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Flexibility in Disguise: Crowdwork Risks from the Worker Perspective

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Flexibility in Disguise: Crowdwork Risks from the Worker Perspective

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

The search for a work-balance life has led people to look for alternatives to traditional jobs. Online platforms create the opportunity for job flexibility (Lehdonvirta, 2018), which motivates people from all walks of life to participate in the gig economy enabled by network technologies (Deng and Joshi, 2016). Yet, research has shown that flexibility comes with risks. Some workers have stressed that some job requests did not even meet the recommended minimum wage (Deng, Joshi, and Galliers, 2016). Many workers noted lacking job security (i.e., stable pay and benefits). Working online can affect one's mental health due to a lack of social contact (Wood, 2019). On the surface, gig work offers people with flexibility in making job decisions. However, it also makes many workers overworked and anxious. As prior research suggests, "to promote labor protection in the gig-economy, the first thing that is needed is strong advocacy to have jobs in this sector fully recognize as work" (Stefano, 2016, p.123). Gig work refers to the "economy or employment through short term or contract engagement" (Schmidt, 2020). Therefore, for workers engaging in the short-term work contracts on (or through) digital platforms, it is important for organizations and policy makers to understand work conditions and worker experiences in order to protect workers' interests and rights.

The purpose of this study is to understand the risks and concerns gig workers face. For this research, we will focus on crowdwork, which is also known as "piecework... defined as work performed remotely over the internet for a piece-rate pay" (Lehdonvirta 2018, p.2). This study answers two key questions: What are the major risks in gig work? Are these risks perceived differently by workers of different gender? To answer the questions, we collected qualitative data by surveying 59 workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk and analyzed data using NVivo software. Our analysis revealed six categories of risks in crowdwork, with mental health risk, financial risk, and labor protection concern as the top three risks. Mental Health risk was defined as psychosocial risks that arise from poor work design, organization and management, isolation, as well as a poor social context of work. They may result in negative psychological outcomes such as depression, stress, anxiety, or burned out (Osha, 2021). This was the highest-rated risk by the study informants, who reported a high content of triggering images and feeling burned out. Financial risk refers to having no fixed pay and being underpaid or not paid at all. Moreover, the study participants were concerned about lacking labor protection, such as regulations concerning hiring and firing. The remaining three risks are physical, informational, and technological risks. Except for labor protection concern, all other risks were expressed more frequently by women than by men.

Additional, in-depth data analysis will be performed to generate further insights. We will examine the associations between the revealed risks and workers' characteristics including their employment status, age, and platform tenure. Quantitative analysis will be performed to test the statistical significance of the associations. This study could contribute to the gig economy research and gig work practice. We believe that it is crucial for digital platforms and client companies to enhance accountability and to ensure workers' rights are being protected. Understanding the risks from a worker's perspective could provide an avenue for all stakeholders in the gig economy to reach a shared understanding and to use technology to allow individuals to truly benefit from the flexibility they are promised.

References

Available upon request