

'The way they manipulate people is really saddening': study shows the trade-offs in gig work

Written by The Conversation

Uber driver Michelle, thinks her job is fantastic when she's only after part-time hours. But she's given it a couple of months and she says she's not getting anywhere.

To be able to earn A\$800 she has to actually pull in A\$1,500, averaging 70 hours a week. The money per hour can be good, but only when it really picks up. Looking at the current job market, she doesn't want to do two full-time jobs to make the same amount of money that she used to earn in an office, working half the time.

She feels exhausted. She used to think people in Melbourne were good drivers, but now that she's been driving all day, she sees a fair amount of aggression. Six weeks ago she was trying to merge into traffic and a man in a ute next to her showed her a crowbar.

Her latest day off she spent sleeping because she was so tired.

Michelle (not her real name) was one of our study participants. We interviewed 60 ridesharing and food delivery workers like her. And the reality of their experiences is far more nuanced than others make out.

Work in the ["gig economy"](#) is often depicted as flexible by businesses and [those who run the platforms](#) that offer work, or as exploitative by [labour activists and commentators](#).

A key finding is that gig workers arbitrate between the costs and benefits of gig work. Many interviewees preferred their gig work over other forms of low-paid work (most commonly cleaning, hospitality, retail) because of abusive bosses, underpayment, and underemployment. In comparison, gig work is seen by these workers as providing a more appealing work environment.

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While some rideshare drivers note they need to work long hours to earn the equivalent of a full-time wage, they also emphasise their enjoyment of their rideshare work. One food delivery worker summed it up:

It is more flexible. You can do whatever you want. You are on the street talking to the people enjoying. You can do exercise as well on the bicycle. And, it is good money.

Despite these workers' sense that there are opportunities in gig work - their experience was not overwhelmingly positive. There was a group of workers who felt marginalised, had few choices, and the gig work was a last resort.

These workers saw gig work as a stopgap measure while they looked for "real" jobs. In these cases they were doing it because it got them out of the house, to supplement their income or before starting their own business.

Social versus isolating

The workers in the study saw social interactions as part of their gig work as one of the more enjoyable aspects. What varied between rideshare and food delivery workers was how these interactions took place.

Food delivery drivers often end up crossing paths during their shifts and informally waiting together. As one worker summed up:

You end up knowing most of the riders, because you see them pretty often. You kind of speak with each other, and there is a social club.

By contrast rideshare drivers noted that their work could be quite physically isolating. Some drivers engaged in online forums with other drivers but would never meet up with them. Despite limited social interaction with other drivers, rideshare drivers reported that this is where they

derived most of their job satisfaction.

Freedom versus control

The drivers we interviewed expressed a sense of freedom and flexibility because they had “no boss, no set hours”. However, the flip side of this was a sense of limited control over work. As one food delivery worker described:

I currently fit my life around their work...obviously I have to work around busy times - lunch and dinnertime.

Both delivery riders and rideshare drivers - found that only particular pockets of time across the day were profitable. This was usually lunch and dinner times, especially weekends for food delivery, and weekends and evenings for rideshare drivers. So while their options to sign on or off the app (the platform that employed them) were flexible, realistically their productive working hours were determined by patterns of consumer demand.

Both the rideshare and food delivery platforms also unilaterally changed the terms and conditions of engagement, which directly affected earning potential. Both groups of workers expressed particular concern about the periodic increases in the commission taken by the platform, reporting cuts to earnings of up to 15%. One driver lamented:

The way they [the platform] manipulate people....is really saddening.

Ridesharing workers were also concerned about being financially over-committed due to the cost associated with purchasing and running a vehicle. This financial burden, coupled with continued changing rules of game, and the capacity for these platforms to arbitrarily “deactivate them” led to anxiety and frustration. One worker described this:

It used to be good before they did all the price cuts and started treating their drivers like trash. We have had 30% cuts since I came on board whilst demand hasn't matched supply. I make around \$10 an hour.

Best of a bad lot

Our emerging findings suggest gig workers often understand the trade-offs between the positive and negative features of their work but see this as a reality of their position within the labour market.

A number of our interviewees felt exploited and/or would prefer better paying "real jobs", validating the concern on [regulation, pay and conditions in this industry](#). But, gig work allows these workers to meet their immediate needs and gives them a sense of being their own boss.

The gig workers enjoyed the high levels of autonomy in their work, and many of them saw their gigs as the best in a market characterised by low paid jobs.

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