

# Job Quality in a Meal-Kit Fulfillment Center:

Findings from Focus Groups and Interviews with Frontline Workers



By Sarah Thomason, Gabriel Sanchez, and Isabel García Valdivia

UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education

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# 1. Introduction and Summary

Meal-kit delivery services are often described as technology companies that are “disrupting” the food industry in the same way that startups have transformed other industries, such as taxi services and hospitality. However, the meal-kit business model requires more than a group of engineers building a website or app. Meal-kit fulfillment centers employ hundreds of frontline workers engaged in food processing and packaging.

Meal-kit companies deliver boxes of pre-measured ingredients to customers, who then follow a set of recipe instructions to finish meal preparation in their home. This emerging segment of the food industry has grown exponentially in the United States, from a handful of companies in 2012 to over 150 in 2016 (Whitten 2016). Collectively, they have attracted more than \$650 million in venture capital investment and generate an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual revenue (ShakeUpFactory 2017). In 2017, nearly one out of five adults in the US used a meal-kit delivery service (Packaged Facts 2018).

Despite this rapid growth, the meal-kit sector still accounts for only a tiny fraction of overall food industry market share and few of the companies have turned a profit. Blue Apron recently went public, and two of the other largest companies, HelloFresh and SunBasket, are looking to do the same. Others, such as Chef’d, have gone out of business. Grocery stores have begun to get into the market as well, with most major chains either acquiring a meal-kit delivery company or developing their own meal-kit brands to sell in store (Wilson, Steingoltz, and Craigwell-Graham 2017; ReviewChatter 2018). Given the rapidly changing landscape in this industry, it is currently unclear if meal-kit delivery will prove to be a sustainable independent business model capable of cutting into the market share of restaurants and grocery stores.

To date, little attention has been paid to the industry’s frontline production workers and how jobs at meal-kit fulfillment centers compare to others in the food industry. In order to better understand job quality at these companies, we conducted focus groups and interviews with current and previous frontline (non-managerial) workers of one meal-kit fulfillment center in California in 2017 and 2018.

## KEY FINDINGS

### DEMOGRAPHICS:

- Most of the workers interviewed for this study were people of color (largely Black and Latino) and about half were women.
- Many had some kind of employment barrier, such as a criminal record. Some workers applauded the company for providing jobs to local residents and individuals who otherwise have a hard time finding work, while others felt that the company was exploiting residents of color who had few other job options.

### WAGES AND BENEFITS:

- Workers reported a starting wage of \$13.50 an hour. This was below the threshold that defines low-wage work in California, and workers reported that their earnings were often not enough to cover the high cost of living in the state. The starting wage was slightly above the minimum wage, and the company increased its starting wage when minimum wage increases went into effect to maintain a differential.
- Some workers received merit-based wage increases through a formal review process. However, the schedule for reviews and potential raise amounts changed frequently. In addition, some workers did

not receive the full raise that they were promised. This led to inconsistent wages across the frontline workforce.

- The company offered frontline workers more benefits than other low-wage employers, including health insurance, vision and dental plans, a 401(k) retirement plan, paid vacation and sick days, and some paid holidays. However, the health plan was described as unaffordable and most workers were instead covered through Medi-Cal.

## HOURS AND STAFFING:

- While workers were scheduled for 40 hours a week, the actual number of hours worked fluctuated significantly according to demand for the company's meal kits. Workers typically received no advance warning of schedule changes, making it difficult to predict the amount of their paychecks and to plan how to cover their living expenses.
- Workers described inaccurate recording of hours worked, paid time off, and paid holidays that lead to delays in getting paid.
- The amount of break time workers were allowed each day varied by supervisor, as some supervisors allowed more or less time to remove and put on required work gear. For some workers, this resulted in insufficient time for breaks.
- The company frequently used temporary staffing agencies to fill positions, although usage fluctuated over time and ranged from just a few workers to roughly half of frontline positions.
- In the past, the company experienced chronic problems such as absenteeism. To address these issues, the company carried out a series of layoffs. Most workers said that this had improved the work environment, but some felt that not all of the workers deserved to be fired.

## PROMOTION:

- It was common for the company to promote from within, but advancement opportunities were dependent on each worker's relationship with their supervisor, and the number of higher-level positions had decreased in recent months.
- Most workers said that they did not plan on working at the meal-kit fulfillment center in the long-term because of the low job quality and lack of advancement opportunities.

## HEALTH AND SAFETY:

- The company improved some safety and health issues that had been widespread in the past, such as workplace accidents. However, other areas continued to be of concern to workers, including sexual assault, ammonia leaks, and common illness and injury due to the physical nature of the work, and cold temperatures maintained in the facility.
- The fulfillment center had only recently began implementing comprehensive food handling safety policies, possibly in response to citations from public health agencies and/or complaints from customers.

## 2. Focus Group and Interview Participants

During 2017 and 2018 we conducted focus groups and individual interviews with a total of 21 workers at one meal-kit fulfillment center in California. In December 2017, we held three focus groups with a total of fifteen workers. In May and June of 2018, we held a series of individual interviews focusing on food handling and worker safety. Nine workers participated in an individual interview, three of whom had previously participated in one of the focus groups. The majority of workers who participated in the study were people of color (primarily Black and Latino). Some lived in the community where the fulfillment center was located, but others commuted from cities across the region. Many identified barriers such as a disability, lack of work history, criminal record, or periods of homelessness, that made finding employment difficult for them. Out of the 21 total participants, ten were women. Sixteen were current employees and the remaining five had worked for the company in the previous six months. Since our study participants consisted of workers from one company and were only held in English, these findings are not representative of working conditions at all meal-kit companies.

## 3. Organizational and Occupational Structure

The fulfillment center employed mostly frontline workers and a smaller number of management-level employees. The frontline workers were a mix of direct employees and workers hired via temp agencies.

The company's use of temporary workers varied over time. During the period when the focus groups were held, the company did not have any temporary workers, but participants reported that at other times, temporary workers made up about half of the workforce.

In the past, the fulfillment center ran at full capacity preparing meal kits 24 hours a day across three shifts. However, recently management cut back the overnight shift to only sanitation workers and reduced staffing during each of the two daytime shifts. Production was divided into the following departments:

- Workers in the kitchen department prepared ingredients, measured out individual portions, and packaged them into paper bags either by hand or using a machine.
- In the small items department, workers prepared condiments and small ingredients that accompanied the foods prepared in the kitchen.
- Another set of workers in the packaging department filled each meal-kit box with the bags of ingredients prepared by the kitchen and small items departments and then prepared the boxes for shipping. Final shipping of the meal kits was outsourced to shipping companies.
- In the quality assurance department, workers inspected ingredients delivered by vendors to ensure that they were high quality and did a final check of packaged meal kits to confirm that they contained the appropriate quantity of each ingredient.
- Maintenance workers repaired and maintained machinery in the fulfillment center, including the refrigeration system.

Workers reported that the occupational structure changed frequently, both in terms of the number of levels of supervision and the titles of different positions. At the time of our study, the fulfillment center was organized into the following positions:

- Frontline workers made up the majority of the fulfillment center workforce and were assigned to one of the above departments. These were entry-level positions and were filled by both direct hires and temporary workers from staffing agencies.
- Transporters moved raw ingredients to the kitchen and small items departments and then transported packaged ingredients from these departments to the packaging teams.
- Team supervisors were responsible for managing a team of about ten workers within one of the departments.
- Shift managers were responsible for managing all of the teams working during a particular shift.

## 4. Hiring, Orientation, and Training

Study participants described a variety of ways they learned about job opportunities at the company and different reasons for deciding to take the job. The hiring and orientation process was similar for most workers.

About half of the workers heard about the job through word of mouth, while others found out about open positions through online job postings or were referred by social service agencies. Some workers attended a mass hiring event at a local hotel where they filled out application paperwork, were interviewed individually, and completed a drug test on site. Other workers applied online through the company's website and were invited to group interviews at the fulfillment center.

Next, applicants were asked to participate in a paid orientation at the company's fulfillment center, during which they spent several hours working at the facility. This ensured that applicants were aware of the working conditions, in particular the cold temperatures, before accepting the job. For some workers, the orientation included time in each different department.

Workers mentioned several reasons for deciding to take the job when offered a position:

- Although low, the starting wage was above the minimum wage and therefore somewhat higher than other low-wage jobs that were available to them.
- The company paid workers every week, compared to other employers that typically paid workers every two weeks or monthly. Some of the temporary staffing agencies used by the fulfillment center paid workers at the end of each work day, which was even more attractive to some workers.
- The company offered benefits, such as health insurance, paid time off, and a shuttle from the train station, that were not typically offered at other low-wage jobs.
- The company was willing to hire individuals with employment barriers, such as a criminal record, lack of employment history, or disability that may have made it difficult for them to find employment elsewhere.
- For participants living nearby, the location made the job attractive as well.

Workers in our focus groups said that they did not receive any formal training beyond the paid orientation that was part of the hiring process and instead learned how to do their work on the job by receiving directions from or observing their co-workers. However, workers who we interviewed individually several months later said that the company had recently begun holding mandatory monthly trainings on food-handling safety.

## 5. Earnings

As of December 2017, the starting wage at the meal-kit fulfillment center was \$13.50 an hour, which is below the threshold that defines low-wage work in California (\$14.35 in 2017) (Perry 2018). The starting wage was somewhat above the minimum wage, and workers reported that when minimum wage increases went into effect, the meal-kit fulfillment center increased the wages of frontline workers, maintaining a differential between their starting wage and the minimum wage.

The starting wage offered by the meal-kit fulfillment center was a draw for workers. Some felt that the pay was fair given the difficulty of the work and compared to the pay offered by other jobs with no required experience. "I think it's fair pay for what they require ... because at the end of the day this is a very easy job," explained one worker. Others felt that the pay was not enough for the amount of physical labor required for the job. "I think I'm worth at least \$17 [an hour] .... I'm pulling heavy pallets and everything. I'm always moving."

Multiple workers said that their earnings were not enough to cover the high cost of living. "Do I choose to buy groceries this week or pay my bills this week," asked one participant when describing how he manages his expenses.

Some frontline workers reported earning more than the starting wage as the result of merit-based raises. Fluctuating policies as to when and how workers were awarded raises led to inconsistent wages across frontline workers.

- Not all workers who were reviewed received a raise. Raises were based on the outcome of a worker's review, and were not based on seniority. As a result, some workers continued to earn the same wage as new hires, even after several years of working for the company (however, these workers still received wage increases when the company increased the starting wage). This also meant that some frontline workers earned more than other workers with more seniority.
- The schedule for reviews, which determined merit-based raises, changed frequently. Upon being hired, some workers were told that they would be eligible for a raise after six months, based on the outcome of an evaluation given at that time. Other workers were told that all employees would be evaluated at a certain time of the year, such as December or March, and that they would need to wait until that time to receive an evaluation, regardless of their hire date. As a result of this shifting policy, the time it took for workers to receive their first evaluation ranged from six months to a year and a half.
- The raise amount that workers were eligible for changed frequently. At one point, workers were promised up to a dollar raise but were instead given between 15 and 50 cents.
- Workers sometimes did not receive raises that they were told they would be given, or were given less than what was originally promised. Some workers said that they never received a raise that they were promised, or that the raise did not go into effect within the original time frame. Some workers said that the raise amount that they eventually saw in their paycheck was lower than what they were told they would be given.
- Frontline workers could also receive a raise by completing additional training or being promoted to a higher-level position within the fulfillment center. For example, workers who completed a forklift certification training program were given a raise of \$1 an hour and workers who were promoted to a transporter position were given a raise of 50 cents an hour.

## 6. Benefits

The workers in our study reported that the following set of benefits were offered by the meal-kit fulfillment center:

- Employer-sponsored health care: Many workers said that they could not afford the health plan's premiums and copays. Nearly all workers said that they had signed up for Medi-Cal instead of the company's health plan. The company held on-site events with non-profits that help workers sign up for Medi-Cal. Those who reported using the company's health plan had done so after becoming ineligible for Medi-Cal.
- Dental and vision plans: Some workers reported signing up for either the dental or vision plans.
- Paid time off: Workers accrued both vacation and sick hours, but were only allowed to use them after working at the company for a certain period of time (workers gave inconsistent information about the length of the waiting period). Workers were paid for some holidays, but only if the holiday fell on a day when they were normally scheduled to work.
- Retirement plan: The company recently introduced a 401(k) package.
- Free lunch was no longer offered, but the company began giving away unusable produce to workers. The company previously paid a catering company to provide lunch for workers, but had recently eliminated this benefit. Most workers said that this was for the better, as the quality of the food was low and food poisoning was not uncommon.

## 7. Hours and Schedules

### SCHEDULING

Workers were assigned to one of three shifts. Officially, they had a fixed schedule each week. In practice, their schedule, hours, and take home pay varied greatly from week to week.

- Although workers were scheduled for 40 hours a week, the actual number of hours they worked fluctuated according to demand for the company's product. When demand for the company's meal kits was strong, workers were able to work their official full-time schedule. During these times, it was common for direct employees to be offered overtime (temporary workers were not allowed to work overtime). When demand slowed down, as it does during the holiday season from November to January each year, workers ended up working fewer than 40 hours each week.
- Management frequently cut hours without giving workers advance notice. When business was slow and fewer workers were needed to complete the day's work, management assigned mandatory time off for some workers. Sometimes management announced ahead of time that a particular day would be cut from workers' schedules. More frequently, workers were notified at some point during their shift. When this happened, no advance notice was given and they were asked to clock out immediately. This could happen at any time during a shift and some workers reported being sent home only an hour or two after arriving. This was particularly inconvenient for the many workers who had a long commute.
- Unpredictable schedules led to unpredictable earnings. When hours were cut, workers' paychecks were reduced. Workers were allowed to use up to four hours of accrued vacation time each time they were sent home. However, this could happen multiple times a week during the slow season, and vacation time was accrued at a rate of only one hour per 40 hours worked. Workers reported more difficulty covering their expenses during months when their checks were significantly lower due to cuts in their hours.

## LUNCH AND BREAKS

Workers were allowed three breaks per 8 hour shift - one 30 minute unpaid break for lunch and two 15 minute paid breaks. Some workers said that the time for breaks was not enough. While workers officially had 15 minutes for a break, they had to “gear down” when leaving for a break and then “gear up” when returning. This involved removing or putting on gloves, a smock, and a hairnet. Some workers said that their supervisor gave them five to ten minutes leeway on breaks to allow time to remove and put on gear. However, this varied by supervisor. Workers also said that bathroom lines were long during break times and that the distance to the designated smoking area was far, making it difficult to either use the bathroom or smoke during breaks.

## TIME RECORDING AND PAYROLL

Workers described frequent problems with inaccurate recording of hours worked, paid time off, and paid holidays. This led to delays in workers getting paid.

- The time recording system frequently failed to record when a worker clocked in or clocked out. The company used a fingerprint scanning machine to record when workers clocked in or clocked out. However, the machine often failed to accurately read a worker’s fingerprint. Most of the workers said that they had experienced at least one of these “missed punches.” As one worker described, “sometimes the machines aren’t as accurate as you would like when you punch in.” Another worker said, “I’m always checking my hours every day because I don’t trust the system.” Workers said that sometimes the system stopped working completely and none of the workers during that shift were able to clock in or clock out.
- When the time recording system failed, it took much longer for workers’ paychecks to be processed. When workers “missed a punch” or the fingerprint scanning system was down, their supervisor had them fill out a paper form that listed the time they started work for the day, the start and end times of each of their breaks, and the time they left at the end of the day. This form was submitted to human resources and the worker’s paycheck for that week was processed using a different payroll system than what was used for regular paychecks. This caused workers to receive that week’s check much later than they normally would. Some workers felt that this delay was unfair. “[My check] was late so it’s like you’re getting penalized for something that was their fault. And you already worked, you know what I’m saying?” explained one worker. “I’m still waiting on a check right now. No lie,” added another.
- Paid time off and paid holidays were sometimes not recorded accurately. Workers said that they had received checks that were missing pay for approved sick days, vacation days, or paid holidays. When this happened, workers submitted a form to human resources and the missed hours were added to a later check. Describing this process, one worker said “sometimes you’ll be using your sick hours and you have to fill out a form ... somehow it just didn’t get put into the computer. Or, somehow it didn’t get to the payroll right. Then, you gotta wait.” “I’m still waiting for my Thanksgiving pay” added another worker. “Like one time they had messed up with my check, it was my grandmother’s funeral ....They forgot to pay me the whole week.”
- Although workers said that they were always eventually paid what they were owed, they sometimes had to complain to human resources multiple times before finally receiving their paychecks. “Sometimes they’ll make a mistake, but if you go and bug them enough everything gets fixed,” explained one worker.

## 8. Worker Health and Safety

A number of concerns regarding worker health and safety at the workplace emerged from the focus groups and interviews. The issues ranged from illness and injury sustained from everyday tasks, to sexual assault. In response, the company formed a committee to promote better standards around health and safety at the workplace.

- Workers reported instances of sexual assault in the workplace. Multiple participants reported either witnessing sexual assault in the workplace or experiencing it themselves. While one worker said that she did report an incident, workers also described feeling afraid to report incidents. One worker explained, "I don't really tell a lot of people this but one guy just got fired. He came up to me and grabbed my private area on the line recently so I had to report that and [now] he's gone." When the perpetrator was fired, some co-workers criticized her for reporting the incident, calling her a "snitch."
- Workers sustained various injuries from the physical nature of the work. Work in the fulfillment center involved standing all day, repetitive movements, and lifting and moving heavy objects from one place to another. As a result, it was common for workers to experience different kinds of muscle pain or injuries. One participant recalled, "I've been sent home actually crying tears just from moving something wrong or lifting or pulling something down wrong. Anything can happen. You just come home and you feel it later."
- The creation of a safety committee, composed of both frontline workers and supervisors, reduced the frequency of workplace accidents, but they still occasionally occurred. Slips and falls were the most common accidents, as floors were frequently mopped in order to keep work areas sanitary. The company began providing slip-resistant shoe covers, although some workers found these to be uncomfortable and purchased their own slip-resistant shoes. The company also implemented "stand ups" before the start of each shift to discuss safety hazards and prevention, such as how to safely lift heavy objects. Other hazards included equipment left in walkways, unprotected electrical cords, and misuse of forklifts. Multiple workers said that the facility had been cited by OSHA inspectors. One worker said that OSHA temporarily shut down the fulfillment center at one point until an uneven floor was repaired and no longer a danger to workers.
- Workers were sometimes forced to return to work when sick or injured. When a worker asked for time off to recover from an illness or injury based on the recommendation of their doctor, the company sometimes required that the worker get a second opinion from a doctor selected by the company, who said the worker could return much sooner. For example, one participant asked for time off to recover from an aneurysm based on the advice of her doctor. Instead, the company required that she visit a doctor selected by the company, who said that she was well enough to return to work immediately.
- Workers reported frequent illness due to the cold temperature maintained in the fulfillment center. The company provided direct employees with some clothing to protect from the cold, including gloves, a jacket, a beanie, and a neck warmer. Temporary workers were also provided with protective clothing, but were not given as many items as direct employees. Some workers said that the clothing provided by the company was not enough and that they had bought additional clothing to stay comfortable in the fulfillment center. Some workers also felt that the cold temperature caused them to become sick frequently. One participant stated: "... when I'm working and being in a cold environment, that makes your body ... just makes it worse. Anything you have, it's going to make it worse being in the cold for four hours, six hours, eight hours a day."
- Ammonia leaks occurred multiple times due to malfunctions of the refrigeration system. When this happened, workers were evacuated from the premises while the fire department intervened to fix the problem and ensure that it was safe for workers to return to the building. Representatives from

the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) also inspected the facility after each incident.

- One worker from interviews said that there were sometimes exposed wires, which wasn't safe because the work area is always wet.

## 9. Food Safety

Recently, the fulfillment center began to implement more extensive policies and systems to ensure that food was safe and of high quality. As one worker described, "initially the facility wasn't as big as it is, but as the company grows, they've been building and improving and getting more safety because a lot of people come in there and inspect it."

This may have been in response to citations from public health agencies and/or complaints from customers. Some workers said that the health department had inspected the fulfillment center and issued citations to the company. Others said that the fulfillment center had hired a private company to inspect the fulfillment center periodically and help improve food storage and handling systems. At the time that we completed individual interviews, the fulfillment center was preparing for a food safety audit to potentially become certified as a safe food manufacturing facility by the SQF Institute.

Overall, workers said they felt the food was safe and that they would be comfortable eating it themselves.

### FOOD STORAGE

- The fulfillment center had multiple refrigerated areas to store protein, dairy, produce, and dry goods separately and at different temperatures. For example, one area was kept at a particular temperature for produce in the nightshade family, such as peppers and tomatoes. Protein was stored in a freezer. Food allergens, such as dairy and nuts, were given a special label and stored away from other foods.
- The fulfillment center had recently changed the way that it labeled proteins and began using a "first in, first out" system, where the product that has been in the freezer the longest is the first to be used.

### TRAINING

- Frontline employees were not required to have a food handling safety card, although several did have the card because it was required at a previous job (e.g., a restaurant or food manufacturing facility). Some workers indicated that supervisors may have been required to have cards.
- Monthly trainings on food handling safety and food quality, or "good manufacturing practices" were recently implemented. Topics included how to prepare one's work station before leaving or going on a break, guidelines for washing hands, when to wear each type of glove and when to change them, using hair and beard nets, foodborne pathogens, food allergens, and maintaining specific temperatures in the fulfillment center. These trainings were required and workers were paid for their time to attend the training.
- Food handling safety posters in English and Spanish were recently put up in the fulfillment center.

## FOOD HANDLING

- Workers were required to wash their hands at the beginning of each shift and every time they left a production area.
- Workers were required to wear protective equipment, including gloves, smocks, hair nets, and beard nets.. Gloves had to be changed if a worker touched their face or hair, picked something up off the floor, switched to working with a different product, moved from one production area to another, or if the gloves were damaged.
- Protein, dairy, produce, and dry ingredients were all processed in separate areas. Before switching from working with a food that was labeled as an allergen to another type of food, a quality assurance associate had to do an allergen test to make sure it was safe to start processing the new food item.
- Workers said that surfaces were cleaned every 45 minutes to 2 hours. When workers shifted from processing one type of food item to another, and also when they left at the end of their shift or to take a break, they were required to sanitize work surfaces and sweep the floor in their work area. Sanitation workers also cleaned production areas more thoroughly at the beginning of each shift and also when production workers took breaks.
- Most workers said that when a worker was sick with a cold or flu, they were either required to take sick leave or encouraged to do so by a supervisor. However, if a worker did not have any accumulated sick leave hours, they were required to present a doctor's note in order for their absence to be excused.
- Overall, workers said that food handling policies were usually followed because violating them resulted in disciplinary actions. Workers would first be given verbal warnings, followed by written warnings, and eventually could lose their job.

## FOOD QUALITY

- The fulfillment center had a quality assurance department with two or three workers assigned to each of the other departments. When vendors delivered boxes of food, they inspected them before they entered the fulfillment center and if any were damaged or spoiled they returned them to the vendor. In the production area, they used thermometers to check the temperature of proteins and dairy and returned them to the refrigerator or freezer if they had warmed up too much. They made sure that food was packaged correctly with the right amount of each product, and that the way it was prepared was always uniform. They inspected food that workers had identified as spoiled, damaged, or discolored. Sometimes they took pictures of the product and labels to show supervisors and vendors. They had recently started randomly testing work surfaces for bacteria levels.
- Workers handling the food also checked its quality. If any food was damaged or discolored, they would throw it into bins below their workstations. The fulfillment center had posters on display to demonstrate what was considered usable produce.
- Most workers said they had never seen moldy or spoiled food in the fulfillment center. Those that had seen moldy or spoiled food said that it happened infrequently, and usually it was identified before the food entered the fulfillment center and returned to the vendor.

## 10. Opportunities for Advancement

Workers who participated in our study said that the company frequently promoted frontline workers when filling lower-level supervisor openings. However, the number of these types of positions had recently decreased. In addition, the process for receiving a promotion was dependent upon each worker's relationships with their supervisor and therefore varied significantly across teams.

- The company frequently promoted from within for lower-level supervisory positions. Workers were eligible to apply for another position after working with the company for six months. Multiple workers reported that either they or their coworkers had transitioned from frontline worker to transporters and team supervisors.
- However, advancement opportunities were dependent on each worker's relationship with their supervisor. Supervisors decided whether or not to formally refer an employee for promotion. Some workers said that it was common for their supervisor to prepare team members for higher level positions by informally training them in new skills and tasks, making it more likely that they would receive a promotion if referred for one. Other workers reported a more antagonistic relationship with their supervisor that would prevent them from ever being promoted.
- The company recently eliminated an intermediate position between frontline workers and supervisors, reducing opportunities for promotion.
- The transition from temporary worker to direct employee was unclear. Temporary workers were eligible to be directly hired by the company after working a certain number of hours, but this happened infrequently. One participant was hired directly after starting as a temporary worker, but only because she applied directly through the company's website and did not reveal that she had previously worked there as a temporary worker. Direct employees said that not all temporary workers wanted to become direct employees and that turnover among these workers was very high.

## 11. Management

Participants also shared their assessment of management and supervisory practices.

- The company laid off large numbers of workers to address chronic problems such as absenteeism. Workers reported that when the fulfillment center first opened, it was common for large numbers of workers to fail to show up for their scheduled shift. Workers agreed that some of those who were laid off deserved to be fired and said that the layoffs improved attendance. However, some workers said that the layoffs resulted in good workers losing their jobs as well. In addition, one participant felt that the layoffs disproportionately targeted Black workers, saying "not only do they exploit them, they say it as though they weren't good enough to work in their establishment."
- The company had formal systems for collecting input from workers, but workers had not seen management make any changes based on their feedback. "[There are] various numbers you can call confidentially and express yourself," described one participant. "They definitely do these surveys twice a year now, and they ask us what we think about the company." Despite these opportunities for workers to provide input, participants felt that management did little to respond to their concerns. One participant said that he had raised concerns several times and saw no reaction from management. "The problem is I'm not quite sure who actually listened to any of our input," he said. "Because we work on the floor, we see everything that's going on, what's going wrong, and all that. If you care enough you're going to go up and bring it to somebody's attention. But it doesn't seem like corporate really cares that much about our input."

- Supervision varied widely, both in terms of style and quality. Some participants reported that their supervisors were overly lenient, allowing some team members to get away with doing very little work. Other participants were concerned that their supervisors excessively surveilled their actions at work, to the point where they felt harassed. However, other participants shared positive experiences with their supervisors. One participant noted that the role of supervisor varied by individual, “the supervisors [at the company] ... half of them were hands-on, half of them were [hands-] off. It’s just the luck of the draw in who you get.”

## 12. Views about the Company and Job Satisfaction

Workers who participated in the focus groups and interviews were divided in their views of the meal-kit company, the products it produced, and how satisfied they were with their job.

- Some workers were proud of the meal kits they produced and described them as high-quality, healthy, organic meals. In describing their view of the company’s product, one worker said, “I think the quality is excellent, because they outsource to local farmers and everything.”
- Other workers said that the meal kits were designed only for wealthy white people. Workers said that they could not afford the meal kits and the types of food that are included are not things that they would typically eat. One worker said that “[the company] services the white community because people of color cannot afford to buy the baskets.” Another worker added that in their experience, “I don’t make enough money to really afford this kind of stuff.” “A lot of the ingredients we use I’ve never heard of before,” added another worker.
- Some workers applauded the company for providing jobs to local residents and for hiring workers with employment barriers, such as a criminal record or having a disability. “That was the good thing about the company. When they opened... they hired a lot of [local] residents. Even if they had criminal records and everything, they gave everybody opportunities to work and prove themselves,” explained one worker. “I do have a lot of respect for them,” added another worker, “because like I said I heard a lot of cats got hired. These were guys that I know never had a job a day in his life, didn’t have no skills. So I respect them for that.” Describing his experience, another worker said, “For me, since this is my first job ... [the company] was the one that gave a chance to me as [a person with a disability].”
- Others felt that the company was exploiting local people of color, who had few other job options. “I don’t appreciate these companies coming into these poor communities and using Black people,” one participant told the group as she voiced her disapproval of the company’s decision to locate in her city. “[This company] is for people that don’t have an education and ... have bad backgrounds ... [The company is] treating them unfair just because of what their background is, their ethnicity, you know, things like that. That’s what I feel like.”
- Most of the workers said they didn’t see themselves working at the meal-kit fulfillment center in the long-term. A couple workers were interested in starting a new career in a different industry, such as HVAC or electrical work. Some workers wanted to eventually return to occupations that they had previous experience with, such as electrical work, home care, or dental assistance. One worker said he planned to leave if he couldn’t get promoted to the maintenance department. A few workers said they would like to get a job at a nearby warehouse, which they said involved similar work and paid a higher hourly wage.

## 13. Conclusion

Compared to other jobs available for workers with limited work experience and other barriers to employment, the meal-kit fulfillment center provided slightly higher wages and more benefits. However, workers also reported serious issues that called into question the quality of these jobs, such as unpredictable schedules and earnings, irregular timekeeping and delays in pay, inconsistent supervision and advancement opportunities across teams, and multiple safety and health concerns. As a result, most workers did not see themselves working at the company over the long term and had conflicting views about whether or not the fulfillment center jobs were good for workers and the community as a whole.

This report has offered an initial overview of working conditions at a single meal-kit fulfillment center. Further research is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of job quality and implications for the overall food industry as the meal-kit sector evolves.

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## Authors

Sarah Thomason is a research and policy associate at the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education. Gabriel Sanchez is a former research and policy associate at the UC Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education. Isabel García Valdivia is a doctoral candidate at UC Berkeley's Department of Sociology.

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Institute for Research on Labor and Employment  
University of California, Berkeley  
2521 Channing Way  
Berkeley, CA 94720-5555  
(510) 642-0323  
laborcenter.berkeley.edu



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