



“Solely focusing on the most talented individuals...is likely an unwise practice when trying to promote creative processes,” the researchers warn. “Managers should strive to promote efficient team coordination, thereby relieving some of the burden placed on centrally located stars.”

ABOUT THE RESEARCH “*The Boon and Bane of Creative ‘Stars’: A Social Network Exploration of How and When Team Creativity Is (and Is Not) Driven by a Star Teammate,*” by Yuan Li et al. (*Academy of Management Journal*, 2020)

OPERATIONS

A Better Way to Manage Virtual Queues

Virtual lines are nothing new, but social-distancing requirements have accelerated their adoption in novel contexts, from retail stores to day care centers. Because people waiting can’t see the line and how quickly it is—or isn’t—moving, companies often provide information about the likely time remaining and issue periodic updates.

Balancing the need for reasonably accurate estimates with the goal of keeping people from abandoning the line can be a challenge, but a new study offers some guidance.

The researchers conducted a field experiment with a global ride-sharing firm, focusing on its operations in one city over four weeks in 2018. During busy periods, the firm places customers in virtual queues before matching them with a driver, provides an estimate of their wait time, and notifies them whenever it drops by a minute. The customers in the experiment were randomly divided into three groups. One received a neutral estimate of the wait time, one received an optimistic estimate, and one received a pessimistic estimate. All estimates were within the range predicted by the platform’s algorithm; actual wait times did not vary.

The researchers then studied what happened. Significantly pessimistic estimates (at least two minutes over neutral ones) caused large numbers of people to drop out—but slightly pessimistic estimates (a minute over) did not. By definition, customers receiving them got more-frequent updates for any given wait time than customers who received

shorter initial estimates, creating a sense of progress that encouraged them to remain in line.

Slightly optimistic estimates made no difference to dropout rates, while more-optimistic ones kept more people in line. Still, managers should avoid overly optimistic estimates, the researchers write; although those may reduce abandonment, they may also “lead to bad customer experiences when customers get stuck on ‘the last minute’ for too long.” Slightly pessimistic estimates can only be helpful, the researchers note; those don’t cause people to give up and may provide a pleasant surprise. Indeed, the firm has since incorporated these insights—thus sharply reducing the share of customers who wait longer than initially estimated along with the share who experience delays near the end of their waits, without raising the overall abandonment rate.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH “*Delay Information in Virtual Queues: A Large-Scale Field Experiment on a Ride-Sharing Platform,*” by Qiuping Yu, Yiming Zhang, and Yong-Pin Zhou (working paper)

