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Work in the Gig Economy: A Research Overview

Book Review Contributed by Tia Inniss

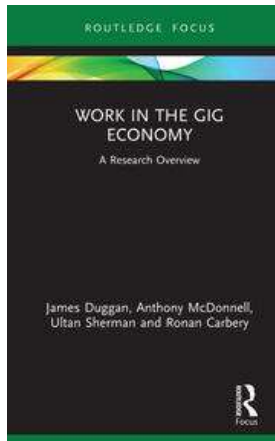
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Work in the Gig Economy: A Research Overview

By James Duggan, Anthony McDonnell, Ultan Sherman and Ronan Carbery



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A Book Review of Work in the Gig Economy: A Research Overview

Edited by Geoffrey Wood

The 2008 global economic crisis transformed the nature of work and employment significantly. This drastic shift led to working arrangements becoming increasingly unstable and fragmented. In light of the surge in volatile working trends, the gig economy emerged. The main premise of the gig economy is based on a digital platform that connects freelance workers with customers to facilitate the provision of short-term services² or asset-sharing (Charlton, 2024). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of digital technologies was accelerated, and gig work became increasingly popular. Although the gig economy is a growing segment that can bring about economic benefits, the rise of gig work increases the complexity of working arrangements and reshapes traditional norms and practices.

Gig work introduces a plethora of issues that need to be explored. Some of these issues accentuate the nature of risk faced by individuals involved in this type of unconventional work. Arguably, the gig economy exposes workers to job insecurity, potential misclassification, and lack of health benefits. Due to the difficulty in documenting the experiences of an “invisible workforce,” this further emphasises the challenges in examining the gig work population. The book, “Work in the Gig Economy A Research Overview” critically assesses the literature on work in the gig economy in an attempt to provide readers with core themes and debates surrounding this research. The book concentrates primarily on scholarly publications done within the last decade that integrate insights from a variety of disciplinary viewpoints, including human resource management, psychology, sociology, industrial relations, and technology management. Additionally, the authors proposed avenues for future research and underscored the importance of grasping the nature of gig work.

The authors began by addressing the evolving nature of work, where they identified the increase in informal arrangements from full-time permanent contracts to temporary or short-term agreements. Previous research has predominantly focused on the role that work experiences play in shaping an individual’s well-being, but this was typically done from a traditional work standpoint. However, contingent working arrangements are generally linked to short-term employment which focuses on the completion of specific tasks (Kroon & Paauwe, 2014). Gig work closely resembles contingent work, where workers are hired on a job-by-job basis and are not privy to the same benefits or rights that are afforded to traditional employees (Lemmon, Wilson, & Posig, 2016). The authors emphasised the importance of acknowledging that the gig economy symbolises a new form of contingent work.

² Short-term services may include options such as delivery services, ride-sharing, or freelance labour.

Although Barbados does not have a highly prominent gig economy, contingent work is nonetheless present within its labour market. The introduction of zero-hour contracts to the hospitality industry constitutes a form of contingent work offering flexibility for employers and employees in this volatile environment. However, these contracts received criticism from the Barbados Workers' Union, highlighting potential exploitation practices. Nevertheless, employers continued to defend this practice, identifying the benefits of zero-hour contracts, such as providing supplemental income, temporary earnings, and valuable job experience (Mehter, 2024).

A key distinction between gig work and contingent labour is the existence of a digital intermediary, typically a platform organisation. Platform organisations facilitate the interaction between two parties but often avoid any legal responsibility by presenting themselves as merely the mediator in any exchanges (Gramano, 2019). The primary concern surrounding the literature done on gig work was aiming to get an understanding of how platform organisations operate, specifically how these organisations manage and monitor their workers. This new type of work renders workers only slightly relevant to the organisation; algorithmic technologies are usually used to manage, monitor, and control workers.

To help identify the key distinction between gig work and contingent labour, the authors found it necessary to highlight an approach that classified gig work into three main variants to get a better understanding of how each variant is impacted. The three main variants pointed out were app work, crowd work, and capital platform work. App work the most commonly known, consists of a service-providing platform organisation that requires workers to complete local tasks for customers while keeping a percentage of the transaction. The most well-known platform organisations that function in the app work sphere are Uber, Postmates, TaskRabbit, and Deliveroo. App workers complete tasks locally instead of remotely and bear the risk and operational costs that come with assuming these positions. On the other hand, crowd workers complete their tasks remotely and engage with customers through digital platform organisations. Crowd workers engage in human intelligence tasks that are beyond the capabilities of computers. Some examples of crowd work organisations include Fiverr and Amazon Mechanical Turk. The final variant, capital platform work, distinguishes itself from the previous two variants by linking customers with capital owned by individuals. The expression "sharing economy," often considered synonymous with gig economy, is directly associated with this variant. Capital platform work occurs when a person uses digital platform organisations as a way to lease assets or sell goods. A prime example of a capital platform organisation is Airbnb.

Throughout the book, the authors stressed the classification issues that arose from research done on the gig economy. The Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) in California was a new piece of legislation aimed at

addressing the misclassification issues of gig workers. This bill stated that “workers could only be classified as independent contractors when they passed the “ABC”³ test” (Duggan, McDonnell, Sherman, & Carbery, 2022). Therefore, if these conditions were not met, workers would be classified as employees, entitling them to labour protections and benefits. This new legislation would have been especially beneficial for gig workers in the app-based domain. However, AB5 received tremendous pushback from the gig economy in California as it was believed that it would terminate the gig economy by increasing costs and potentially reducing the flexibility amongst workers. This ultimately led to Proposition 22, which requested gig workers to be excluded from AB5 and successfully passed in November 2020. This signified how influential the gig economy was and the obstacles hindering governments and legislators from effectively regulating this type of work.

Platform organisations in the gig economy implement heavy monitoring and corrective measures as a way of managing their workers through a process known as “algorithmic management”. However, this process contradicts the main premise of platform organisations positioning themselves as digital platforms that simply connect supply and demand needs. The authors emphasised that several criticisms were made regarding this issue and suggested that algorithmic technologies were merely a “fig leaf” as a way of masking traditional methods of work exploitation. That being said, algorithmic management entices organisations because it keeps operating costs low and increases savings significantly. Nevertheless, these same processes contribute to a lack of interpersonal relationships and empathy, which is typically seen in the management of traditional organisations.

Due to the nature of algorithmic management replacing human resource processes, this allows for a sophisticated control system that tightly regulates markets. With this type of advanced system, platform organisations undermine the promise of freedom and choice that are proposed to gig workers. The authors dissected the role that algorithmic management plays in app work, crowd work and capital platform work since these three variants are impacted differently. Algorithmic management is frequently used in app work and utilises GPS systems as a way of tracking the movements of workers and allocating tasks. Additionally, as a means of managing app workers, customer ratings are also taken into consideration. However, in crowd work, algorithms are used to filter and separate workers based on location, level of experience, and task acceptance rate. Though similar to app work, the performance of workers depends on requesters’ feedback. Lastly, there is limited knowledge on algorithmic

³ The ABC test has three main conditions, all of which must be satisfied for a worker to be classified as an independent contractor. Condition A: The worker must be “free from control”; condition B: The worker must be “outside the usual course of business”; and condition C: The worker must be “customarily engaged in business of the same nature”.

management in capital platform work, but all individuals in this gig variant are still subjected to this algorithmic environment.

The penultimate chapter of this book discussed the experiences of gig workers and underscored the multiparty working relationship in the gig economy. The authors started by noting that gig workers are at a disadvantage given the limited power that they possess. Furthermore, the book covered how each party within the relationship shapes the experience of a gig worker, identifying power asymmetries and a range of interdependencies that exist amongst gig workers, platform organisations, and customers. First, the gig worker relationship was examined and established as a triangular working arrangement with several studies showing the frustration felt by workers with regards to compensation levels, power imbalances, and autonomous working. The platform organisation role presents the greatest challenge in the multi-party relationship because they both maintain control over the working relationship while keeping their distance from any legal obligations. However, the customer, who is the most passive party, tends to be the most influential given the role that they play in measuring a worker's performance.

After a careful examination of the roles that gig workers, platform organisations, and customers play in the gig working relationship, the authors proceeded to mention three areas that have implications for this arrangement. Employment relation issues were the first factors investigated, where it was found that gig work, along with its fragmented nature, diminishes the reciprocity present in conventional employment relationships. Furthermore, gig work possesses a strong economic relationship that compensates workers based on the amount of work done rather than the time spent. The second factor analysed was job autonomy, where it was determined that while gig workers are offered flexibility, some researchers argue that platform organisations limit workers' independence. The authors described this as "the autonomy paradox," stating that gig workers are introduced to a new form of control through algorithmic management processes that can result in sleep-deprived, overworked, and exhausted workers. Career-related issues were the last factor examined by the authors, who argued that these digital platforms create an environment where workers are hindered from development opportunities, secure employment, and an upward career trajectory. Ultimately, researchers were unable to determine how this type of work experience fosters professional development or aids in securing employment beyond this domain.

To sum up the extensive literature done on work in the gig economy, chapter five focused on the key issues highlighted along with solutions and future research recommendations. The issues that were seen throughout this book stressed on the misclassification of workers, the extensive use of technology, and legal issues. It was proposed that recommendations for the government and public sector should

improve benefits and protections for workers in the gig economy through the development of policies and legislation. Furthermore, solutions from work-led responses should be geared towards the formal and informal unionisation of gig workers in an act to support one another and drive change within the economy. The final solution proposed from a private sector perspective was some form of self-regulation amongst the various platform organisations as a way to address the classification issues. Some of these practices could include hiring workers as employees, offering health benefits, and more. Nevertheless, although several researchers indicated that platform organisations hold the majority of power within gig relationships, limited sources identified collective efforts from gig workers in bettering their working conditions. Numerous groups were created to share information and unionise including the National Domestic Work Alliance and App-Based Drivers Association. Moreover, the Deliveroo strike stands out as a pivotal event that increased collectivism and activism within the gig economy.

In general, the book effectively synthesised the existing literature on the gig economy and presented it clearly and concisely. The authors provided a comprehensive overview of perspectives from platform organisations, workers, and customers primarily from an academic standpoint. However, the book lacked input from gig workers themselves. Furthermore, the review heavily focused on literature from Western economies, specifically the United States and parts of Europe, but failed to highlight how the gig economy manifests in other parts of the world, including underdeveloped economies.

Overall, the book "Work in the Gig Economy: A Research Overview" called attention to the notable surge in research done on the gig economy in multiple disciplines. By addressing key issues such as misclassification, legal challenges, and pervasive algorithmic technologies, the book underpins why understanding the gig economy is crucial for policymakers. This book offered valuable insights into the understanding of how the gig economy plays a vital role in today's society while also providing solutions and future recommendations regarding the sustainability of this evolving work model.

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