: