

The future of hospitality jobs: The rise of the gig worker

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ABSTRACT: This review article aims to analyse the different perspectives on the gig economy and gig workers, specifically in the hospitality industry, and establish a research base that contributes to future research. The article examines the perceptions of both employers and employees of the gig economy based on available literature. Current literature reveals that the impact of gig-style work is under-researched in many areas, including the hospitality sector. The COVID-19 pandemic and its restrictions have revitalised the gig economy and forced the hospitality industry to explore a sustainable long-term relationship with it. Many of today's permanent hospitality jobs will be lost to gig workers. Governments and employers have to prepare and adapt to a future where the desire for flexibility is central. The article reviews the many advantages and disadvantages of the gig economy and offers an insight into the future of hospitality jobs. This review article is beneficial for both industrial and educational applications.

KEYWORDS: employment, COVID-19, gig economy, human resources

Introduction

How people live, work and spend their money has changed dramatically over the past two decades with advances in technology, especially smartphone technology. Being super-connected via social networks has increased communication. It has opened up new ways to make money online; picking up a "gig" (or a temporary work engagement) has become very easy to do. The advances in technology, artificial intelligence and the "gig economy" are changing how people find and do work. Countries must be ready to respond to this new phenomenon with innovative policies and programmes.

What is the gig economy?

The gig economy is made up of three main components: the independent workers paid by the gig (i.e. a task or a project) as opposed to those workers who receive a salary or hourly wage; the consumers who need a specific service, for example, a ride to their next destination, or a particular item delivered; and the companies that connect the worker to the consumer in a direct manner, including app-based technology platforms. Companies such as Uber, Deliveroo, Airbnb, Lyft, Etsy or TaskRabbit act as the medium through which the worker is connected to and ultimately paid by the consumer. These companies make it easier for workers to find a quick, temporary job (i.e. a gig), from a musical performance to fixing a leaky tap. However, one of the main differences between a gig and traditional work arrangements is that a gig is a temporary work engagement, and the worker is paid only for that specific job.

The history of gig work

The development of the gig economy started first in delivery and freelance working scenarios, and the term "gig" comes from the music and entertainment business, where performances were often one-offs. However, the term is slowly and steadily entering hospitality discourse. Therefore, this article suggests that workers in the hospitality industry today are and will be confronted with the consequences of gig work. Over the past two decades, the world of work has changed considerably as organisations have focused on increasingly flexible recruitment strategies. The now almost historical notion of a job for life and the concepts of a "9 to 5" workday are diminishing fast (Tabet, 2020). The idea of "gig working" is rapidly gaining ground (Burkard & Craven, 2019; Dewan & Ernst, 2020). As a definition, gig working is when people take temporary, often ad-hoc, work contracts (or gigs) sourced online through digital, cloud-based marketplaces (International Labour Organization, 2021). Digital work platforms such as Upwork and Freelancer.com are typical of the "Uberisation" of work, as they allow businesses (employers) to contract workers for short-term engagements (gigs), or specific projects, for a defined period. The recent growth of online platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo and TaskRabbit has given rise to a *global sharing economy* in which it is becoming ever more commonplace to buy and sell jobs and services online across the world. With the increasing number of crowd sourcing platforms, the number of people working in the area has also increased. All these developments have resulted in the rise of the so-called gig economy.

The gig economy is usually understood to include chiefly two forms of work: "crowd work" and "work on-demand via apps" (Kessler, 2015; Said, 2015; Smith & Leberstein, 2015). The term "crowd work" (also called "crowd sourcing") usually refers to working activities that imply completing a series of tasks through online platforms (Howe, 2006; Cherry, 2009; Felstiner, 2011; Adriaan et al., 2013; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Mandl et al., 2015). These platforms put potential workers (employees) in contact with an indefinite number of organisations and individuals (employers) through the Internet, connecting clients and workers globally. "Work on-demand via apps" is a form of work in which the execution of traditional working activities such as transport (taxis), cleaning (either commercial or domestic), food delivery, and even clerical work is directed via apps on individual mobile phones. These apps are managed by companies that also intervene in setting minimum quality service standards and selecting and managing the workforce (Greenhouse, 2015; Rogers, 2015; Aloisi, 2016).

It is difficult to estimate the number of workers in the gig economy. Businesses are sometimes reluctant to disclose these data and, even when figures are available, it is hard to draw a reliable estimate since workers may be registered and work with several companies in the same month, week or even day (Singer, 2014). However, data collected and elaborated on by Smith and Leberstein (2015) for the principal platforms and apps show that the gig economy is a growing phenomenon.

There are many associated difficulties with assessing the number of employees and contractors (active in the gig economy) employed by multiple platforms because of a high turnover of contractors. However, some recent data from Uber.com suggests Uber claims to have 22 000 employees as of December 2018 (Uber Newsroom, 2021). Uber also cites 3.9 million drivers worldwide. However, drivers' very high turnover rate complicates this measure of gig workers contracting to Uber.

One media article reported that in early August 2016, Deliveroo had 800 employees (Satariano, 2016), while another article of around the same date said there were 6 500 riders employed by the company (Sahoo, 2016). On 8 September 2016, the *Financial Times* reported that 20 000 self-employed couriers were working for Deliveroo (O'Connor, 2016). In September 2017, Deliveroo confirmed that the company works with 30 000 riders across the globe (Titcomb, 2017). In September 2020, Deliveroo claimed that the company plans to increase riders to more than 50 000 in the UK (Deliveroo, 2020).

Hermes has contracts with 20 000 people paid on a piece-work basis to deliver parcels using their cars (Butler, 2020). Dubbed "lifestyle couriers", they are self-employed and do not receive any paid holiday, sick pay, parental leave or pension contributions. They pay for their fuel and car insurance but can take other jobs and have some flexibility over their working day. They are part of the fast-growing "gig economy" in which big companies, including Hermes, rely on increasing numbers of self-employed contractors, who are not subject to the national living wage, to deliver their core services.

A report by SPERA, a venture capital-backed portfolio company of Medici Ventures (2016), indicates that internationally the gig economy has been having a much more significant impact than first thought, and currently, more than a quarter of the US workforce is officially part of it (SPERA, 2016). To further clarify, nearly 54 million Americans participated in some form of independent work in 2015 (SPERA, 2016), and more than 10

million people – that is about 1 in 12 US households – rely on independent work for more than half of their income (SPERA, 2017). Researchers project that half of the working US and UK population will move into the gig economy within the next five years (SPERA, 2016; 2017). The number of US gig workers in 2021 rose to 51.1 million, a 34 per cent increase year on year. These numbers are expected to grow further, with some predicting that gig workers will constitute half of the workforce by 2023 (MBO Partners, 2021). The European Union also saw a 45 per cent increase in the number of independent workers from 2012 to 2013. Independent workers comprise the fastest-growing group in the European Union labour market (Goudin, 2016). Other parts of the world are also affected by these developments. For example, India's independent workforce, at 15 million, the second largest in the world, fills about 40 per cent of the world's freelance jobs (SPERA, 2016).

As the gig economy has grown over recent years, so have debates about its place and value to employment sustainability in the global labour market. Confusion has arisen around what exactly it constitutes and how it impacts employers, recruiters and workers alike. Some see online talent platforms as "clearing houses" with the potential to inject new momentum into the labour market. The McKinsey Global Institute, for example, calculates that by 2025 digital work platforms could add USD 2.7 trillion, or 2.0 per cent, to global GDP, increasing employment by 72 million full-time equivalent positions. For the UK, that equates to £45 billion and extra work for 766 000 people. The study estimates that up to 200 million people worldwide could personally benefit from using digital work platforms, specifically by allowing the unemployed to find work as freelancers or allowing part-time workers to work additional hours on a supplementary basis (Manyika et al., 2015). From the worker's perspective, the argument goes that the gig economy gives people the opportunity to work when they want to and be more in control of their lives (O'Connor, 2016). There are, though, downsides to the gig economy. There is ambiguity about the employment status of the gig worker linked to the reluctance of companies to disclose information and the flexible work patterns of gig workers: are they self-employed or an employee? This is not a rhetorical question because the status of an employee determines their rights, such as maternity leave, overtime pay, sick pay, pension rights and health care insurance (in the US).

Ambiguity in the workplace

Consider a hypothetical work arrangement for a delivery truck driver. They drive for a delivery service whose primary client is a large commercial company. The driver is paid based on the number of deliveries they complete, and they do not receive traditional employment protections such as overtime pay, sick pay or pension rights. The driver must purchase their vehicle but is not allowed to work for other delivery services. The driver must wear a uniform with the delivery service's logo on it. They can be removed as a contractor at will for not meeting the service's standards or expectations. What are the sources of classification ambiguity?

As the above example illustrates, the so-called self-employed workers in the gig economy are, in reality, employees in the real sense of the word in that they often only work for one organisation. In contrast, the organisation saves costs by not having the on-costs of employees by, for example, saving on

employee benefits such as pensions, sick pay and paid holidays (Taylor et al., 2017). Secondly, employees in a gig economy may be free to choose when to work but not how to work or, perhaps more crucially, how much they are paid (O'Conner, 2016). Even more crucially, as will be explained in the next section, many gig workers are not in the position to choose when and how long to work because if they refuse a gig too often, they may not be offered any in the future and be, in effect, dismissed (Lee et al., 2015). Furthermore, many organisations offering gig work are often deploying algorithmic management based on the argument that algorithms are better at managing new employment opportunities and that this offers better and cheaper consumer services. This may be the case; however, the reality is often tightened control of the gig worker's performance.

Algorithmic management

Algorithmic management might sound like a science fiction future, but it has had uncanny echoes from the past. A hundred years ago, a new theory called "scientific management" swept through the factories of America. It was the brainchild of Frederick W. Taylor, the son of a well-to-do Philadelphia family who dropped his preparations for attending Harvard to become an apprentice in a hydraulics factory. At the factory, he saw a haphazard workplace where men worked as slowly as they could get away with, while their bosses paid them as little as possible. Taylor wanted to replace this rule-of-thumb approach with "the establishment of many rules, laws and formulae which replace the judgment of the individual workman" (Taylor, 1911, p. 37). To that end, he sent managers with stopwatches and notebooks to the shop floor. They observed, timed and recorded every stage of every job and determined the most efficient way that each one should be done. As Taylor discussed in his book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, "[p]erhaps the most prominent single element in modern scientific management is the task idea. This idea specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done and the exact time allowed for doing it" (Taylor, 1911, p. 39).

Taylor's scientific management approach has been widely applied in manufacturing, but the service industry has always been a specialist sector providing customer service at different levels. Hence it has been considered difficult to measure service time without highly standardising service operations such as has been the case in companies like McDonald's and Wok to Walk (n.d.), a Dutch fast food take-away company that, after its start in Amsterdam in 2004, is now represented on four continents (Wok to Walk, 2017). More complex operations, such as those in most hotel chains, have long been considered safe from the extended hand of Taylorism because of their complexity caused by customer demand. However, thanks to algorithms, a vast amount of data can be collected and analysed in real-time, making the measurement of and the improvement of processes such as the check-in at hotels possible. Today, many warehouse workers for companies such as Amazon, for example, use handheld devices that give them step-by-step instructions based on GPS on where to walk and what to pick from the shelves when they get there, all the while measuring their "pick rate" in real-time (Baraniuk, 2015). If a process can be analysed and reduced to its constituent parts, human employees may be (at least partly) substituted by machines, thus taking a new step in the deskilling of hospitality labour. For example, online check-in

and check-out facilities have become widely available recently, with many hotel groups speeding up the process and reducing staff numbers on the front desk at the hotel.

Alongside pushing people to work faster and helping in the deskilling of labour, the use of algorithms is providing a degree of control and oversight that even the most hardened advocate of Taylor could never have dreamt would happen. Consider, for example, Uber, the well-known pioneering company in the sharing economy, offering a location-based app that connects drivers to riders. It started in a small number of US cities and, by the end of 2017, it is operating in more than 600 cities worldwide. Uber's app controls the fares that drivers charge and raises rates when demand surges. Surge pricing is meant to allow both the driver and Uber to boost revenues. However, research shows that surge pricing failed to reach its goal because rates changed too quickly and suddenly for drivers to utilise the information strategically to improve their incomes. Therefore, the interaction between algorithms and people in this situation failed (Lee et al., 2015).

Academics need to consider Uber's operations better to understand the degree of control possible with algorithmic management. Uber's app is designed to adjust the ride price to the demand; it also monitors the driver's position to assign a client to the driver nearest to the client's location. This process increases efficiency, but it also raises issues about the driver's privacy. Moreover, the driver's acceptance rate of the passengers assigned to them by the algorithm is one indicator of drivers' performance. As passengers' assignment is often not transparent to the driver, his motivation and sense of control are negatively affected. Algorithms are also used to analyse passengers' ratings of the driver's service quality, another objective on which a driver's performance is evaluated. If the rating drops below a predetermined level, drivers are warned or dismissed. However, a passenger's rating of a driver's quality may not accurately reflect a driver's performance and service level. Consider, for example, passengers under the stress of missing a flight. They may rate a driver's service based on events beyond the driver's control, such as a traffic jam on the road to the airport. As an Uber driver may never meet with a human resource manager during their whole employment period and may therefore not be able to discuss particular circumstances, algorithmic performance management may be perceived as unfair and become a source of stress, disappointment and frustration (Lee et al., 2015).

Taylorism on steroids

Documents submitted as part of an employment tribunal case brought by the GMB – Britain's general trade union – against Uber in London include an email sent to driver James Farrar congratulating him on an average rating above 4.6. According to an article published by the *Financial Times*, Uber shared that they will continue to monitor drivers' rating every 50 trips and will send an email if they see the rating for the past 50 trips fall below 4.4. Uber confirmed it would deactivate drivers whose ratings dropped too low. However, it says this is extremely rare. The court documents include one instance in which Uber sent an email on 23 December 2013 to a driver called Ashley Da Gama wishing him a Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year and explaining that they are currently planning for 2014 and would like the employee to be part of it. However, they do need to

see an improvement on his current track record to ensure this. Two weeks later, Uber emailed again to say his ratings had not improved enough. His account was deactivated on that day (O'Conner, 2016).

Considering these drawbacks and the enormous number of people affected by gig work and algorithmic management, it is not surprising that the phrase "gig economy" is seen by many as a code for little more than the exploitation of the workforce and that algorithmic management is seen as a tool exacerbating the exploitation. As a proportion of the total employees in the population, there are millions of people who are, in effect, forced to undertake work at inadequate pay rates imposed upon them globally (Lashley, 2016). The word "wage slaves" may sound extreme, but many arguments support this in the modern world.

The gig economy, rather than being driven by workers' preferences to work flexibly, is seen by many as the result of employers' attempts to drive down costs and avoid "unnecessary" permanent employees, particularly but not exclusively during periods of economic uncertainty (Taylor et al., 2017). The legislative divisions between "employees" and the "self-employed" on one side and the mixed blessings of algorithmic management on the other make it artificially cheaper for businesses to move away from the traditional employer-employee model of working and towards an insecure "firm-contractor" relationship instead. The current situation remains unsustainable as this model favours the employer more than the employee (Brinkley, 2015).

COVID-19 and the gig economy

COVID-19 has wholly destabilised the world's workforce. Many people have resorted to gig work to survive (Helling, 2021). The gig economy has been growing since the beginning of the pandemic as gig workers are removing many hurdles of human resources management from the service and hospitality industry (Financialnewsmedia.com, 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, more people are staying at home to minimise the spread of the virus and thus shopping online (Liu, 2020). Amazon, for example, has opened 100 000 new roles mostly in their warehouses and delivery units to support people in self-isolation (Clark, 2020).

Today's world is witnessing an unprecedented crisis of significant magnitude, a crisis that aggravates human suffering, paralysing world economies and disrupting the way humans lead their lives. In an interview with *Euronews* in March 2020, the UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres compared the crisis to a "war situation" requiring a war economy to deal with it (International News Channel, 2020). On 31 December 2019, the crisis began when the World Health Organisation (WHO) China Country Office got news from the Chinese authorities about a new type of novel coronavirus (nCoV). Since then, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has led to 231 703 120 confirmed cases and 4 746 620 confirmed deaths reported in 216 countries (WHO, 2021). In June 2020, the Global Economic Prospects report by the World Bank Group presented a grim outlook for the world economy. The report confirmed that nations would face recessions and substantial growth downgrades that will push tens of millions into extreme poverty (The World Bank, 2020).

With world markets slowing down and nations facing recession, the gig economy, surprisingly, grew exponentially. This was mainly due to the increased reliance of the confined

population on gig workers for home deliveries, and the reliance by many people on gig work as an additional or primary source of income (Henderson, 2020).

Research by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) shows that 2019 was the ninth year in a row that the travel and tourism sector showed growth. The sector has outpaced global economic growth, contributing the USD 8.9 trillion to the world's GDP (10.3% of the worldwide economy) and creating 330 million jobs, one in ten across the globe. A worst-case scenario presented by the WTTC predicts that travel and tourism jobs will suffer 98.2 million job losses worldwide and a loss of USD 2 686 billion in travel and tourism GDP (WTTC, 2020). According to Laura Bosch Ferreté (2021), an engagement specialist working for ROBECO, an international asset management firm, COVID-19 has created a shift in behaviour among consumers and businesses, and has created a significant disruption in labour-intensive sectors. The response to this disruption requires the retail, hospitality and gig economies to maintain robust capital management strategies. The hospitality industry is one of the hardest hit. Recent research suggests that recovery will take many years. As a labour-intensive industry requiring a vital face-to-face exchange between guests and employees, the hospitality industry was the first to suffer from quarantines and shutdowns. Hospitality establishments had to shut down out of fears of community spread through group environments.

As of 2021, with many countries relaxing COVID-19 restrictions, the hospitality industry is finally beginning to recover. Nevertheless, the recovery is not proceeding smoothly as the industry cannot find workers. Post-pandemic research has shown that many laid-off hospitality workers, especially those at entry-level, who left the industry refuse to return (DeMico & Liu, 2021). According to a survey by Bloomberg, half of the laid-off hospitality workers in the US will not return to their previous jobs in the hospitality industry, with over half of the respondents arguing that they want better working conditions, better pay and benefits, more flexibility and the desire to work remotely (Dmitrieva, 2021). While struggling to attract and retain employees and develop meaningful careers, the hospitality industry has had many insights from the COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, flexible forms of work reduce the risk on the company while supporting and offering varied benefits to employees (Martins et al., 2020). Nevertheless, many disadvantages associated with flexible forms of work were also highlighted during the pandemic, such as the adverse effects on the mental well-being of employees and the lack of income during forced leave (Robinson et al., 2019; Plastow, 2020).

Employment strategies in the hospitality industry are constantly evolving, with new generations requesting flexibility and actively working towards attaining this objective. A survey by Adecco Group among CEOs, leaders and employees concluded that flexibility at work is here to stay. Productivity will be measured on output and impact rather than hours worked (Adecco Group, 2020). The hospitality industry needs to embrace these principles to attract future generations of workers. To deal with substantial staff shortages, hospitality has to endorse the gig economy and embrace it from the top-down (Woodcock et al., 2018). At the 32nd Hunter Hotel Investment Conference at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis, Mike Deitemeyer, the CEO of Aimbridge Hospitality, the largest global third-party management company, announced that the company has started testing the waters of the gig economy. According to

Deitemeyer, even though general managers, department heads and the sales team need to be full-time permanent employees, all other hotel jobs should be flexible and vary, based on demand. Having full-time employees in these positions could have dire consequences (Fox, 2021; Katz, 2021). As the hospitality industry recovers from COVID-19 restrictions and employee dismissals in 2020, it should focus more on workers' desire for flexible working and invest in digital transformation and technology to attract and retain talent. To tackle the dire shortage of labour, the industry should embrace and work further with the gig economy.

Future research

The impact of gig-style working is under-researched in many areas, including the hospitality sector. This discussion article aims to highlight the issues raised by the so-called gig economy that touch on areas already researched in traditional human resource management working environments, such as labour turnover, flexible working practices and the employer-employee relationship, and to focus on how these areas can become future research projects in the hospitality sector.

Conclusion

Today's digital capitalism creates a world of consumers delighting in apps for a cheap taxi or delivering take-away food or groceries to their doors. However, it is also creating a world of disempowered workers who have to labour in this on-demand world, the so-called gig economy, in which a working week is no more than a series of "gigs" contracted out by the online dispensers of on-demand work. The case against the gig economy is that it bids down wages; it makes working lives episodic; it displaces risk from corporations onto ordinary people; furthermore, it is a source of growing stress. Gig work does not come with pensions, sick pay, holiday entitlement or parental leave, and perhaps most importantly, a feeling of belonging to a team or organisation, the so-called "physiological contract". Gigs are one-on-one relationships between the contractor and the contractee. The workers are easy to abuse and hard to monitor. There are workers in the global labour market, students, older workers and adults with childcare responsibilities seeking flexible working hours that fit their lifestyles, for which the gig economy presents real opportunities. However, it is not great for many other workers, especially as it forces mainstream employers to compete on the same terms.

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Bill Rowson passed away on 12 October 2020.

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