



HM Government

The experiences of individuals in the gig economy

February 2018

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Acknowledgements

This research was commissioned by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) with funding from DfE and undertaken by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES). The research was led by Andrea Broughton, Principal Research Fellow at the Institute for Employment Studies.

The report authors are: Andrea Broughton, Rosie Gloster, Rosa Marvell, Martha Green, Jamal Langley and Alex Martin.

The IES research team also included Joy Williams, who oversaw the analysis framework and carried out interviews, and Chiara Manzoni, Clare Huxley, Clare Everett, Duncan Brown, Kate Spiegelhalter, Evelyn Breese, Becci Newton, Kari Hadjivassiliou, Rachel Marangozov, Annette Cox and Stefan Speckesser, who, alongside the report authors, all carried out interviews.

The authors would like to thank Charley Lennard and Sophie Myers at Roots Research, who handled the recruitment of participants so smoothly and efficiently.

We are indebted to Eleanor Jones and her colleagues at BEIS and DfE for their guidance during this project and for helpful comments on the draft report.

Our thanks also go to Karen Patient at IES who provided administrative support to the project and who so efficiently managed the recruitment of our respondents. We would also like to thank Landor Graphics and Gillian Ludwig for transcribing the interviews.

Finally, the team would like to thank the interviewees who gave their time to be interviewed. They reflected candidly on their past and current circumstances and working lives, providing us with the rich data that is presented in this report.

Executive summary

Background

- There is no single, agreed definition of the gig economy; for the purposes of this report IES have used the following working definition:
- ‘The gig economy involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment-by-task basis.’

Methodology

- This research report contains the main findings of a qualitative research project based on 150 telephone and face-to-face interviews with individuals working in the gig economy. They were primarily asked about their motivations for undertaking this type of work, the nature of the work itself, and their experiences of using online platforms and finding and carrying out the work.
- The views expressed in this report are those of the respondents and not of BEIS. The information collected as part of this research, and the views expressed in this report, have been interpreted by IES.

Experiences of the gig economy

- This study highlights the diversity of the gig economy, both in terms of the types of individuals undertaking this work and the work that they are doing. Individuals come from a variety of backgrounds, with a range of differing experiences and skillsets, and find themselves undertaking gig economy work for a diverse range of reasons. The type of work that they undertake varies enormously, from unskilled physical work, such as cleaning and dog walking, through to office-type administrative and short online tasks, and driving and delivery work, to a range of skilled creative and professional work.
- The experience of individuals depends heavily on whether or not they are carrying out gig economy work as their main source of income. If this is the case, they are potentially vulnerable to fluctuations in working time and therefore pay levels, short notice of working schedules, and suffer from a degree of precariousness in terms of a lack of employment rights. A need for income also means that individuals may not have a choice about which work to accept.
- By contrast, where individuals are working in the gig economy in order to top up either individual or household income, they are less vulnerable to fluctuations in the amount of work available and also typically have more freedom to choose which jobs to accept and reject.

Employment rights

- Gig economy work is highly flexible and this is very much appreciated by those engaged in it, with many feeling that this flexibility is a fair trade-off for any lack of security and employment rights that resulted. We found little expectation of a more stable working environment. This is partly because many of those working in this way anticipated only doing so on a temporary basis; some expected that at some point that they would move into something else, even though they had no immediate plans to stop.
- The vast majority of gig economy workers, including some of those working for proprietary platforms in the taxi and delivery sector (i.e. those devised and managed by a specific company), felt that they were in control of their work in terms of its pace and scheduling and classed themselves as self-employed workers. However, in the case of some proprietary platforms it was reported that some exert more control than others over their workers in terms of providing branding, uniforms, other equipment, direction and control.

Skills

- The underlying skill level of individuals varied significantly, depending on the individual and the type of work in which they were engaged. The majority of gig economy workers were receiving no formal training and limited informal or on-the-job training. There was also limited opportunity for career progression. While this is not an issue if this way of working is temporary, it does become potentially more problematic, especially if younger people work in this way for a long time, as it could stymie skills acquisition and career development.

Planning for the future

- A large proportion of respondents were relatively content with their working life and had no expectation that it should be any different in terms of work flow, control and scheduling. However, there was a certain short-termism in that very few individuals were saving, or were able to save, any of their income. Most were not saving for their retirement. Those who had property rental income or a pension from a former period of employment were in a better position, but younger workers could potentially find themselves in a difficult financial position further on in their working lives.
- There is a rural/urban divide in terms of tasks that are tied to a specific location, such as taxi and delivery services, which are clustered in towns, due to higher population and business densities. As such, it would be difficult to expand these types of services into more rural locations.

Health and safety

- In terms of health and safety issues, support from online platforms in emergency situations was seen to be patchy. There were also some safety concerns surrounding checks carried out by platforms prior to individuals working in clients' homes or other private locations on a one-to-one basis.

Conclusion

- We found that experiences of the gig economy were very much dependent on the respondents' circumstances. Although the perceived advantages of working in the gig economy varied, the ability to work flexibly and the control this afforded individuals was a commonly-cited perception. However, some might find themselves financially vulnerable when working in this way, due to fluctuations in the amount of work available and a limited ability to save. Despite this, many seemed unquestioning of this flexible and patchwork working life, in which income is derived from a variety of sources. This may point to a change in overall attitudes to work for some groups in the UK.

1 Introduction and background

This research report contains the main findings of a qualitative research project based on 150 telephone and face-to-face interviews with individuals working in the gig economy. They were asked about their motivations for undertaking this type of work, the nature of the work itself, and their experiences of using online platforms and finding and carrying out the work. They were also asked about their working conditions, such as pay, working hours, health and safety, and control over pace and work scheduling. Questions were also asked about skills levels, skills gaps, training opportunities and views on career progression. Interviewees were asked about their savings habits and plans for the future, in terms of both work and personal goals.

The gig economy is a rapidly developing part of the UK's labour market. The growth of technology has enabled the development of online platforms to facilitate the matching of supply of and demand for work in a range of areas and involving a range of skills.

There is at present scant research on the actual size of this area of the labour market, and it is therefore difficult to assess how many individuals may be affected. A recent survey¹ carried out by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the European trade union UNI Europa found that around 11 per cent of online adults (around 5 million individuals) are being paid for work through online platforms. Further, 21 per cent of the survey respondents in the study said that they had used online platforms to seek paid work (although not necessarily successfully). In terms of users, 42 per cent said that they had used online platforms to find services, including taxi drivers, builders, graphic designers and accountants. Around 26 per cent of those interviewed in the study said that they earned more than half of their income through online platforms. It is, however, difficult to determine exactly what to measure and it may well be that official statistics are not capturing the latest developments in this fast-moving area.

In order to help monitor the growth of the gig economy, academics at Oxford University have developed an Online Labour Index (<http://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>), which provides the online gig economy equivalent of conventional labour market statistics. This index measures the use of online labour across countries and occupations by tracking the number of projects and tasks posted on platforms in near real time. For the UK, it shows that software development and technology are currently the most sought-after skills, followed by creative and clerical work. The index has found a strong relationship between the quantity of vacancies posted in a day and the quantity of vacancies filled, lending support to the idea that online work is 'on-demand' work, to which workers must adapt their schedules.

¹ FEPS and UNI Europa (2016), *Crowd working survey*. Available at: <http://www.fepeurope.eu/assets/a82bcd12-fb97-43a6-9346-24242695a183/crowd-working-survey.pdf>

Looking to the future, a study published in 2015 by the McKinsey Global Institute² estimated that by 2025, digital work platforms could add \$2.7 trillion, or 2.0 per cent, to global GDP, increasing employment by 72 million full-time equivalent positions. In the UK, that would mean around £45 billion and extra work for 766,000 individuals.

This study identified four categories of what they term independent workers: about 30 per cent are free agents, who actively choose independent work and derive their primary income from this; around 40 per cent are casual earners, who use independent work for supplemental income by choice; around 14 per cent are 'reluctants', who make their primary living from independent work, but would prefer traditional jobs; and around 16 per cent are the 'financially strapped', who do supplemental independent work out of necessity.

The government has been looking at this issue in recent years. In 2014, BIS published an independent review into how the government could support growth in the gig, or sharing, economy³. This review noted that advancements in the shared economy 'have the potential to turn the UK public into a nation of micro entrepreneurs – making money through the assets and skills that they already have, and saving money by accessing goods and services rather than buying them outright'. Following the review, a new membership body, Sharing Economy UK (SEUK) was launched in March 2015. It should be noted that the gig economy only includes an exchange of labour, whereas the sharing economy also includes an exchange of assets. SEUK has a remit to advocate the sharing economy, to set standards and to respond to the challenges emerging from this new, dynamic and potentially disruptive market. In response to the review, the government also announced a number of measures in the 2015 and 2016 Budgets to support the sharing economy. These included making it easier for tenants to sublet their rooms and introducing tax-free allowances aimed at income generated from activities in the sharing economy - two new £1,000 allowances for property and trading income were introduced in April 2017. In October 2016, the prime minister announced that she would set up a review into employment practices in the modern economy in order to ensure that employment regulation and practices are keeping pace with this area of the economy. The review, headed by Matthew Taylor, reported in July 2017⁴.

The overall idea of the gig economy tends to divide opinion, with some seeing it as a threat to working conditions, while others see it as an opportunity⁵. The debate acknowledges that it has the potential to generate income beyond traditional linear employment relationships and to enable individuals to work more flexibly. These new types of working arrangements allow individuals to work at any time and anywhere, which has positive consequences for those seeking more flexible work arrangements, such as people with

² Manyika J, Lund S, Bughin J, Robinson K, Mischke J, and Mahajan D (2016), *Independent work: Choice, necessity, and the gig economy*. McKinsey Global Institute. Available at: <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/employment-and-growth/independent-work-choice-necessity-and-the-gig-economy>

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/378291/bis-14-1227-unlocking-the-sharing-economy-an-independent-review.pdf

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/employment-practices-in-the-modern-economy>

⁵ Ilaria Maselli I, Lenaerts K and Beblavý M (2016), *Five things we need to know about the on-line economy*. CEPS Essay No. 21/ 8 January 2016.

caring responsibilities, mobility issues or older workers. In addition, those in full-time education also benefit from the flexibility that this way of working allows them. Further, the work arrangements that can be entered into in this way have few or no training costs and in general the barriers to entry are low, which allows a wider selection of individuals to generate new income or to supplement their income.

For the employer, online platforms can speed up the recruitment process, offer wider access to potential recruits and reduce the cost of hiring workers. On the risk side, it will still involve some level of screening, may require new protocols to be developed, and may not inspire the employer brand loyalty that is usual in more traditional forms of employment relationships.

However, there are concerns around worker protection, employment rights and social welfare coverage for individuals working in this way. One observable trend relates to several digital applications offering heightened work flexibility (in terms of work hours or workload), but limited employment protection, while maintaining an increasingly loose relationship with end users⁶. A study by the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC)⁷ notes that the debate here centres on the 'commoditisation' of the labour market. This is based on attempts by the employer to cut costs and avoid permanent hiring, particularly during the start-up phase of a business, or during difficult economic times, rather than workers' preferences to work flexibly. The literature also highlighted some debate about whether the legal distinction between an employee, a worker and a self-employed contractor can contribute to employers moving away from the traditional 'employer-employee' model of working and towards a 'firm-contractor' relationship instead. Self-employed 'gig workers' are engaged outside established systems of social security and the protections these afford, which means they may not have access to, among other things, pensions, statutory sick pay and holiday entitlement.

There is also a debate on whether a third category of worker is needed, alongside traditional employees and independent contractors, in order to classify work arranged through digital platforms⁸.

The potential downsides to the gig economy for workers may also include the obligation to always be available, which may increase the risk of stress and burn-out. For example, Broughton et al (2016)⁹ found that drivers in companies such as Uber can be exposed to risk of work intensification, stress and a blurring of the boundaries between working and non-working life.

⁶ Economist Jobs, Europe Economic Blog (2016). *How might the sharing economy affect the world of work?* Available at: <https://economistjobs.com/might-sharing-economy-affect-world-work/>

⁷ REC (2016), *Gig economy: The Uberisation of work*.

⁸ Eisenbrey R and Mishel L (2016), *Uber business model does not justify a new 'independent worker' category*. Economic Policy Institute. <http://www.epi.org/publication/uber-business-model-does-not-justify-a-new-independent-worker-category/>

⁹ Broughton A, Green M, Rickard R, Swift S, Eichhorst W, Tobsch V, Magda I, Lewandowski P, Keister R, Jonaviciene D, Ramos Martin N E, Valsamis D, Tros F (2016), *Precarious employment in Europe: patterns, trends and policy strategies*, European Parliament

Thought therefore needs to be given to achieving the right balance between flexibility and protection. Aeppel (2016)¹⁰ notes that many of those working in the gig economy very much like the freedom and flexibility that it gives them. However, ‘the problem is that workers can enjoy the benefits in the good times, but when business slows, they have no safety net’.

We hope that this qualitative research project will add to the stock of knowledge about gig economy workers, and in particular who they are, what they do, what their motivations are, and their overall experiences of working in this way.

¹⁰ Aeppel T (2016), *How the on-demand/gig economy is redefining work*. MIT IDE Research Brief Vol 2016 0.6

2 Methodology

Qualitative interviews

This report is based on the findings of qualitative research involving 150 semi-structured interviews using a discussion guide agreed with BEIS and which is contained in the Annex. A total of 125 interviews were carried out by telephone, with the remaining 25 carried out face-to-face. The interviews were carried out in five sectors/occupational clusters, as follows:

- Taxi/transport
- Professional/creative/high-skilled work
- Office/short online tasks/administration
- Physical low-skilled work
- Physical skilled work.

We were also mindful to gain a spread of interviews across the following cross-cutting themes:

- Whether the gig economy was the primary or supplementary income source
- The age of the interviewee
- Whether the interviewee had caring responsibilities
- Whether the interviewee suffered from any work-limiting health conditions
- Location, including the state of the local labour market.

For details, see Table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample segments and cross-cutting themes

	Taxi/ Transport	Professional/ creative/ high-skilled work	Office/short online tasks/admin	Physical low-skilled work	Physical skilled work
Target numbers for interviews (approx.)	30	30	30	30	30
Gig economy as...	Primary income source				
	Supplementary income source				
Household status	Students and/or young workers				
	Parents/carers				
	Work-limiting health conditions				
	Older adults				
Range of locations	Urban				
	Rural				
	Coastal				
	Buoyant labour market				
	Flat labour market				
UK nations	England				
	Northern Ireland				
	Scotland				
	Wales				

Recruitment of the sample

The recruitment of the sample was subcontracted by IES to Roots Research, which recruited the sample from its UK-wide panel of over 100,000 respondents. In addition, we topped up the sample via a combination of methods, such as placing an advert on the IES website, and using other professional and personal contacts. We gave cash incentives to participants, of £30 for telephone and £40 for face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face

interviews were carried out in public spaces, IES offices in London and Brighton, cafes and interviewees' homes.

Interviews were carried out between January and April 2017 and ranged between 25 and 60 minutes in length. Six pilot interviews were carried out (three telephone and three face-to-face), after which adjustments were made to the discussion guide.

Description of the sample

Table 2 below shows the number of interviews by sector. The total is 154 due to the fact that some interviewees were active in more than one sector. The category of professional/creative and high-skilled workers is the largest, encompassing a wide range of occupations, including actors, theatre directors, musicians, designers, website designers, consultants, artists and tutors. The category of physical skilled work is very small, due to the fact that those in this sector, such as plumbers, carpenters and electricians, do not tend to use online platforms in general to generate their work.

Table 2: Interviews by sector/occupation

Sector	Number
Taxi/transport	36
Professional/creative/high-skilled work	56
Office/short online tasks/admin	38
Physical low-skilled work	19
Physical skilled work	5

Table 3 below details the interview spread by location. Overall, London is the largest category, partly due to the fact that the London economy employs large numbers of gig economy workers, although there is a spread among the other locations, especially the south-east and north-west of England.

Table 3: Interviews by location

Location	Number	Location	Number
London	55	East Midlands	7
North West	24	West Midlands	7
South East	21	South West	6
Scotland	10	Northern Ireland	3

Location	Number	Location	Number
East of England	8	Wales	2
North East	8		

In addition to the broad location categories, 83 interviewees lived in urban locations, 46 in suburban locations, 12 in rural locations and 9 in coastal locations.

Table 4: Interviews by ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number	Ethnicity	Number
White/White European	106	Asian/Asian British	16
Mixed race	12	Pakistani	2
Black/African/ Caribbean/Black British	13	Latino	1

The vast majority of the sample (115) identified themselves as self-employed/freelance workers, with 18 saying that they were freelance alongside an employed job. Fourteen were students and three said that they were homemakers.

The gender split of the sample was 82 women and 68 men. The age split was 65 in the 18-25 category, 71 in the 26-49 category and 14 in the 50+ category. Forty one had children at home, while 109 did not.

In terms of the status of gig economy work, out of our sample of 150, 68 said that it was their primary source and 82 said that it was their secondary source.

Of the sample, 18 said that they had some sort of physical or mental health condition that affected their ability to work.

Overall, education levels were relatively high, with 67 having a university degree and 25 a postgraduate qualification. Eighteen had started but not completed university education, while two had a diploma, 25 had completed A levels or equivalent and 13 GCSEs or equivalent.

The individual platforms referenced the most frequently by respondents were PeoplePerHour (58 respondents), Freelancer (46), Upwork (36), Uber (18), Deliveroo (16), Clickworker (10) and TaskRabbit (9).

Interviewing and data analysis

The interviews were recorded, with permission from respondents, using encrypted Dictaphones. These recordings were then transcribed using a professional transcription organisation as well as the IES in-house transcription resource. The transcripts were analysed using Atlas.ti, which enabled systematic extraction and analysis of qualitative data. This was carried out manually by the research team, with regular quality control checks by the project manager. The transcripts were coded, and grouped into 'families' (i.e. descriptors) to allow easy and systematic retrieval of information falling under different headings. This report was written on the basis of the analysis of the data from the 150 transcripts of interviews.

3 Motivations for working in the gig economy

Summary

This section outlines the reasons why individuals choose to work in the gig economy. It looks firstly at how respondents' educational, employment, voluntary and personal histories have led them to find work through online platforms. The dominant motivations and drivers for working in the gig economy are then identified and explored.

There were wide varieties in terms of the level of education and qualification of respondents. The types of gig work undertaken also varied between those with different educational experiences. Respondents also had very diverse working histories. However, four common pathways can be identified as:

- those entering the gig economy to promote themselves as a freelancer for work in which they had previously been an employee;
- those who had previously worked in employed roles, but were currently working in the gig economy for a transitional period;
- those who were currently employed but who were using work found through online platforms to supplement their incomes; and
- those with little or no work history (mostly students).

The most widely reported motivation for wanting to work in the gig economy was the flexibility of the work, grouped into three types: individuals caring for family; students who needed flexibility alongside their studies; and individuals who had a preference for greater control over how their time was spent.

Respondents either earned their income solely through their gig economy jobs or used them to supplement their main household income. The former group can be seen as potentially more financially vulnerable, whereas the latter were more financially secure.

Educational history

There were wide varieties in terms of the level of education and qualification of respondents. The types of gig work undertaken also varied between those with different educational experiences. Respondents whose highest qualification was Level 3 (equivalent to A level) were more likely find work in the physical low-skilled, administration, and taxi and courier categories. These respondents were largely motivated by a need to supplement their income and a need for flexibility. For example, one respondent, who worked for Uber, had come to the UK from Italy with no formal education, wanting to work on a self-employed basis.

'Well, basically, I wanted to work where I can work self-employed all the time ... That's why I moved to the UK, and after a year I had the opportunity to be self-employed, to work with deliveries and stuff like that.'

Taxi/transport worker

Students in further or higher education also spoke of supplementing their income, supporting their studies and needing flexibility, although they tended to work in creative, professional and high-skilled jobs, as well as some of the lower-skilled categories. The quote below is from a student using online platforms to find catering jobs in order to earn additional income, and legal work, to follow their ambition to work in law.

'I hope to get a permanent job after I finish, ideally in the legal industry. I've done a range of different [gig] jobs - legal work, legal secretary - which is helpful for my CV. I've also done work more casual, just for the extra income. I've done work in the hospitality industry, the education sector. Those are the main ones.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Respondents also reported their ambitions for when they finished full-time education. Everyone who was working in their desired field believed that online platforms could be used to develop skills and build a professional network; this was particularly prevalent amongst respondents who were looking for or had found work in a professional or creative field. For example, one respondent graduated with a master's and used the platform ProductionBase to follow her post-education ambitions.

Work history

Respondents had very diverse working histories. However, four common pathways can be identified:

- The first is that of respondents who had entered the gig economy to promote themselves as a freelancer for work in which they had previously been an employee. This was prevalent amongst respondents offering a professional service and former taxi drivers who were now using the platform Uber. Economic recession and redundancy were two of the key reasons why professionals who were formerly employees had taken the decision to work on a freelance basis.

'I was made redundant from my main job in July, August 2015, and I signed up for self-employment in about November that year... So, having been working in broadcasting as a producer and a presenter for more than 20 years, I know how the media works. So, I started punting myself out as a freelance press and public relations consultant, which is what lots of journalists who lose their jobs do.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Professionals were also attracted to freelancing because of the perceived benefits of better pay, in some cases, and more flexible hours.

The majority of the Uber drivers in the sample had been previously employed by private hire taxi firms. Having a private hire licence and the relevant experience made it easier for former taxi drivers to make the transition to Uber.

'When I left school, obviously I'd left college and I was working at Tesco. From Tesco, I moved onto a family business. I was there for quite a bit. Yes. I was doing that for quite a bit. After that, I started doing taxis for private hire, and now I work for a company called Uber.'

Taxi/transport worker

- The second is that of respondents who had previously worked in 'traditional' roles, but were currently working in the gig economy for a transitional period. Many women said that they had left employment in order to look after their children, and that gig economy work allowed them to be flexible around their childcare commitments.

'I had always worked consistently, worked full-time for companies, but then after I'd had [my daughter], then it became more difficult because the demands were greater. And then I had a fall-out with the company that I was working with, because I couldn't work past six o'clock because of the childminding, so I left and set up on my own and freelanced.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Respondents with mental and physical health issues made the transition from employment to gig economy work because they felt that it was better suited to supporting their health and wellbeing. Respondents with mental health problems noted that they would like to return to employment one day when they were better.

- The third category is that of respondents who were currently employed but who were using work found through online platforms to supplement their incomes. Respondents with low- and high-skilled first jobs supplemented their income in this way. Some low-skilled workers reported that their first job was not providing them with the hours or pay to cover their cost of living.

Highly skilled and creative respondents similarly took work through online platforms to supplement their main income when work was infrequent. For example, this respondent had a first job as a self-employed commercial media manager:

‘For me, it’s been a way to try and bring in a little extra money, because I freelance and I don’t always know when I’m going to get the next job. I thought that was another way to supplement my income, especially with something like TaskRabbit ... It’s a great supplemental income. It may be good for people like writers, people that work from home that work in their own time and want to pick up a little extra income.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

- The fourth category is that of respondents with little or no work history. These were mostly students and all of their work had been short term and temporary.

Caring commitments

Many respondents had caring commitments in terms of looking after children and elderly or ill family members. For these individuals, the main motivation for working in the gig economy was the flexibility that it provided, enabling them to combine caring with earning an income.

‘I’m definitely not a stay-at-home mum, but when I came back to work I really struggled to do the job they wanted me to do, and that was because [of] the senior leadership as opposed to my competencies. I looked at how much we were paying for childcare and how much I wasn’t at home. As much as I was happy to work full-time, I didn’t have any home time either because I was still working through the night.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Voluntary work

Experiences of volunteering - as distinct from their activity within the gig economy - varied between respondent groups. Older participants were more likely to volunteer for organised charities in order to help out. Younger respondents also did charitable work, but were more likely to talk about ‘unpaid work’ when asked about volunteering.

Older people were more likely to report volunteering for the sake of the cause they were volunteering for, whereas younger participants more often wanted to volunteer in order to gain skills and experience, as in this case of an 18-29-year-old who undertook volunteering work to get the experience necessary for paid retail work:

‘When I first started, I did a bit [of volunteering], but I did it before, so it was just to get a retail job, and then I got one and I haven’t done it since.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Many of the respondents' voluntary work had a direct link to employed work that had been undertaken in the past. The majority of volunteering work had little to do with their gig economy work, with the exception of under 50s working in the creative fields. Those in the creative industries used unpaid and voluntary work in the same way they used their gig economy work: to gain experience and build their portfolio. One respondent remembered how she worked 'for free' to gain access to the television industry.

Other life events

A range of life events had motivated respondents to find work through online platforms, such as moving house, travelling and family breakdown or death. For some, it was a way of finding work quickly and giving them a chance to build up some work experience and contacts. For others, work through online platforms enabled them to work flexibly and/or at home while they were dealing with some serious family issues.

Reasons for working in the gig economy

The most widely reported motivation for wanting to work in the gig economy was the flexibility of the work. Respondents had many reasons for wanting flexibility, although there were three reoccurring motivators: individuals caring for family; students who were in need of flexibility alongside their studies; and individuals who had a preference for greater control over how their time was spent.

The platforms encompass work opportunities from a broad range of sectors, which meant that respondents across different occupational groups also had different reasons for working in this way. Reasons for working in the gig economy included: a belief that the gig economy was the future of work; attempts to pursue a dream job; an opportunity to earn additional income while individuals pursued a specific goal; an opportunity to gain work experience; and the fact that working conditions were better suited to those with physical and mental health problems.

For a minority of respondents, working in the gig economy was not a choice, but resulted from them being unable to find employed work, having been made redundant or needing to supplement the income from their main employed job.

Flexibility

Flexibility as a carer

Although both female and male respondents reported having children at home, female respondents with caring responsibilities were far more likely to cite this reason as a motivator for working in the gig economy, as it allowed them to fit in work around childcare responsibilities. For example, low-skilled physical workers such as cleaners working through platforms such as Mopp chose work at times and locations that were ideal for their childcare commitments. In addition, respondents who carried out administration and professional work were able to look after small children by working from home.

‘Obviously it doesn’t come with benefits like holiday and sick pay, pensions, all those things. I suppose that’s the downside, but the freedom and the take-home pay and the variety of work I get to do far outweighs that, and actually what really outweighs it all is being able to take my children to school and pick them up. And as I’m effectively a full-time mum, I am with them at every point where they need me to be with them, but I’m still working part-time as well. It’s kind of a holy grail.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

The need for flexibility around caring also extended to those who had caring responsibilities for family members who were elderly or sick.

‘My mum’s also elderly so I have to look after her as well, so that’s another caring thing I have to factor into the week... which you don’t get paid for. You have to try and earn as much as you can in between.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker, also working as office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Flexibility as a student

Respondents who were studying had decided to find gig economy work because it provided them with the flexibility to supplement their main income from scholarships, loans and their parents whilst meeting their educational commitments.

‘It’s very flexible. I think it’s probably more flexible than a lot of, sort of, ‘traditional’ jobs, because I’m pretty much on a zero hours contract really, so I don’t have to do a certain number of hours per week. If I’m allocated shifts, but I can’t work them because something comes up, it’s very easy for me to just go online on the website and sort of request an absence, and it’ll get through within a couple of hours usually. So, it’s a very flexible job, which, as a student - I’m on quite an intense course – [is] ideal really, because if I’ve got exams or assignments to complete, I can just opt out when I need to.’

Taxi/transport worker

Flexibility as a preference

Respondents across all occupations reported working through online platforms because they had a preference for flexibility. They preferred to manage their own time as their ‘own boss’ and did not want to be in a hierarchy or an office environment.

'I need to be in charge, and I just decided life is too short, and I decided I don't want a career; I want to live comfortably, but ... When I worked in production, I was travelling to Soho every day, two hours one way, back. You don't have a life.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

'When you're driving and you're self-employed, you don't really have people on top of you, but when you're in an office or a call centre or doing customer service, you always have someone on top of you. You are your own boss when you're self-employed. You work for yourself. So, if you put in the effort, you get the outcome. If you don't put in the effort then you're just putting yourself into trouble. There's no one there to nag at you and give you a headache all the time.'

Taxi/transport worker

Income

Respondents either earned their income solely through their gig economy jobs or used them to supplement their main household income. The former group can be seen as potentially more vulnerable, whereas the latter more financially secure.

Those who used gig economy work to provide their main income or as a necessity to supplement other sources of income needed their gig work to help to cover the cost of living, and some stated that they were struggling to pay rent and bills. The following quote is from an individual who worked 40 hours per week in their day job and had to work additional hours as a taxi driver on the weekends.

'The amount of work that I would like if my day job had been a bit ... paid better... For sure, I would do just one job. Much better. With only the day job, I cannot afford to live. It's so hard. I mean, it's paying the bills.'

Taxi/transport worker

Another respondent used online platform work as a courier to supplement their fluctuating income on a zero hours contract.

'Because I'm on zero hours, they can't contract [my] hours, so I might only get 16 hours per week, which means I have to take on small delivery jobs to make up my wages, basically.'

Taxi/transport worker

Those respondents who used their gig economy work to earn some supplementary household income for non-essentials were in a more privileged position. Many had adequate income from other sources, such as a partner's income. In their case, gig economy work income was being used to top up savings, save up for something specific or tide them over until they decided what they wanted to do, while their partner covered basic outgoings.

The gig economy as the future of work?

Some respondents believed that the gig economy was the future of how people would find work. They felt that the gig economy was beneficial to their personal career development and/or beneficial to the platforms and consumers. These respondents believed that these benefits would perpetuate the use of working through online platforms into the future and many wanted to be ahead of the competition.

For those in the sample who were professional, creative and high-skilled freelancers, the gig economy was seen as the future because it was somewhere that they could advertise their services online and expand their client base, in some cases fulfilling the functions of an agent. For example, this respondent reflects on recruitment and casting in acting, noting that online platforms enable them to profile themselves to greater benefit:

'I'm on Spotlight Digital website now, but at the time I was in one directory, and if you had all the directories from just that one year you'd have about 13 and each one was the size of a phone book, an old phone book, a big doorstep thing. You could tell at a glance that you had no chance. You were lost in images in a book. People would only really find your image if they were actually looking for you. As a newly qualified actor, that just wasn't going to happen. Things were really vastly different when I graduated.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Respondents working as taxi drivers and couriers acknowledged that their way of working had been reinvented by the advent of platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo. They felt that their personal safety has been improved because drivers no longer carried cash and customers were identifiable through their bank accounts and social media profiles. The way in which the system matches drivers with clients is also seen as a fairer and more efficient system than that of the 'traditional' operators. Further, one Uber driver said that they made the transition from working for a minicab firm, due to an issue with their former employer; and saw Uber as a fairer system:

'My main concern was, with the taxis, what you find is that if you work with the 'traditional' firms, the people who are answering the phone calls and sending the jobs through to drivers ... They start messing about with the work. They'll keep the good jobs and they'll give them to their friends who are working as taxi drivers, and that's with every firm now. It became an accepted thing within taxis.'

Taxi/transport worker

Other taxi drivers described how they had begun to work in the gig economy because it was the future of the industry, as traditional firms could not compete on price. Respondents working for Uber noted how the platform was able to provide customers with a high-quality and cheap service. Some respondents stated that they had moved to Uber because they felt as though that was their main chance to find work in the taxi sector.

'I was looking for a firm in Manchester and it was really quiet, to be honest. When Uber kicked off, it was customers ride for free for the first few rides, £15 credit, all kinds of things, offering drivers money to join. They put in a lot of the work. With other firms you can probably make money as well, but you're sat around longer.'

Taxi/transport worker

However, some expressed concerns about the growth of Uber in terms of taking on more and more drivers, which makes it harder for individual drivers to earn their living.

Pursuing the dream job

Professional, creative and high-skilled freelancers were the group most likely to say that they were pursuing their ambitions by working in the gig economy. Online platforms were especially popular with actors, who saw these websites as essential, either as a substitute for a traditional agent or an additional way in which to find work. Unlike the majority of respondents, these individuals saw their gig economy work as permanent rather than a transitional 'stopgap'.

'I went back into pursuing my chosen field, which is obviously performing arts or acting... I think I was the start of a new generation of actors, because when I came out in 2010, Casting Call Pro and Spotlight... I think. There are still a collection of actors, even people of my own age, who are in their late 20s, who are like, "Oh, I don't do social media. I don't do Facebook or Twitter or anything," and there is so much work on the internet that you've got to embrace it or not be doing acting work.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

A number of respondents working in physical low-skilled jobs and office, short tasks and administration jobs were likely to have career aspirations that they were using their gig economy work to fund. Many of these goals were creative and required individuals to be very flexible with their time.

Health reasons

Respondents with physical and mental health issues were particularly in evidence amongst those working in office, short tasks and administration jobs on account of the fact that they could work from home. Respondents with mental health issues said that they felt that employed work was not suitable, as they found it too stressful due to factors such as workload. However, some said that their work through online platforms was temporary and was helping them to transition back into employment.

Many respondents with physical health issues preferred to work from home as this was more comfortable for them and they avoided any commute. For some, this was a lasting solution, whereas for others who were getting over a particular injury or issue, it was seen as more of a temporary situation.

'I also had a physical injury or a health problem a couple of years back, which added to the fact that I couldn't physically go to work and commute, etc. So, aside from the time that it took me to recover physically without basically doing any work, after that, it was much easier for me to work on my own terms, with my own schedule.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Gaining work experience

Some respondents working in office, short tasks and administration jobs and professional, creative and high-skilled jobs saw their gig roles as work experience that could lead to employed work. They felt that the gig economy work was an opportunity to use skills practically, develop new skills, build a CV or portfolio and network with potential future employers.

'I'm doing it because it's good, like because it's professional, in the sense that people are going to pay people to do stuff on there. I'm doing it because that way I can say to people who are willing to actually pay me proper money, "Oh, yeah, look. I've done some paid work," you know, and so that's the main thing, I guess, and it's good practice for me.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Box 1: Individual gig economy workers – delivery rider and student

One respondent in his early 20s was a student studying for an undergraduate degree in Film Studies, in his third year. He wanted to work in the wildlife filmmaking industry in future, and also spent time volunteering on film shoots, undertaking roles such as runner or helping with camerawork in order to gain experience. Alongside his studies, he worked between 25 and 30 hours per week as a delivery rider on a bicycle as he was also a keen cyclist and owned his own bike. He was attracted to working in this way as it was very flexible and could fit around the demands of his university course and voluntary film work to build his portfolio.

He applied to the firm and then undertook a trial shift, where he met up with a more senior rider, who shadowed him and assessed his road awareness. He attended a road safety briefing, where they recommended that he obtain insurance and he then collected his branded equipment, which included the delivery box, a cycling jersey, branded t-shirt and jacket, and a power bank to charge a smartphone out on the road. The equipment required a £150 deposit and was paid for via pay cheques over a number of weeks. When the respondent does not want to work with the app any more, he will then return the equipment and should receive a refund of his deposit.

The app makes projections of likely busy periods on a weekly basis. The respondent tended to choose to work during the projected busy periods in order to maximise his pay, as he was paid on a per drop basis, and the rate of pay per drop was also higher on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. He could earn £4.25 per drop instead of £3.75, which was the rate during the week. The rate per drop could be more, up to £6.50, if there was very high demand. The respondent sometimes received texts from the company's head office outlining a higher rate for the evening in order to encourage more riders onto the roads to meet demand.

He had decided not to work for a short period of time just prior to the interview, as he was away filming, and appreciated the fact that he could switch back onto the app and start riding when he liked. He commented that an alternative job with shifts and rotas would not give him as much flexibility as easily.

'I think it's just such a breath of fresh air, especially hearing people that I know who are in these jobs that probably on average get paid less... Although it is a corporate company and you are directly involved with other large corporate companies, it doesn't feel like that as a business. It feels a lot more informal. It feels a lot more casual. Free really.'

He was extremely positive about working in the gig economy during this period in his life:

'I know I'm not going to be working for them forever and there will be a time when I need to leave the job and pursue the career I want to go into, but I finish my course in May and I expect to work until at least the end of this summer, 2017, and until a better job becomes available really. Without any other engagements in the week, if I was really going for it and working 40/50/60 hours a week, you know, you can make a really obscene amount of money!'

Redundancy

Some respondents in the professional and creative fields started to work on a freelance basis when they were made redundant. Rather than seeing this as a negative experience, many saw becoming self-employed as a positive transition, as it was something that they had planned to do. These skilled freelancers used their gig economy platforms to advertise their services.

Box 2: Individual gig economy workers – voiceover worker, nearing retirement

One respondent was a 58-year-old man who lived with his wife, and three adult children, who were at home due to the high housing costs in their area. His wife and children were all in full-time employment. He was two years from retirement and had accepted a redundancy package from his previous employment in a telecommunications company in 2005, which allowed him to pay off his mortgage. He started to work for that company as an apprentice in 1977 and subsequently worked his way up the company to the level of director. After accepting the redundancy package, he decided to find work as a narrator and voiceover artist because colleagues had suggested that he had the voice for this. He used the online platforms Voices Pro, Voices.com, Spotlight and Voices123 to find work. His working hours varied from week to week:

'I can go two/three weeks without actually doing anything, and it can be zero and then I can be, you know, totally busy for two or three weeks on the trot.'

He had found his time doing platform work to be enjoyable, preferring its flexibility to the 'rat race' of his previous 9-5 work. He also said that he had found out that he could exist on a significantly lower salary than previously and had a lot more freedom, autonomy and opportunities to improve his health and wellbeing. He noted that after three months away from full-time employment, the positive effect on his wellbeing and health was visible to his friends. He therefore fully appreciated the trade-off between income and flexibility, especially at this point in his life.

Although the respondent enjoyed working through online platforms, he acknowledged that it would be difficult to work in this way if an individual were relying on this for their sole income. In his case, the security provided by his wife working and the fact that they owned property allowed him to work in this way. He used the income he earned as a voiceover artist to cover his living costs and top up his savings while he waited for his pension to become available.

4 Experiences of working in the gig economy

Summary

This section provides an overview of the key features of the nature of the work that respondents were finding through the gig economy. This provides the context for and shapes respondents' experience of interacting with online platforms. Respondents' experiences of the online platforms is then explored, first from the perspective of finding and undertaking work, and then, once a task is complete, of quality assurance, payment and client feedback.

Our sample was very diverse, including respondents undertaking work in a range of sectors. Their experiences of finding work through online platforms varied according to a range of factors, such as: whether they were looking for one or a variety of types of work; the location of the customer and the point of service delivery; how exposed they were to competition for work, both nationally and internationally; the degree of demand for skills; the length of task; and the degree of dependency on online platforms.

After the gig work was completed, the experience of and interaction with the online platforms continued to vary, although most platforms had some form of quality assurance process. Customers were commonly asked by the platforms to provide feedback and score the service provided.

Online platforms typically facilitated the transfer of payment from the customer to the freelancer via an escrow system, whereby the platform holds and regulates payment of the funds from the customer to the gig worker. Although this meant that the platform often took a percentage of the fee charged, respondents generally viewed this as a positive service and a key benefit as they felt more assured that they would receive payment for their work.

An overarching theme was that there was a perceived lack of ways to communicate in a timely and effective way between the freelancer and the platform, in order to resolve technical issues or queries, which could also have health and safety implications.

Nature of the work

Respondents worked across a number of industrial sectors, undertaking a variety of tasks they found through online platforms. The sample included respondents undertaking professional work, those working in the creative industries, for example as actors, individuals working in the digital media sector in areas such as social media marketing and user experience testing, and in administrative and clerical roles such as translators and administrative assistants. The sample also included dog walkers, cleaners, delivery drivers, and skilled tradespeople such as painters and decorators. Some of the online platforms used by respondents are specific to a sector or type of work, such as Uber to transport, and others offer access to a number of types of work, such as Freelancer. For

an overview of the main platforms that feature in this research, see the Glossary at the end of the report.

Several background factors provided the context for and underpinned respondents' experiences of finding work through online platforms. They included:

- **The number of different types of work sought:** Respondents varied as to whether they sought one or more types of work. Some sought a variety of related work, such as one individual who undertook general administrative tasks such as creating spreadsheets, undertaking basic bookkeeping, and client calling. Other respondents had 'portfolio careers' where they sought a series of different, unconnected types of work, such as one individual who sought virtual PA work and cleaning work. Respondents who sought one type of work tended to find work through platforms offering delivery or transport services, or have a particular platform that they used, liked and from which they secured a sufficient volume of work and income.
- **The location of the customer and the point of service delivery:** The nature of some services meant that they needed to be delivered in person and the gig worker was located in the same geographic area as the customer, for example with dog walking services, or individuals assembling flat-pack furniture. The availability and nature of these tasks therefore depended on the buoyancy of the local labour market, the density of the population and the physical connectivity of the local area linking respondent to gigs, as this respondent discussed:

'The majority of them are within a few miles, I live in south-east London ... So, the majority of them are within a few miles of that, but if there's one that's, like, a whole day of work then I'll go, sort of, north London or further out. Quite often there's jobs further east as well.'

Physical low-skilled worker

Other tasks, such as translation work, could be delivered remotely, and the customer could be located elsewhere in the UK or abroad. While some respondents were happy with this arrangement, others recounted concerns about being paid in a different currency, and some felt unsure about the legal status of work undertaken for clients based abroad, as one respondent working in social media marketing recalled:

'Jobs come in from all over the world, obviously across the UK and often countries in Africa. That's interesting. I think that made me quite nervous. I normally bid for jobs that were within the UK because I wasn't sure of how it worked legally and I didn't really know where I stood if I didn't get paid. I didn't go down that route.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

- **Location and size of competition:** When a task could be undertaken remotely, gig workers could be in competition with other individuals nationally and internationally. The scale and intensity of competition could make it incredibly challenging to secure work

and to build an online profile, as these respondents explained. The first worked as a voiceover artist and the second in music production:

‘So, even though there’s lots of people posting on Upwork all the time, really, compared to... When you consider it’s worldwide and the amount of people that are on the site, it’s still very difficult. I mean, to be fair, I’ve got two jobs through Upwork, but that was over the course of two months. So, it does take a while.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

‘It’s a bit of a race to the bottom. You bid against other people for a job, whether it’s doing some mixer tracks or a video edit or something like that. The trouble is you’re up against people in the Far East or India and Pakistan. You just can’t compete with the rates that they’re willing to [offer].’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Some respondents had also found that the services they provided via platforms in a geographically restricted area and in person, such as transport, could experience an imbalance in supply and demand. Specifically in the case of taxi drivers, this was often due to an increase in the number of new drivers who were using online platforms to find work.

- **Degree of demand for skills:** Respondents with specialist skills, particularly those relating to technology, or those with more general skills in combination with specialisms, tended to find there was greater demand for their skills and services. This positively affected both the ease with which they could find work and build a profile, as well as the pay rate they received.
- **Length of task:** The nature of the work undertaken by respondents was diverse in its duration. At its shortest, respondents undertook ‘clickwork’, consisting primarily of very short online tasks and paid per ‘click’. These tasks could involve checking links worked and stating preferences for the usability of websites or from a range of product photographs, for example. In this type of work, individuals were commissioned to undertake the same tasks concurrently.

‘In Clickworker, it would tend to be very repetitive work where there might be an assignment to either look at different websites, for example. If I can remember, one maybe was September last year where I had to look at various websites and make comments about whether the layout of the screen was conducive to somebody coming to the website, being able to find easily what they were looking for. I maybe had to look at several different screens. It was a timed exercise and the reward or pay for that would have been relatively low.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Some ‘gig work’ could last a few minutes and other work could take up to several months in duration.

- **Dependency on online platforms as a source of work:** Some respondents recounted starting out working via online platforms and how their sources of work had diversified over time. This tended to build their resilience. In general, respondents other than those working in the transport sector tended to report that they also generated work from other avenues, such as repeat business, personal contacts and word-of-mouth referrals. Respondents tended to build these contacts and obtain these opportunities over time, and typically recalled that the most interesting and lucrative work they undertook came through these other sources. One respondent working as a proofreader explained how the source of the work they delivered had changed over time:

‘Yes. To an extent, I can now [choose the work I want]. When I first started, no - I just had to do whatever to pay the bills. I can choose more now, and because I have met these people through platforms and they’ve become long term clients off the platform, it does allow me to be a bit choosier and it means that it makes up 75 per cent of my work. The other 25 per cent ... Okay, if it’s a bit more of a boring admin task it’s not so bad because I know the majority of what I’m doing is interesting.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

- **Dependency on one platform versus the use of several platforms:** The nature of the work respondents undertook, and the extent to which they had clear and focused career aims, was linked to whether they used one platform, or multiple platforms to find work. It was common for respondents working as drivers for platforms such as Deliveroo or Uber to solely find work via these platforms. The prevalence and choice of platforms was explicitly mentioned by some respondents. These examples illustrate some responses from users about the diversity of platforms available:

‘I certainly did a bit of research as to which platforms were viable, the most used, just reading through blogs, reading through reviews.’

Physical low-skilled worker

‘Well, it is often the case that platforms run out of jobs. So, in order to ensure a steady supply whenever I want them, I need to use more than one, in order that there’s always something available.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Experiences of using the platforms

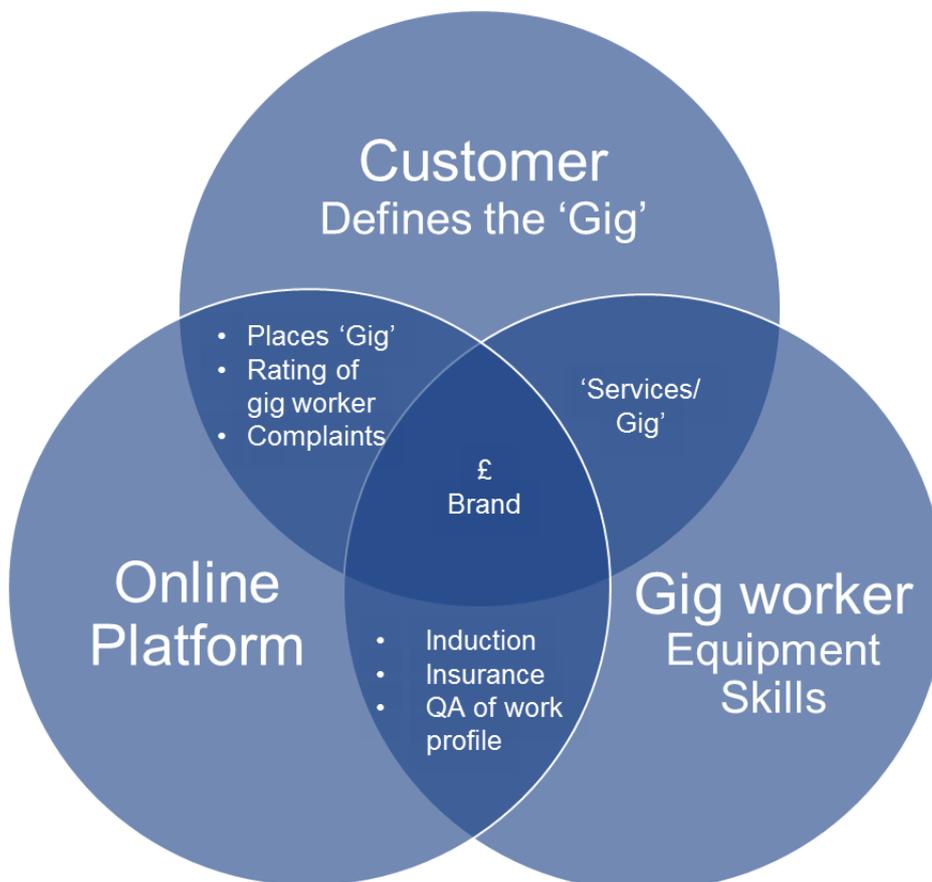
How online platforms, customers and gig workers interact

Respondents in the sample used a variety of online platforms to find work, including Freelancer, Upwork, Bark, Uber and Deliveroo. Each platform engages with freelancers and customers in a slightly different way, but generally the customer defines the ‘gig’ or the nature of the work to be undertaken and places it onto the platform. Before exploring respondents’ experiences of using online platforms, Figure 1 summarises the main ways in

which the customer, online platform, and individual engage with each other. Some aspects of the transaction involve all three parties, whereas others involve just two of them in combination.

- **Gig worker and platform:** The gig worker brings their skills and equipment to the work, and liaises with the platform, firstly by building an online profile. Some platforms also require workers to have an induction. Some provide workers with insurance, for example covering them if the work they are carrying out in someone's home causes damage, and depending on the nature of the work. Some platforms also quality-assure a sample of the gig worker's work – for example, the accuracy of their translations.
- **Customer and platform:** The customer may use the platform to rate the service provided by the individual and can sometimes access and implement a complaints procedure, should it be necessary.
- **The gig work and customer:** The gig worker and customer interact during the provision of the service or product.
- **The platform, gig worker and customer:** All three parties typically interact in setting pay and making the financial transaction. It was common for the platform to provide an escrow service for payment between the commission and completion of the work (usually taking a percentage fee).

Figure 1: Nature of interaction between customer, gig worker and online platform

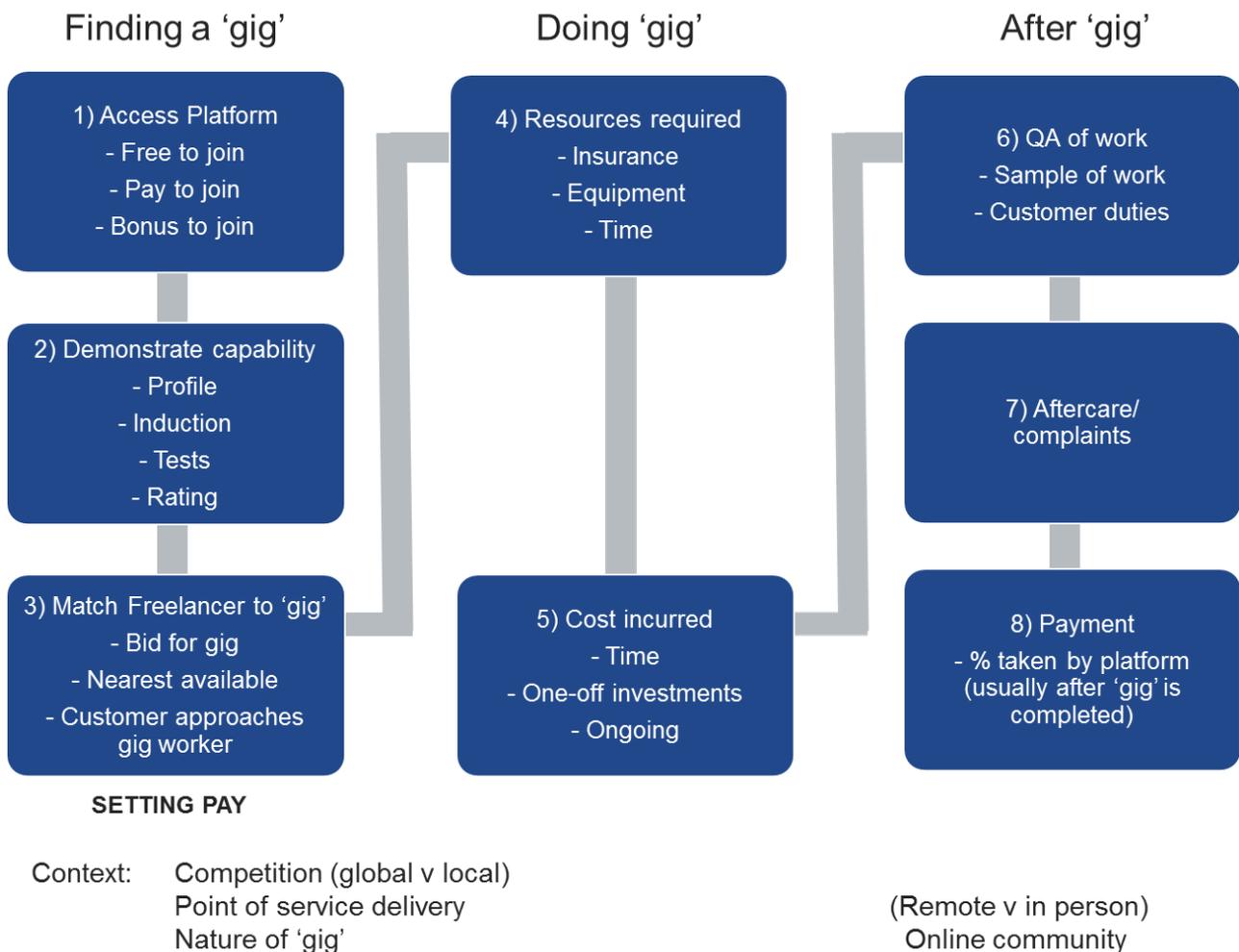


Source: IES, 2017

Experiences of finding work through online platforms

Figure 2 provides an overview of the steps involved in using online platforms to find and undertake work. After providing an overview of how customers and gig workers interact with online platforms, this section follows the process mapped in Figure 2 and describes how our respondents found work as a result of accessing online platforms, demonstrated their capability and were matched to gigs. Next, it explores the resources required, and the costs incurred by respondents in order to deliver the work. Lastly, it details gig workers' experiences of the platforms after they had completed a gig, including how the quality of their work was assessed, and the processing of payment. It is important to note that there is significant variation in the process of engagement between different online platforms and individuals that use them to find work. Where these differences affected respondents' experiences, these are drawn out.

Figure 2: Overview of experience of online platforms



Accessing the platform

Respondents discussed the ways in which they accessed online platforms. Many were free, others had subscriptions, and some in the transport sector offered bonuses to join.

The online platforms used by most respondents were free to access, to set up a profile, and to then seek work, as one respondent working as a handyman explained:

'When I first found out about it, [I was] very sceptical, then I was amazed to just have a job which lasted two weeks, within half an hour. It's fantastic really. It beats any other stream of getting in contact with people that I've come across.'

Physical skilled worker

Other online platforms, particularly those specialising in roles in the creative industries, required individuals to subscribe and pay to join, either annually or monthly, in order to be able to view work opportunities.

Respondents in other sectors discussed the pros and cons of subscribing to online platforms in order to access work. One individual at the start of a career in social media management had decided to try to first explore other free avenues and online platforms before subscribing to platforms. Another respondent who worked as a translator described two tiers of access to work within one of the platforms they used, depending on whether or not they paid to be a member. If you were a paying member, then it was possible to apply for a job as soon as it was posted. If you were not a paying member, you could only reply 24 hours after the work had been advertised. Frequently, a supplier had already been found within this time period. There could also be other advantages to subscribing to platforms in that subscribers could see more detail, such as comments from other workers.

Another respondent who worked in the creative industries described another paying option available on an online platform, whereby individuals could pay a fee to be guaranteed a higher place towards the top of the platform's search engine returns when customers were searching.

In the transport sector, a number of respondents said that they had been eligible for a bonus when they joined the online platform, and that financial incentives were also available to the friends that recommended and referred them to the company.

Demonstrating capability

Once respondents had accessed an online platform, on most sites, in order to be able to look for work they were required to create an online profile, demonstrating the skills and experience they had in the type of work they were seeking. Some respondents included links to their own websites or work portfolios online, and others included references. Some respondents described tests that the online platform invited them to complete, the results from which would form part of their online profile and which they hoped would demonstrate and verify the quality of their skills.

‘There are loads of different tests that you can take ... If you finish them and complete them, they’ll show up on your profile. So anyone who’s looking for someone to do a job ... They can see how good you are at certain areas ... Then there’s a UK English basic skills test that I did. I’m in the top ten per cent, it says... just to add a little bit of extra weight to your quote, to say, you know, “I’ve proven that I can actually do this to a good level.”’

Physical low-skilled worker

Respondents described ratings from previous customers as a very important part of their online profile. When first accessing the platform and building a presence that would demonstrate their capability, some respondents strategically lowered their prices to win work and gain the opportunity to be reviewed. Others described the pressure of needing to build a record of positive online feedback on the platform.

‘It works on a rating basis. So, there are some users who I’d say have been on Upwork for a long time that do have a lot of high ratings on language, so [customers] are more likely to employ somebody who had a good rating rather than somebody who has no rating at all. So, in order to get your first job, I think you have to go very down with your prices... At the very beginning, you want to try to do your very best if you want to impress people, and you know that everything depends on your rating and your capability.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

‘There’s really no choice. Once I had good feedback, then there would have been better jobs for me to take, but when you first start, you’ve got no choice but to take the rubbish jobs.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Respondents working as drivers for Deliveroo and Uber described a different process for demonstrating their capability for working via the online platform. These platforms have a physical presence in the geographies in which they are operating and an office. Individuals who have successfully applied online are invited to attend a meeting with representatives from the platform to review their documents and to receive an induction and overview about how the online platform works. Respondents who were car drivers recalled how they had to demonstrate that they had insurance and other relevant paperwork. Respondents who conducted deliveries using a bicycle explained that Deliveroo had checked the safety of their bike and fitted the delivery box, as well as issuing other safety and branded equipment necessary for them to work for the platform.

Matching workers to gigs

In the sample of respondents, there were generally four ways in which online platforms matched individuals to ‘gigs’: gig workers making bids to customers; individuals who were located nearest; customers approaching workers; and contests. Clickworkers, where many

individuals undertook the same tasks, were allocated slightly differently and the allocation was not competitive.

The most frequently discussed was a bidding system, where individuals would respond to an advert posted by a customer to undertake a specific task. The contextual factors described above, such as the location of the customer, the point of service delivery and the location of the competition affected respondents' experiences of the success they had finding work via this route. The speed of response to an advert was perceived to be paramount in whether an application would be successful, particularly if it was a task delivered remotely.

'You have to send a proposal very quickly, as soon as the adverts appear, and you have to make your pitch and make yourself stand out, and it's been a bit of a needle in a haystack as to whether you get contacts for that. They're very competitive. There could potentially be hundreds and thousands of people applying in a matter of minutes, so that's quite tough in some ways. Also, you have to sell yourself, and say, "I'm available," if you want this sort of work.'

Creative/professional/high-skilled worker

Pace and scheduling is further discussed in Chapter 5 (Control over pace and scheduling).

In order to respond to adverts, or to an approach from a potential customer, and to have access to the customer's contact details, some platforms, usually those not offering an escrow service, required gig workers to use 'credits'. Sometimes a small number of credits were supplied free when an online profile was opened; subsequently, they needed to be paid for by the freelancer.

Respondents working as drivers or riders for online platforms described how the work tended to go to the individual who was available and located as close as possible to the pick-up point. For example:

'The system works in a way that the closer you are to a restaurant ... If you're the closest person to that restaurant when they send out a request for a rider, you will be asked to go. So, it works on a complete proximity basis. So, you kind of have to position yourself in a strategic position between all the restaurants that usually have the most orders, basically.'

Taxi/transport worker

One group of respondents, particularly those using technical or specialist skills, or undertaking high-skilled work, said that they also accessed work via online platforms as a result of customers making direct approaches to them, based on the content of their online profile. Each felt that when direct approaches were made to them, this had resulted in better-quality and more lucrative work, as the skills they had were in demand, as this social media manager and electronic engineering consultant explained:

'If a customer is looking, they might research people with profiles that matches their criteria, and they might come to you directly, and that way round I managed to get my most lucrative long-term contract. They approached me. I found that to be the best way.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Within the sample, there was one example of a respondent applying to a contest that had been posted on an online platform seeking responses to a creative brief. After receiving responses, the customer would then chose the one they liked best and pay a fee.

Experiences of undertaking work through online platforms

This section explores respondents' experiences of the resources required and costs incurred in undertaking the work they successfully accessed via online platforms. The resources required and the costs involved in fulfilling the work were heavily dependent on the nature of the task, and for drivers in the transport sector the costs incurred are notably consistent regardless of the success they have in securing work.

Resources required

Depending on the nature of the work they undertook in the gig economy, respondents made use of varying types of equipment. All reported that they had access to the internet via a smartphone and/or computer. For those delivering desk-based services, a computer and some basic software packages could be all they needed, and in general respondents seemed very cost-sensitive, only purchasing additional software if it was absolutely essential. If software they did not have was required to undertake a gig, then some respondents said they would not bid for the work, and others said they would see whether the customer would purchase the software as part of the job.

Other respondents had purchased expensive equipment in order to be able to bid for work, such as a respondent undertaking voice artist work from home, who had transformed a bedroom into a home studio, complete with sound insulation.

Respondents working in the transport sector discussed the resources they needed. For those working for Deliveroo and using bicycles, they needed to provide their own bicycle and to use branded equipment that was hired whilst they worked for the company, with an amount each week deducted from their pay until they had paid off the cost. This was then refunded when they left the company and returned the equipment, as these two riders explained:

'You don't have to get insurance. They do encourage it, but you don't have to get it. Yeah, you provide your own bike. A pretty good thing is that although you do pay £150 deposit, that does come out of your pay cheque until you pay it off. That can only be taken out at max 50 per cent a time. So you'll only ever have 50 per cent of your pay cheque taken out to go towards your deposit.'

Taxi/transport worker

'The whole cost for the equipment cost £150, which is subtracted from the first payment, but it's like they say; it's like a warranty, because when you take it back you get back your money.'

Taxi/transport worker

Car drivers needed to have a working car, insurance, and taxi plates if they were working for Uber. Some respondents working in other sectors said they were encouraged by the platforms they worked with to have insurance, and one respondent undertaking general handyman work described that the work he undertook as a result of connections made via one online platform was covered by the platform's insurance:

'You are employed for up to half a million pounds worth of damage ... There was a guy who asked me to come and hang a huge TV on his wall and he didn't ask me through TaskRabbit. He just said, "Will you come and do it?" I'm happy to do it, but I'd actually rather in this case ... I'd rather you booked me through TaskRabbit and I'd sacrifice the 30 per cent, just in case anything happened to your brand new TV so the insurance covers it. So, the insurance is kind of one of the positive things that they offer.'

Physical low-skilled worker

The working time of some respondents was facilitated via an app, and generally these were felt to be very intuitive and easy to use, as this respondent discussed:

'So, I have the driver app for delivery on my phone. So, you get given that when you start working for them, and when I start my shift, I cycle to whatever zone I'm working in. I log into the app once I'm there and then I'm available to receive orders, and if I get an order through, I'll get a notification on the app, just saying you've got an order. So, you have to just swipe across to accept it and then it tells you what restaurant it is, and if you don't know where it is, you can link it up to Google Maps, find the restaurant, swipe to say you've arrived. Then you get given an order number, and so you go in and you ask for that order number and they'll give you the food, and I also get a checklist on my app of what should be in that order, and then I swipe to say I've collected it. Then, it tells me the customer's name and address and it also gives me access to their phone number, if I need to ring them if I get there and can't find the right entrance or something like that. So, I cycle to where they live, swipe to say that I've arrived, give them the food, then swipe to say I've delivered the food and then cycle back to the front of the zone and wait for the next order.'

Taxi/transport worker

Costs incurred

Several respondents discussed the time it took them to bid for and find work via online platforms. In many types of work, this could be undertaken only at the cost of the

individual's time, although some types of work were notably different. Drivers using cars to undertake delivery or taxi work incurred a one-off cost for their taxi plates, as well as significant monthly outgoings, as respondents tended to rent or lease the car they worked in. They also incurred fuel costs as they travelled to and from jobs.

'I rent the cars. Obviously, I can't afford to buy my own one. Do you know what I mean? And then, on top of that, the licence, the taxi badge that I've got ... I've only got it for one more year ... Within the year I'll have to go onto getting a new taxi badge, go through that hassle again. It might take up to a year. It's £500, £600 to get set up, to get the badge. Do you know what I mean? And then I've got to go and find another car to pay weekly and rent, which is about £175 a week, and then you've got your diesel as well. That's £110 a week.'

Taxi/transport worker

Some respondents described how these platforms have systems that make drivers aware of potentially busy periods and in some cases provide financial incentives via the pay structure for them to work during these times in order to meet peaks in demand. One driver and one rider explained:

'They have a lot of incentives as well, on top of what they do, at the weekend usually and on rainy days ... So, from twelve until midnight, complete three trips for £15, eight trips for £40, thirteen trips for £100. These amounts are on top of your regular fares and guarantees.'

Taxi/transport worker

'Deliveroo are actually quite helpful ... They give you like projections on how busy the busy periods will be. Busy periods tend to fall on a Friday, Saturday, Sunday night, but I mean it's not unusual to be working in the week on a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and also have a very, very busy day. You know, it really can surprise you sometimes which nights are actually busy, because there's so many factors in play, you know, and especially in Bristol, the student factor is a big one. So, once the students go, you do tend to get less business really.'

Taxi/transport worker

Experiences after working via online platforms

After the gig work was completed, the experience of and interaction with the online platform continued to vary, although most platforms had some form of quality assurance process, either as a result of the platform checking a sample of the work that had been undertaken, or by seeking a customer review of the service provided. Some respondents also said that the platforms they worked with had systems and procedures for complaints, and lastly, most facilitated the transfer of payment from the customer to the freelancer.

Quality assurance of work

Some respondents, such as those undertaking translating or transcribing work, described how a sample of the work they undertook for clients via the online platform was quality-assured for accuracy by someone else working on behalf of the platform. This quote is from a website proofreader:

'I generally find it quite straightforward. They constantly are checking up on the quality of your work. So, if the quality of your work drops below their standards, they'll let you know, and you need to pick up the quality and get back on track, if you like. And if you are consistently below their required quality, then they'll stop allowing you to take work. So, it's ... Well, you have to keep up a certain quality.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

More generally, as described earlier in the chapter (Demonstrating capability), the customers who had used the service were commonly asked by the platforms to provide feedback and score the service provided by the gig worker on a number of measures. This then was available to potential clients to see via the gig worker's profile, and where reviews were positive these were felt to help secure future work.

For drivers using Uber, the feedback and ratings provided by customers could be used to manage and reward their performance. For example, one respondent described that they could receive bonus payments if they scored a high proportion of five-star ratings, whereas another explained that drivers who regularly received low star ratings would not be given work:

'On Uber, you get rated as a driver. So, you get five stars if you're really good and you get one star if you're really bad. You get a certain amount of one stars and they'll take you off the Uber platform and you can't drive for them. I know a man who doesn't drive for them anymore because of customers.'

Taxi/transport worker

Aftercare and resolving complaints

Some respondents reported that the online platform they used provided a mechanism via which customer complaints against them could be handled. One respondent, working in low-skilled manual jobs such as cleaning, described how the communications between themselves and the customer are logged and documented by the app so that there is evidence about what happened in the interaction, should it be needed.

Another respondent who worked as a driver provided another example of a complaints system operated by the online platform they used. He recalled one fare where the customer had complained he had taken the long way round. If the complaint had been upheld then the driver would not have received the fare:

'What happened with me once is ... the motorway closed and I had to take a bit of a detour, and the customer's e-mailed them and said, "Oh the driver's gone the long way round." They e-mailed me and said, "Oh, right. We've deducted the fare..." Obviously I got in touch and said, "It's not like I did it on purpose. The motorway is closed and it was night closures." Then they started investigating it and then they came back to me and said, "You were right, so, you can have the fare."'

Taxi/transport worker

Payment

Online platforms used by respondents typically facilitated the transfer of payment from the customer to the gig worker via an escrow system. Although this meant that the platform often took a percentage of the fee charged, respondents generally viewed this as a positive service and a key benefit, as they did not have to chase clients for payment, and felt more assured that they would receive payment for the work they had done. The platform would also use this to cover any costs incurred by handling these payments.

Where platforms provided an escrow service, respondents reported that they all took a percentage of the fee charged to the client. The percentage taken by the site varied between platforms, and was also reported to vary on some platforms with the volume of work undertaken through the site, with a decreasing percentage taken for greater volumes of work in a defined time period.

'They chase the money if you don't get paid and they are ... The companies are vetted to make sure that they are genuine and they're not just stringing you along. So, yes, but they do [take] quite a big chunk. I think it's about 12 per cent or something of your money every time.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Contact with the platform

An overarching theme across respondents' experiences of using the platforms, whether during the process for finding work, doing work, or afterwards, was that there was a perceived lack of ways to communicate in a timely and effective way between the gig worker and the platform, in order to resolve technical issues or queries. This could also have health and safety implications (see also Chapter 5, Health and safety). Typically, respondents felt they were on their own, as these examples illustrate:

'Sometimes the customer service is really poor on some of the sites and your issues don't get resolved. So, if you're ... You know, you sort of come up against a brick wall sometimes and you have to, sort of, sort things out yourself, I've found.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

'The fact that you ... Kind of, you're on your own, and if some issues might occur sometimes ... So, you don't have, like, staff to address to, because I heard that from other people. It's the main complaint. The only way to contact them is either by email, and they reply in quite a long time, or if you try to call you get straight to this system, because I had some issues with deliveries and I couldn't contact the client because the number was not right on the app. So, I tried to contact the [online platform]. It didn't work. Had to wait for, like, many, many minutes and then they called me, but from another system that I can't [access].'

Taxi/transport worker

By contrast, some respondents noted instances where a platform had engaged with them and made the experience of working through the platform feel more personal.

5 Pay and conditions

Summary

This section examines the pay and conditions of those working in the gig economy, looking first at rates of pay, how pay is set or negotiated and the savings habits of individuals working in this way, including their planned pension provision. The section then looks at working time, including hours of work, organisation of work and working time flexibility, in addition to issues around the degree of control that individuals feel they have in terms of the pace of their work and its scheduling. Further sections examine health and safety issues and employment rights, such as access to the minimum wage, sick pay and holiday pay.

Experiences of pay depended on a range of factors, such as type of work, how experienced individuals were, how well developed their online profile was, and whether or not they were reliant on this income as their main source of income. If their gig economy work was not something on which they had to rely in order to live, respondents were relatively relaxed about their levels of income from it. However, some recognised that if they needed to rely on this for their main income, it would be very difficult to earn enough. The way that pay was set varied according to how particular online platforms were organised. Some platforms provided for negotiation over rates, while others provided a set rate for a particular job. Many respondents said that they had more than one source of income, both online and offline, and so were relying on different types of work to patch together their overall income. Saving habits were dictated by individuals' personal circumstances. Where the household income was comfortable, they felt financially more comfortable. However, the dominant theme was of people not saving or saving very little.

Working hours varied significantly between respondents and also fluctuated a great deal from week to week. Many had more than one job and would make up their weekly hours from a variety of sources. It was rare for respondents to have to commit to working a minimum number of hours per week. Organisation of work was highly flexible. Respondents generally felt that they were able to access the volume of work that they wanted. One of the key factors in how individuals organised their work was whether or not the work they were doing via the online platforms was their main source of income. If it was not, they could turn down jobs. There was also a view among some that this was very much something that they were doing at this point in their life, as it suited them to work in this flexible way at the moment.

There was reasonable satisfaction with the control that individuals had over the pace of their work. Notice about work schedules varied considerably, depending on the type of work being carried out. Some workers were very aware of the unpredictability of their work schedules, but seemed to take it in their stride, almost as if they had no expectation of predictability. Many respondents were working in a range of areas simultaneously, patching together a living from different kinds of jobs. Some parts of the work were more predictable, in terms of scheduling, than others. For some, there was a general impression of rather last-minute planning in terms of scheduling.

Health and safety concerns varied considerably between sectors. Those working primarily at home undertaking online tasks generally felt that they had no particular health and safety concerns, other than ensuring that they took regular screen breaks and that their work stations were ergonomically adequate. In the delivery sector, there were issues around what would happen if they had an accident.

Pay rates

Individuals' experiences of pay depended on a range of factors, such as the type of work that they were doing, how experienced they were in their particular line of work, or how well developed their online profile was, whether they were reliant on their income from the online platform as their main source of income, or whether they had a cushion, in terms of a partner who was a higher earner. Younger people tended to either be living with their parents, or could turn to them to help them out financially when they needed to.

Many respondents admitted that the pay that they received for their work through online platforms was not as high as they would have liked, or as it had been in the past when they were working in a different way. However, in many cases, this was an active trade-off for the flexibility that this way of working allowed. Some recognised that the pay for this sort of low-skilled work was never going to be very high, but accepted the situation, especially if this was not their main income source. The first quote is from someone engaged in cleaning and dog walking through online platforms and the second from an individual working as a transcriber but also a chauffeur.

'They're low-skilled jobs, so I understand that the payment that's associated with that isn't going to be much. Some jobs pay more than others, which is obviously advantageous, but for these, because it's a source of extra income, I accept that it's not going to be highly paid.'

Physical low-skilled worker

'When I was employed it was a lot more, but then I'm not working so much. I'm not going into an office every day so it balances. I don't have travelling expenses and things like that.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker, also working as a taxi/transport worker

The unpredictability of earning through online platforms could be a problem, in that income levels fluctuated in accordance with the volume of work available. The following quote demonstrates this unpredictability of earnings.

'The pay for Deliveroo ... It's £6 an hour, but you get £1 for every delivery you do and tips as well, if you get any. It works out okay, because there might be an hour that I'll sit and do nothing, waiting for a delivery, and then I'll get an hour when I'm doing four deliveries. So, for that hour when I'm doing the four, I'll get £10 as opposed to the £6 for when I'm doing nothing. The harder you work, the more you get paid really.'

Taxi/transport worker

However, fluctuating income was not a problem if individuals had some sort of cushion, such as a redundancy payment, a partner who earned a good income, or some other income source. If their gig economy work was not something on which they had to rely in order to live, they were relatively relaxed about their levels of income from it.

Similarly, there was a group of respondents who were not working in this way in order to earn their living, who recognised that if they needed to rely on this for their main income, it would be very difficult to earn enough, as these quotes from two workers in the professional and creative sector demonstrate:

'There's no way I could ever learn a living through doing what I'm doing right now, so it's like ... It's just whatever I can get that's paid.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

'Self-employment isn't all it's cracked up to be; it can be quite difficult and quite a lonely road. It's hard to tell. My income has been fluctuating over the last number of years. It certainly hasn't been going up exponentially year on year.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Some felt that they could not risk earning all of their income in this way and therefore made sure that they had a regular income from another source, such as part-time employment. It should be noted, however, that fluctuating income and responsibility for income generation is an intrinsic part of the nature of all self-employment.

Some respondents, working in the delivery sector, felt that initial promises about earning levels could be misleading, as earnings depended strongly on the amount of work available. This was the case with this individual, who worked as a delivery driver:

'It sounded really too good to be true, because it said £16 an hour, which actually isn't the case. It wasn't £16 an hour. Depending on apparently the area and things like that ... The pay was quite good anyway, but then sometimes... It's the waiting around I didn't like. Sometimes you might not get a delivery for an hour, and you're waiting around. Things like that.'

Taxi/transport worker

One alternative source of income mentioned by some individuals was that of income from buy-to-let properties. In these cases, individuals were earning money through online platforms, but only in order to supplement regular rental income from their properties.

In the driving and delivery sector, there was some dissatisfaction with overall pay levels, as this depended very much on how busy the driver was and how long the jobs were. The fact that the online platform takes a substantial cut of the fare lowers the overall rate payable to the driver. In the office, short tasks and administration sector, some individuals felt that there was pressure to take some of the lower-paid jobs in order to try to build a profile, from which they could then progress to better-paid jobs. In that sector, there was a range of jobs on offer, and if an individual was experienced enough, they could earn a reasonable hourly rate by choosing the most suitable tasks and working quickly. The quote below is from a respondent who engaged in short online administrative tasks and 'clickwork' in their spare time and at weekends.

'You could sort of filter it by the highest paid, the highest paid per hour, how long each task would take. The minimum time that someone putting on the work could set would be one minute, so you'd look at the one minute ones and think, "How many of those can I do in ten seconds?" That would be your best return. [I could make] probably slightly over the minimum wage - maybe £7-8 an hour.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

How pay is set/negotiated

The way that pay is set varies according to how particular online platforms are organised (see also the section above on how online platforms, gig workers and customers interact). Some platforms provide for negotiation over pay rates, while others provide a set rate for a particular job.

Negotiating pay

In the former case, individuals have some control over the setting of their rates, in that they can negotiate. The usual difficulties around negotiation and setting rates of pay apply, in that it can be difficult to find the right rate to charge. One individual, who found music production work through online platforms, explained how pay varied significantly between customers, with some paying well, but with no uniform rate across the board, meaning that negotiation could play a large part in setting pay rates, depending on how much the client was prepared to pay and how much they valued the individual worker. This was also the case for the following individual, who was engaged in low-skilled online administrative and cleaning work.

'You also choose your hourly rate for the first job you do with a client. TaskRabbit takes 30 per cent. Then, after that it drops down a little bit, but it's one of those fine lines, which is they can't exactly tell you how much you should charge, so it's tricky. You don't want to charge too much because then people won't hire you for it, but if you charge too little ... I'm not sure I've really found that balance.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker, also working in physical low-skilled work

In some cases where the rate was negotiable, some individuals felt that they were losing out to lower-cost competition from low-wage countries outside Europe. This type of work was usually routine low-skilled administrative online work that could be accomplished relatively quickly. Those living in the UK felt that they could not compete against those offering much lower rates for a job. Some of those doing these low-skilled administrative jobs also felt that it was difficult to calculate exactly what their hourly rate was, as their work was paid by the task and was made up of a great many short online tasks, such as clicking on links or testing websites (clickwork).

'The pay does vary a lot, I've noticed. So, because they're very quick, you're paid on individual tasks, and they can be from 5p to 20p, I think. So, you have got to do a lot of them to get paid properly. The pay is awful, and it's monotonous. It would send you a bit mental after a while.'

Online/office/administrative worker

'It can be a bit of a race to the bottom, where it's obviously not a UK-only platform. Inevitably, if someone posts a job who wants a user guide written and I, as a qualified professional would quote, I don't know, say, £400 for a piece of work, inevitably somebody in Bangladesh will quote £50 and somebody in, I don't know, the Scottish Highlands or somewhere might quote £300.'

Online/office/administrative worker

Set pay rates

Where pay was set, there was no control over the rate and individuals accepted or rejected jobs on the basis of whether they thought the rate was fair. Pay was mostly set by job rather than by hour. Online platforms take a cut of earnings, usually between 12 per cent and 30 per cent. Those working as drivers and deliverers were paid a rate that combined a rate per shift and per delivery. These rates could vary, however, depending on the time of day and levels of demand.

'You've got the Monday to Thursday. That's your standard. That's your lowest rate. That's £3.75 per drop. And then on the weekends it goes up to £4.25 a drop, and as well as that on mornings on the weekends, the morning shift, I think they've offered up to about £6.50, I think, per drop. But sometimes you'll get a text from head office and they will say, "Tonight, from 6pm 'til 8pm, instead of £4.25 a drop you'll get £5.50 a drop," and it's like an incentive to get more riders on the road, because I think they often find themselves caught off guard with so many orders and not enough riders to fill them.'

Taxi/transport worker

Those in the creative sector felt that they were in a slightly better position if they had some experience and could command a certain fee. However, those at the beginning of their careers felt, in general, that they had to take all work that was offered.

Many respondents, across all the different sectors, said that they had more than one source of income, both online and offline, and so were relying on different types of work to patch together their overall income. This has the advantage of flexibility – if one source is not yielding much income, another one might. It also means that working life is varied and very flexible. It also means, however, that there is a risk of precariousness in terms of finding enough work and enough income.

Saving habits

Saving habits were dictated by individuals' personal circumstances. Where the household income was comfortable or they had other sources of income, they felt financially more comfortable. However, the dominant theme here was of people not saving or saving very little.

Many of the respondents said that they were not able to save at the moment. In fact, a common response when asked whether they could save was laughter. Some felt that they were just managing from week to week; this was particularly true in the case of those who were earning too much to be eligible for state benefits, but who were finding it difficult to earn enough to live comfortably. Others were working through online platforms in order to top up their state benefits, but always looking at ways to live more cheaply. This was the case across a variety of sectors.

'Can you save regularly?'

(Laughter) 'No. I wish I could. I do try. I try to put money down, and then something always comes up. Something happens. The kids need something, something at school, they've got a trip, they've got to buy books, or anything, or a bill comes up.'

Taxi/transport worker

'Right now, I'm hand to mouth. The problem is, because I can't afford much rent ... I'm in this vicious circle at the moment.'

Physical low-skilled worker

'I would like money for holidays and things. I don't know the last time I went on holiday. I would need money for leisure, I suppose, and for saving. I haven't got savings.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

However, much depended on the individual situation, for example whether respondents lived in a household where others had regular incomes. Where this was the case, respondents were more likely to be able to save and to be more financially comfortable in general.

When asked how they would cope with a sudden large expense, the majority of respondents said that they would find it difficult to find the money, as they did not have large reserves of savings upon which to draw. Some respondents felt that they were struggling to cope with ordinary expenditure and so would not know what to do if they were faced with a sudden extra expense.

Age and life situation was also a factor: younger people and students did not save a great deal, due to low income levels, but also did not feel the need to save. This was particularly the case with students, who were working to try to finance themselves while they studied. Further, in locations where living costs were high, and particularly in London, it made it more difficult to save.

'Oh, no. No one saves in London. I'm also 22 and a student. I guess I could save, but I would rather go out and enjoy myself with my friends.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

For younger respondents, aged 18-29, overall, the prospect of being able to save money was more uncertain compared to their older peers, a common theme across all occupations. Some did manage to save in the short term for holidays and emergencies; however, only one respondent in this age group had a mortgage, and only one other expressed that they were saving towards this. For many, feelings towards savings were generally characterised by uncertainty and unease, whereby the ability to save was highly contingent upon how many hours they could work or the contract on which they were working.

By contrast, those aged 30-49 were more likely to express that they were actively saving. Although respondents were generally more positive, with two even investing in a second property, the majority were far from expressing feelings of being affluent. For instance, respondents would explain that they were currently able to save, but would then go on to express feelings of uncertainty, explaining that those savings would not last long or that

things could be a lot better. Conversations around future finances with respondents over 50 years of age tended to centre on retirement, rather than finances.

The reasons behind saving money also differed a little by occupation. For example, those working in the professional, creative and high-skilled category and the office administration category tended to put money aside when they had a lot of work, as a contingency for when the availability of work diminished. For this reason, some respondents felt uncertain about their future finances, as their savings usually acted as a short-term buffer rather than going towards long-term goals.

Working time

Average working hours

Working hours varied significantly among respondents. Working hours also fluctuated a great deal from week to week. Some respondents said that their working week varied depending on the amount of work that came up that week. For some, the volume of work available tended to depend on factors such as the time of week, the season, or periods that would traditionally be busy, such as the run-up to Christmas. Busy times varied between sectors. Many had more than one job and would make up their weekly hours from a variety of sources, often three or four different types of income stream. The quote below is from an individual who worked as a taxi driver but also as a catering worker.

'The taxi I start with on Friday. I do 12 hours. Saturday, 12 hours as well, and Monday I do 10 hours, something like this. That's all. Tuesday, Wednesday I work in catering.'

Taxi/transport worker, also engaged in physical low-skilled work

When asked to describe an average week, most said that it varied a lot, although some had specific times of day when they dedicated themselves to work. For example, one individual, working as a translator, said that their working hours varied hugely, from three hours during the week in which the interview took place, but that the previous week they had been working on a large task, which entailed a 40-hour week.

It was rare for respondents to have to commit to working a minimum number of hours per week through online platforms. The exceptions were delivery companies, where specific shifts were organised, during which individuals needed to have their apps turned on and be available for work.

Organisation of work

Organisation of work was highly flexible. A very common response during the interviews was that it was entirely up to the individual how much or how little they worked. Many individuals reported organising their work how they liked, particularly if they were working at home. They could choose which hours they worked, which jobs to do, and when they wanted a break or time off. They also chose each day whether or not they wanted to work.

Those individuals working on routine administrative tasks in particular could also choose to do as much or as little as they liked, deciding more or less on a minute-by minute basis, depending on what was going on in their lives at any given moment. This type of work is highly flexible, carried out online and can be undertaken at any time.

'My little boy's at preschool now, so I can slot 20 hours a week in at the minute. He's due to be in full-time education from September, so it will be a few more hours there, and if I want extra work I'll get up at 5 o'clock in the morning before anybody else is up. And then if there's football on at night I'll do a bit more while my husband's watching that. So, it's so flexible, and because I've got quite a few different places that I get the work from, I can just say, "Oh, yeah. I'll take that tonight," and it just really works, at the minute.'

Office/online/administrative worker

'On any given day that I want to do some work, I'll just start by loading the website. Then, I choose from the list something that looks appealing or more interesting than the other ones, and then get on with it. So, within really a few minutes of deciding to work, I'm started, and each task - each job, if you like - will take about half an hour to 45 minutes, something like that, and so I'll do several in a row, and then take a break usually, and then come back to do more later on that day or really whenever I next feel like it.'

Office/online/administrative worker

In terms of being able to access the volume of work that they wanted, respondents generally felt satisfied that they could, given the flexible nature of the work that they were undertaking. It was largely up to them how much or how little they worked (see also the sections on control and scheduling). The exception was some of the delivery workers or drivers, who sometimes found themselves waiting around for work to come in. This was the case in the early days of Deliveroo, and may be becoming more common with taxi drivers, as greater numbers of drivers sign up to apps such as Uber.

One of the key factors in how individuals organised their work was whether or not the work they were doing via the online platforms was their main source of income. If it was not, they had a lot more control and flexibility in how they organised their work, turning down jobs if they did not want to do them.

Working time flexibility

One of the key advantages of working through online platforms is the flexibility that this affords, in terms of the organisation of working time. Many individuals who worked at home doing online administrative tasks appreciated this very much. This was particularly the case if individuals had childcare responsibilities.

'I try to start at nine o'clock in the morning and then I'll just work through until 12 and then take a break, and then entertain my son if he's around. Sometimes, I can be working at night, and I'll just ... I'll start at 5pm and then finish at 10pm, 11pm with breaks in between.'

Office/online/administrative worker

'If they give me a task and they say it's going to take three hours, I can prepare myself, and I can say, "Okay. Have I got three hours?" If I don't then obviously I reject the offer. That's why it's good, because it's not a contract; I can just accept it if I've got time. It fits in with my childcare.'

Physical low-skilled worker

Others reported having complete freedom over how much work they chose to take on and when they worked. The following is a selection of quotes from representative individuals in a range of sectors. Some had a target for the income they wanted to achieve, as with the first quote, which comes from an individual who was working as a driver for Uber, and the second quote, which comes from an individual who was working as a transcriber and a chauffeur.

'To be honest, it's just whenever I wake up. So, I used to get up at about one o'clock. My target was £100 a day.'

Taxi/transport worker

'This week, I've agreed what days I'm going to work next week, so I don't look too much further than the next week. I know how much money I need to earn a month. That also comes into it.'

Taxi/transport worker, also engaged in office/short online tasks/administrative work

There was a view among some respondents that this was very much something that they were doing at this point in their life, as it suited them to work in this way at the moment. These individuals were not necessarily wanting to spend their whole working life working in this way, but at the present time were happy to do so, not thinking very much about the future. For these people, the flexibility was key.

Control over pace and scheduling

Pace

Overall, there seemed to be reasonable satisfaction with the control that individuals had over the pace of their work. Many felt that they created the pressure themselves by accepting or refusing jobs. Occasionally the pace could get troublesome, but this was

largely the result of taking on a certain volume of work voluntarily. Individuals therefore tended to accept this as part of this way of working.

'If I feel under pressure it's because I've taken it on, and I already know the pressure's there, so it's my own fault. It's very rare I'm getting hounded down, because every piece of work I get I already know the deadline, so I know in my head what I'm available to do. The big money pieces come. You could be sat working and an email flashes up - is anybody available to take this - and it could be at three times the rate, and it means stopping what you're doing.'

Office/online/administrative worker

However, some people encountered issues around needing to finish jobs quickly in order to be able to complete as many jobs as possible. This was deemed important in terms of raising one's profile and ratings on the online platforms. If personal ratings are good, individuals are more likely to be offered work in a competitive environment.

By contrast, some individuals felt that they had involuntary downtimes in their schedule, depending on the time of year, with some months quieter than others. Factors that might influence how much work was around included the end of the month, when people got paid, or seasonal factors such as the busy run-up to Christmas. This could be factored into an individual's work schedule, in that they could work very hard for a certain period and then take some time off during the quieter times, for example at the beginning of the calendar year.

The pace of work could be more of an issue in delivery jobs, where there was a uniform time slot for each delivery, but the distances that need to be travelled varied. The individual had no control over the location of the job and so tried to complete the delivery in the time slot available as best they could.

'When it's just a single order, I think that there is enough time, because usually you have to do it in a 30-minute window, but when it's busy you get two or even three, and then it can get very tiring. Sometimes the distance is very small - they send you to an address which is quite close, so you get there very fast - but other times they send you really far away. The time slot is the same. Sometimes you can deliver in the 10 minutes. Other times, it might be more than 30 minutes, because the distances are very big.'

Taxi/transport worker

The driving and delivery sector workers also suffered more from uncontrolled unpredictability within shifts than workers in other sectors. Some taxi drivers reported sitting around waiting for jobs to come in, although this varied at different times of the day and the week. Long hours were sometimes required in order to make enough money.

'I know every job we do is hard to make money, but at the end of the day, if you put your hours in, if you work more than 50-60 hours, you will make some money. In the job we do with Uber, we just have to be patient and have to wait for the customers.'

Taxi/transport worker

Others reported wide variations in the pace of work that were impossible to predict and to control.

The issue of client expectations also played a role in some cases. For example, if a job had been agreed through an online platform, but when an individual arrived in a client's home to carry it out the client wanted extra work carried out, the individual workers found themselves in the position of having to negotiate with the client.

Scheduling

Overall, the work undertaken by the respondents seemed to vary considerably in the number of hours worked and their scheduling. In some cases, individuals controlled the scheduling by accepting or refusing jobs. Those who had control over their scheduling were often very organised about when and how they worked, for example setting reminders on their phones about when they needed to go online to start looking for jobs.

Some very much appreciated the total control they had over scheduling, feeling that it far surpassed what would be possible in an employment relationship, and enabling them to work very hard for a period and then to take time off, as it suited them.

'You can have a day off. You can work at your own pace. Yesterday, because I'm self-employed, I worked really hard. I thought, "I'm going to finish this job, even if I have to work 12 hours without a break." But if I was working for another company, perhaps that could have taken two or even three days. It was exhausting, sure, but at least it's in my control.'

Physical skilled worker

In other cases, people felt that they needed to take on as much work as they needed to make enough money. Offers were often last minute, entailing changes of plans at short notice. This could make it difficult to plan and to juggle other things in individuals' lives.

'Sometimes you can plan, because the thing is that sometimes that ... Today, I could log into my email and literally have a message from a client, like right now, and then suddenly my whole schedule changes. So ... Sometimes you can plan, sometimes you can't.'

Office/online/administrative worker

The notice that people had about their work schedule varied considerably from individual to individual, depending on the type of work that they were doing. Some respondents could book in jobs months in advance, while others only knew from week to week how much work they had on. Many individuals operated in a fast-moving world where jobs could come up at the last minute, or work could get cancelled at short notice. This was not appreciated by those affected, but they did not really see how things could be any different and felt that they had to go along with it.

‘Strictly speaking, it could be pretty last minute and they also are constantly sending out emails for urgent files that they need pretty quickly which are up for grabs in addition to this shift system as well ... The only downside is when you sign up for a shift, like an evening one, turn down other plans for the evening and then nothing comes through. That’s happened a couple of times ... Probably 20 per cent of the time you don’t get something, which is not fantastic. The morning shift, that’s not the end of the world because there’s stuff I can do. If I turn down an invitation to go and do something in an evening because I’m expecting work and I don’t get it, that’s pretty shoddy.’

Office/online/administrative worker

‘How far ahead do you tend to know your work schedule?’

‘Not that far ahead, to be honest. It can be day by day. Two weeks at the most.’

‘How do you then juggle that with any other commitments you’ve got?’

‘I have to do the best I can really. It’s not always easy.’

Physical skilled worker

Box 3: Individual gig economy workers – care worker on a zero hours contract

One respondent was a woman aged 40, living alone, who had left school aged 16 and had initially trained as a hairdresser. She left this work when she had a child, aged 20. She had previously had relatively long periods out of work, during which she was able to claim benefits. She now worked in the care sector on a zero hours contract, as an employee, and was also studying for a qualification in health and care, funded by her employer. She also undertook voluntary work with homeless people.

Because she was on a zero hours contract and her hours fluctuated considerably, from full-time hours to, in some cases, no hours, she needed to undertake extra work in order to make up a full-time wage. She did this by performing delivery work through online platforms such as Freelancer and also looking on Gumtree for emergency jobs. If she wanted to do a job that was advertised, she had to accept it quickly, otherwise it would go to someone else. She only knew the hours she would be working in the care job one week in advance, or sometimes at even shorter notice:

‘Just a week in advance. Also, it could be that I just get a phone call of a morning prior to people phoning in sick or stuff like that, emergencies. I find out on a Sunday how many hours I’ve got in the job and then I’ll decide whether I need to apply for a driving job that week. I normally get it to be fair.’

She undertook a variety of delivery jobs, such as food deliveries or car deliveries. She did not feel that she was particularly using her qualifications for this, but was treating it as a way to make up a full-time income. When asked whether she would like a full-time job in the care sector, she said that she would, but she also actually quite enjoyed the variety of combining the care and the driving activities. She also seemed happy with the balance between the two types of activity, although she sometimes needed to cope with sudden demands, such as an extra care shift. She did feel under pressure on occasion, however, in that she was reluctant to turn down work either from the care job or the delivery work, as she felt the need to maintain good relations with providers of both types of work.

She was paid per delivery and was not particularly happy with the pay, but acknowledged that she was carrying out relatively low-skilled work. She was not able to save from her income.

Overall, she felt that the advantages of working in this way were the flexibility in terms of scheduling the work and the volume of work. The disadvantages were that it was precarious in terms of how much work was available from week to week. She was, however, philosophical about her position:

'It's not too bad. Obviously it depends how my week's going. If I have to work the weekend, then I have to work the weekend. It's just as simple as that. I don't grumble about it. I just have to take the work while it's going.'

Her future plans centred around working full-time in the care sector and expanding the voluntary work that she did, although she felt that she would continue with her delivery work for as long as she needed to make up her income. She also intended to start saving for her pension when she moved into more stable work.

Some workers were very aware of the unpredictability of their work schedules, but seemed to take it in their stride, almost as if they had no expectation of predictability.

'I can't plan anything. It's very rare that someone says, "We'll have something in two days." No. It's normally, "We have this project now. Do you want it? Yes or no?" and you have to decide immediately, and it starts immediately. There is no planning. So, sometimes I make plans to see friends. Then, I have to cancel at the last moment, if I really want to do the job, or I have to say no to a job if I've booked, I don't know, a holiday or a weekend away.'

Office/online/administrative worker

In the driving and delivery sector, drivers working for Uber were theoretically free to choose their own hours of work, although some said that if they wanted to be given jobs by the platform, they did need to be available.

Some types of work were more predictable, however. The respondents who were working in the creative sector found that they could often book in jobs well in advance. This was particularly the case with actors and those involved in work such as voiceovers or acting-related jobs. This was also the case with dog and pet care, as this is based on looking after pets while owners are away on planned holidays.

Most respondents said that they did not have to commit to a minimum number of hours a week, although many felt that they had to work a certain number of hours in order to earn sufficient income. There were some exceptions, such as some individuals working in hospitality, where they were obliged to sign up for certain shifts. Deliveroo also requires workers to commit to specific shifts.

Many respondents were working in a range of areas simultaneously, patching together a living from different kinds of jobs. Some parts of the work were more predictable, in terms of scheduling, than others. For some, there was a general impression of rather last-minute planning in terms of work scheduling.

‘Do you know what you will do next week?’

‘Not exactly. For the restaurant and stuff with Deliveroo, I don’t really know, but I know for the retail store I’m working on Saturday and Friday, and tomorrow I know what I’m doing. I know what I’m doing this week, but next week I know that I’m going to be working some days, but I’m not sure which hours. They’ll send me a WhatsApp thing by tomorrow, I think.’

Taxi/transport worker

One respondent made the point that they quite liked the unpredictability of working in this way when they were younger and did not have as many responsibilities, but that the situation had now changed since they had become a parent.

Balance of control

In terms of the balance of control between individuals and online platforms, respondents generally felt that it was they, rather than the platforms, who were in control over what they did and how they did it. Overall, people felt that they were self-employed and could choose how much they worked, which jobs to take and when they worked. This was true across sectors and occupations.

‘I feel like I just choose when I want to work and choose the jobs that I want to, like I’m in a lucky position that I’m not like absolutely desperate to be working all the time.’

Physical low-skilled worker

‘It’s up to me whether I accept or don’t accept these assignments. I’m not put under any pressure to do a minimum number. Once you’ve accepted them, you’ve to do them within the time frame required and get back to them. There’s no initial constraint or pressure to sign up to any individual ones. It’s entirely up to me.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

However, this was predicated on people feeling that they were getting enough work and income from the platforms. Where this was not the case, then people felt that they had to accept certain tasks that they might not otherwise have done. This was, however, based on economics rather than any pressure exerted on them by the platform. One individual, doing routine administrative tasks online, described how they had five jobs simultaneously at one point the year before, as well as a full-time job, noting that they would not do that sort of thing unless they had to.

Where people were not relying on the platform for their entire income, or were working in this way in order to fill a gap while they decided what to do next, they felt more in control.

There can be some blurring of control issues, however. On some platforms, some respondents felt that it was not a good thing to say no to work too often, not because they

would be penalised for this, but because their online profile would start to look empty and they would not have enough recent customer ratings.

In addition, those individuals who are just starting out in their careers and using online platforms to build a profile, for example in the creative sector, felt that they were not really in a position to refuse any work offered. Typically, these types of people included actors and those working in other roles in the arts, who were at the beginning of their careers.

Some individuals felt that although they were free to accept or refuse work, they did not feel particularly in control of the flow of their work, just because it was unpredictable. The nature of the exchange also made some people feel that there was no real interaction with and feedback from the client.

'I don't think I've got very much control over what I do on those platforms anyway. Well, you can't control your work coming in. It's not reliable, and there doesn't seem to be any feedback from the people giving you the work too. If you get a task wrong, you usually don't get a reason why it's wrong. So, there's no feedback on that.'

Office/online/administrative worker

There were, however, differences between platforms in terms of the control they exerted over individuals. Some of the proprietary platforms (i.e. those owned and managed by specific brands) were seen to exert more control over individuals than the more general online platforms. Some of the delivery companies operate on the basis of shifts allotted to individual workers, rather than the individuals turning on their apps to indicate that they are available for work. Some respondents felt that, in this way, the platform had the control over how much work was offered.

'I have two jobs. For the one that I'm on 9am to 6pm, I don't really have any control, because I have to be available to do the work as it comes up through that whole period. For the other job, it's just... I have to get it done at some point in the day, so that one is much more flexible.'

Office/online/administrative worker

Health and safety

Health and safety concerns varied considerably between sectors. Those working primarily at home, undertaking online tasks, generally felt that they had no particular health and safety concerns, other than ensuring that they took regular screen breaks and that their work stations were ergonomically adequate, which would be the case for any home worker. However, those engaged in tasks outside the home did have some concerns. In the delivery sector, there were issues around cycling on busy roads, although this would be the case for any worker using a cycle, and what would happen if individuals had an accident.

There was acknowledgement that the online platforms would cover issues such as breakages in client homes, but there was concern that individuals would receive no compensation if they had an accident that resulted in them not being able to work for some time. This also links to the fact that, as many consider themselves to be self-employed, they have no access to sick pay (see also the section below on employment rights). The quote below comes from an individual who was working as a handyman, alongside study and work in arts.

'If I'm on a TaskRabbit job, if anything of the client's property breaks, the insurance that TaskRabbit provides will pay for the stuff that they've broken, but if I broke my arm and I'm off work for two months, they have no cover for that.'

Physical skilled worker

In the driving and delivery sector, there were some concerns that there is no emergency number to phone if something goes wrong. This resulted in drivers feeling very much on their own to deal with any emergency situation.

'Their contact with the drivers is absolutely appalling. They've got no numbers to ring them. If any emergency happens, it's all through email. It can take up to three or four days for a reply. Do you know what I mean? I've had times when I've not had a reply, and I've had to email and say, you know, "This is a joke."'

Taxi/transport worker

There were also some concerns about the fact that the online platforms did not carry out extensive checks on the people registering with them. This could mean that there were some safety implications for people working with them on a one-to-one basis, especially in clients' homes. This is something that could be perceived to be particularly problematic for women, if the job entailed working alone with men that they did not know.

There were also some concerns about the types of jobs being offered on some of the platforms, that it took some judgement and experience to distinguish between the genuine and suspect types of offers. Some individuals felt that this was because there was no regulation or checks on those offering work via these platforms.

Some had concerns about safety and some thought that the platform was not doing all it could to safeguard health and safety. The individual below was a young person who had worked as a cycle delivery worker for one summer during their studies.

'[Their checks are] just to make sure that you can more or less get the deliveries done on time, that you're safe on the roads ... They're not really that committed to checking you're wearing a helmet and things. It was never really enforced. You would think a restaurant would call up a company if the guy who was delivering food for them on a motorcycle wasn't wearing a motorcycle helmet, and they could complain, and say, "Oh, that's dangerous. We don't want to be working with people like that." I remember once, actually, I had a little accident on my bike, and so I called up, just to tell them essentially that I'd had a crash and I wouldn't be able to finish my shift. They just say to you that there's no compensation. Even though I was in the last hour of my shift, I wouldn't be paid for that last hour, because I didn't finish the hour.'

Taxi/transport worker

By contrast, those working as taxi drivers felt that because they were sitting down all day and confined to their cars, either on jobs or waiting for jobs, they were becoming less fit and more unhealthy, although they accepted that this was one of the general downsides of working as a taxi driver.

Although those working at home were generally very satisfied with their working conditions, and felt that if something was not right it was their responsibility as it was their home environment, there were some concerns about needing to take adequate screen breaks and ensuring that they were not susceptible to repetitive strain injury (RSI) as a result of typing or mouse usage, or problems relating to excessive telephone usage. Some acknowledged that it could be difficult to have the discipline to take regular breaks when working alone at home, even though they were aware of devices such as software that tells people when to take breaks. These are, of course, issues that are associated with home working and working on a screen in general and are therefore not specific to gig economy workers.

The fact that working hours can be unpredictable can also have an impact on health and fitness, as it means that individuals may struggle to attend regular fitness classes or build up any kind of exercise regime. On the other hand, not working on a 9am-5pm basis can also mean that individuals have time during the day to exercise.

'It's quite hard to do anything like fitness, or go to the gym, or go to yoga, because you don't want to sign up to anything, because you might not be around and you might miss it.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Some respondents spoke of the stress of not knowing their schedule or the type of job that they were going to be doing over the next week or so. This was also linked to the stress of not knowing how much they were going to earn, which was held by some to be the greatest source of stress.

6 Employment rights

Summary

This section examines attitudes to employment status and employment rights. Respondents largely assumed their employment status was as self-employed casual workers and accepted this. They were mostly aware that they did not have employment rights as a result of this and did not appear to be particularly concerned. For some, working in this way was not a positive choice, but the outcome of a lack of other opportunities; they were not happy with their pay or their employment status. There was frequent mention of the trade-off between employment rights and the flexibility of gig economy working. Others felt that they were just doing this kind of work on a temporary basis and that they had a lot of flexibility and not a great deal of commitment. The outcome of this was that there was not a great deal of security and rights, but this did not bother them unduly.

There was, however, some concern among respondents about the precariousness of their situation – that if they fell ill, they would not have any financial security. As most were in good health, it was not a concrete concern, but for some who had experienced ill health in the past, the worry was at the back of their mind. When asked how they would cope if they had to take a significant amount of time off work due to illness, respondents' answers tended to depend on their particular situation. If they were working in the gig economy as a means of earning supplementary income, this would not be a particular problem. If they were relying on this work as their primary source of income, some said that they would have to turn to their parents for help, either in terms of asking them for money, or moving back in with them.

Box 4: Individual gig economy workers – administrative worker, working from home

One respondent was a 26-year-old male who suffered from anxiety. He lived with his parents in a part of England that he described as a socio-economically deprived area, with few work opportunities. Both of his parents were retired and his brother was not able to work due to disability. He gained his A levels and attempted to go straight into employment, but was unable to find work and spent a short period on Jobseeker's Allowance. He found a six-month temporary contract, but this did not lead to permanent employment. He then tried to start his own business, but this was not successful. At this point, he started to find work through online platforms, doing online office and administrative tasks. Unlike most respondents, his online platform work has been over an extended period of time with two employers who use him intermittently. For this reason, in contrast to the vast majority of respondents he did not think of himself as self-employed in a traditional sense.

'I'm technically self-employed. So, I have informal agreements with two employers. There's no contract between us, but I've been working for both of them... One of them for over a year, another for, say, four or five months by now ... So, there is sort of an informal contract. Am I self-employed? I would say that I am employed. It's just not written down anywhere.'

The respondent found one of his freelance positions through an online platform. He is required to be available all day, but the admin work is usually only short tasks. He estimates that he makes around £16-17 per day for this. He found the other position on a company website and started an informal agreement under which he works for five hours a week at a rate of £20 an hour.

He was worried about the precarious nature of his work:

'Obviously, there's zero job security, because there is no contract. So, I always have to be aware of any potential ... You know, the need to quickly find something new.'

He is unable to save money as his income only covers his rent and gives him £200 for the month ahead. Nevertheless, he believes that working from home in this way is an attractive option, given the employment restraints of his locality. Working at home is also a better option for him than working in an office, due to his anxiety issues.

'I tried to find employment in an office or that sort of environment, or in a shop, but I wasn't able to remain there because of my anxieties. So, being able to work from home in a controlled environment was a big motivation for me.'

Thoughts about employment status and employment rights

Respondents largely thought that they were self-employed casual workers. They mostly felt that they did not have employment rights as a result of this working arrangement and did not appear to be particularly concerned about this. This was the case across occupations; people felt that this was not an ideal situation and they would like to have more rights, but believed they were not employees and accepted the result of this. Some spoke of thinking that they could actively make the choice not to be an employee. Some respondents said they were not sure about their employment rights, saying that they did not really know about rights in this area, but suspected that they did not have many.

'It's not ideal, but I understand that unless I have a permanent contract with anyone, then it's unrealistic for me to expect those perks, I guess.'

Physical low-skilled worker

For some respondents, working in this way was not a positive choice, but the outcome of a lack of other opportunities. They were not happy with their pay or their employment status.

Those respondents who were members of a trade union, such as actors in Equity, benefited from sick pay, which was appreciated.

Feelings about lack of employment rights

The majority of respondents felt that although it was not ideal that they felt they were not entitled to sick pay, holiday pay, maternity pay and pension cover, they did not expect to have these rights as they were not working for an employer. There was frequent mention of the trade-off between employment rights and the flexibility of gig economy working, with many feeling that, on balance, the flexibility outweighed the downside in terms of employment rights. Others felt that they were just doing this kind of work on a temporary basis and the basic trade-off was that they had a lot of flexibility and not a great deal of commitment. The outcome of this was that they felt there was not a great deal of security and rights, but this did not bother them unduly.

'I understand that I'm freelancing; I'm not in a contract. So, I don't expect holiday pay. It's my choice, I guess, to do these things.'

Physical low-skilled worker

'Well, you can't expect it really. If you're just working a few hours for someone, you can't expect them to give you a pension, can you? It's something that's beneficial to both of you to be able to just do a small project, earn a little bit of extra money. Yes. I think it's what you'd expect if you're being reasonable about it. You can't expect sick pay really, I think, if you're just working a few hours a week for someone. They pay for the hours you work really, and that's it. If you want those benefits, you'd go and get a full-time job.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

'I think it's just a trade-off. To have something semi-flexible and something that is just riding a bike around ... You're getting paid to get out on your bike and it's like a privilege almost to be getting paid to do that. It's not serious employment, by any means. I don't necessarily think they should offer [employment rights].'

Taxi/transport worker

There was, however, some concern among respondents about the precariousness of their situation – that if they fell ill, they would not have any financial security. As most were in good health, it was not a concrete concern, but for some who had experienced ill health in the past, the worry was at the back of their mind.

'There is no contract between us and I do feel very vulnerable, because I'm easily replaced, because there are a million other people out there willing to do low-level work for a cheap rate. So, I do feel that I'm not able to push it too much or to rock the boat too much.'

Office/online/administrative worker

While some respondents accepted the fact that they did not have the same employment rights to which employees were entitled, some had opted to go back into employment.

Impact of lack of employment rights

The lack of holiday pay had an impact on respondents, in that they knew that if they wanted to go away, they needed to save up to ensure the period of unpaid leave. This is the case, of course, for all those who are self-employed.

In the case of lack of sick pay, respondents tended to be philosophical about the fact that if they were ill, they would not be able to work, as noted above. As many were relatively young and in good health, it was not an immediate concern, but they acknowledged that they would not really know what to do if they were unable to work for a long period of time in the future.

There were instances when respondents had been ill, however, and it had had a significant impact on their earning power, as they had not been able to work for a considerable time. Even in these cases, they accepted that there was no sick pay provision linked to this way of working.

'You just have to pray that you're not [ill], because I've had to use some [savings] before. When I injured myself on holiday, I had to use all my savings over the months when I couldn't work, and then you go back to work and you play catch-up. So, there's not a lot you can do about it. It's unfortunate, but it's the name of the game, isn't it?'

Taxi/transport worker

However, there was also a view that because respondents did not particularly plan, the perceived lack of employment rights was not something about which they were overly concerned, as they were just living and working with short-term goals in sight.

When questioned more closely about how they would cope if they had to take a significant amount of time off work due to illness, respondents' answers tended to depend on their particular situation. If they were working in the gig economy as a means of earning supplementary income, this would not be a particular problem, as they would have other means of income on which to rely, such as property rental income, a partner's income or sick pay from a part-time employed job. However, the situation would, of course, be more serious if they were relying on this work as their primary source of income. Here, some respondents said that they would have to turn to their parents for help, either in terms of asking them for money, or moving back in with them.

There were also a number of respondents who were doing gig economy work alongside an employed job, and so benefitted from the employment rights from that job. In this case, the perceived lack of employment rights from the gig economy work did not have an impact on them.

'It suits me at this present time. The way I look at it is, it's casual work. You know, you're doing work out of your own full-time job, which I've got all the benefits of anyway. So, if I didn't want to work then I wouldn't need to, because I already get my benefits - holiday pay and all that - from my own [employed] work.'

Taxi/transport worker

7 Skills and training

Summary

This section explores the skills requirements for those working in the gig economy, opportunities for training, any barriers to training, use of previous skills, and any opportunities for progression within their work.

Specific professional and vocational skills varied widely by occupation and could often be very specific and highly technical. Those involved in low-skilled physical work highlighted the need to have a large range of practical and craft-based skills. Those doing office and administrative work reported a similar need for a diverse portfolio of skills. Respondents working in professional, creative and highly skilled occupations often reported the most specialised skills required. Many skills were related to sophisticated ICT needs. Most respondents explained that some basic ICT literacy was needed to obtain work in the gig economy, although the level of sophistication required varied according to the complexity and functionality of the interface. Those who needed actual ICT skills to deliver their work tasks belonged to a smaller selection of gig occupations. English and financial literacy, self-motivation, organisational and interpersonal skills were particularly emphasised. Respondents generally did not feel that they had any substantive skills gaps that prevented them from accessing work via the gig economy. Many felt they were overqualified for the work on offer, much of which was characterised as fairly generic and requiring less seniority than many had been used to in their work outside the gig economy.

Access to training was rare. Training was consistently sourced and paid for by interviewees themselves, and carried out during what would normally be paid working time. The one exception was some fairly limited induction training, typically a brief orientation that explained how to use a particular platform and the basic tenets of correctly completing tasks. Respondents had greater levels of access to informal or on-the-job training, although this tended to be amongst the professional, creative and highly skilled as well as office and administrative workers. There were also some limited opportunities to learn from peers and more senior colleagues.

Respondents across different occupations had different views about the extent to which they were able to use their skills, experience and knowledge in their gig economy work. Those working in taxi and transport were often the least positive and felt that prior training and experience was rarely put to good use. By contrast, skilled physical workers who had some vocational education and training that was directly relevant to their current work were significantly more positive. Respondents in creative occupations were the most positive that their gig work aligned closely with their formal training and work experience. Taxi and transport drivers generally did not feel there was any scope for career development within their occupation or the platform they worked for. Similarly, those engaged in physical low-skilled and skilled occupations did not think there were many opportunities for progression. However, for several in lower-skilled occupations, this was not of great concern as they were not intending to remain in the same occupation long term. In contrast, respondents working in professional, creative and highly skilled roles were generally more hopeful about opportunities. Office and administrative workers were less positive, but still felt they had scope for career progression in the gig economy.

Skills requirements

Current skill levels

Respondents were in general relatively highly educated. Overall, 67 had a university degree and 25 a postgraduate qualification. Eighteen had started but not completed university education, while two had a diploma, 25 had completed A levels or equivalent and 13 GCSEs or equivalent.

Skills required to undertake gig economy work

The types of skills required to undertake work in the gig economy tended to coalesce into three broad categories:

- Specific professional and vocational skills, varying according to the nature of respondents' gig occupation, needed to complete particular tasks attributed to their role.
- ICT literacy to access work through online platforms (for all respondents) and more finely developed ICT skills for certain gig occupations.
- Well-developed employability skills. English and financial literacy, self-motivation, organisational and interpersonal skills were particularly emphasised.

Specific professional and vocational skills

Skills relating to respondents' gig occupations were generally the most prominent types of skills required, from the point of view of respondents. These skills varied widely by type of gig occupation and could often be very specific and highly technical.

Generally, taxi and transport workers who operated motorised vehicles explained that the most important thing in order to access work was to have a full (clean) driving licence. All respondents, including those using bicycles, also explained that they had to drive safely as well as strictly adhere to the Highway Code to protect themselves, customers, the public and the reputation of their online platform.

'It was mainly just being confident in cycling in very congested place and knowing not to go on pavements, because you were an ambassador of the company.'

Taxi/transport worker

In addition, some other skills were specific to subgroups of taxi and transport workers. For example, many taxi drivers interviewed had previously worked for 'traditional' firms outside of the gig economy and emphasised the advantage of having already passed 'The Knowledge' needed to drive a Hackney cab. This in-depth insight allowed them to travel using routes that allowed them to provide a better service than they would have been able to if they were reliant on GPS directions. Alternatively, some transportation workers specialising in logistics discussed the need for a particular licence that would, for example, allow them to operate certain Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs).

A small minority of lower-skilled physical work involved working with animals (e.g. walking dogs) and therefore respondents discussed animal-related skills. These individuals explained that pet management and care could be useful, and was desirable, in their own eyes, but not strictly necessary in order to be able to access work. However, more typically, people in low-skilled physical work were commissioned to do repairs, maintenance and other handiwork. They highlighted the need to have quite a large range of practical and craft-based skills in order to access the full assortment of work on offer. This was often prioritised over focusing on a particular specialism which would narrow their workflow.

Respondents in office and administrative work reported a similar need for a quite diverse portfolio of skills to access the full breadth of jobs on offer. There was a need to be, as one respondent described it, 'a generalist'.

'Skills? ... You've got to be aware of the regulations, building up a relationship, getting to know the clients, being able to do the job that the client wants. Whether it's bookkeeping, whether it's accounting, whether it's submitting VAT, whether it's submitting corporation tax, self-assessment, you name it.'

Office/online/administrative worker

Respondents working in professional, creative and highly skilled occupations often reported the most specialised skills required, reflecting the degree of proficiency needed in their role. Many skills were related to sophisticated ICT needs. These included data security, programming, motion graphics, computer-aided design and multimedia or creativity software packages. Non-computing examples included particular language pairings for translation and puppetry or stage combat for the performing arts. Broader generic project management skills were also much more commonly cited as a requirement amongst these respondents when compared to those in other gig occupations.

Interviewees in the performing arts were some of the only respondents who discussed the importance and value of professional qualifications to their gig work. They felt that it meant their professional practice was of a higher standard, and could (in some cases) be advantageous when applying for auditions. However, respondents across professional, creative and highly skilled occupations generally felt that their professional experience and track record had more currency in the gig economy than qualifications. Even for occupations which required professional certification and relevant qualifications, experience and reputation held more sway.

'As opposed to qualifications, I have a portfolio. So, I can say to a client, "Yes. I've done this, this, this, this and this," and they look at it and they go, "Oh, well, yes. Okay, then." So I'm able to prove ... And I'm highly rated on some of the platforms and whatnot.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

ICT literacy

ICT literacy usage came under two categories in discussions with respondents, as it was needed for both accessing work and completing work.

Most respondents explained that some basic ICT literacy was needed to obtain work in the gig economy, as without it platforms would be inaccessible. The level of sophistication required varied according to the complexity and functionality of the interface that respondents needed to use to access work. Taxi and transport workers described how the mobile app they needed was intuitive and straightforward, meaning that only limited ICT skills were required to understand how to operate the app, recognise what it looked like when you were offered a job, how to accept it and how to find the customer and complete the task. Conversely, gig workers in other sectors – who appeared to be more likely to work across multiple platforms – discussed needing more finely tuned online research skills. They explained that this was necessary to be able to seek out new work streams, deploy more advanced search techniques to find specific jobs, identify new platforms and engage with online communities (for example, to understand the reputation of different platforms to aid decision-making).

Respondents who needed ICT skills to actually deliver their work tasks belonged to a smaller selection of gig occupations. Office and administrative workers as well as those in certain highly skilled, professional or creative roles explained they not only needed to access work through a variety of platforms of varying functionality, but also needed well-developed expertise across a whole suite of basic and specialised software packages, technological approaches (e.g. search engine optimisation) and hardware. Workers in some professional and high-skilled work often required the most complex and sought-after ICT skills, such as being able to set up remote networks, develop websites or create and build an online presence and branding for their employers. More generally, respondents who required ICT for their gig work explained that using search engines tactically and making full use of their available functions was highly advantageous.

‘There’s some words that come up, you know, in subjects that you’ve never heard of before. So, you need to be able to research. I know everybody in the world uses [search engine] but you need to be able to use it to find what you need and words that you’ve never heard of before. There could be some medical terminology or medication that you’ve never heard of so you need to be able to put in the right things.’

Office/online/administrative worker

Employability skills

Many interviewees discussed how their role in the gig economy required well-developed transferrable skills because the freelance nature of their work meant they had to source their own workload and were often client- or public-facing.

Good English literacy was prioritised by most respondents regardless of gig occupation, because many roles involved high levels of written or verbal communication. Respondents working in office, administrative or highly skilled professional roles were those who most commonly emphasised a need for high-quality written literacy. Firstly, it was necessary to

effectively 'sell' yourself to clients, emphasising professional aptitude. This took a variety of forms including writing a profile objectively, compiling a CV, producing a video or audio pen portrait and uploading it and also drafting personalised cover letters. In addition, for copywriters and translators, exemplar written work was sometimes required for platform screening processes and could operate as a 'calling card', exhibiting the quality of their work to potential clients.

Verbal communication (combined with good interpersonal skills) was discussed by staff across gig occupations, as many had to talk with clients or the public at some point in their work. However, respondents working in taxi, transport and physical low-skilled work placed a particular emphasis on expert verbal skills. They discussed how it was essential to build rapport and de-escalate tense situations, for example when working with the public late at night when they are under the influence of alcohol.

'You are always in contact with people and you have to deal with people. Sometimes people are very nice and sometimes they are not nice. But when you are a trained person, you know you will be alright with them.'

Taxi/transport worker

Respondents working in professional and highly skilled roles also prized verbal communication. However, in contrast to transport and taxi drivers, they were more likely to explain how it was necessary to help them understand a particular package of work from the perspective of a wide range of different stakeholders with different ambitions and goals and negotiate how and what would be delivered.

'Communication is key for an interior designer. You need to be able to speak to people at all different levels, because a lot of the time we're speaking to the people with the purse strings or the facilities person or the CEO of the company or financial directors, so you have to have that skill and you have to understand how to talk to a financial director differently to a facilities person.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Financial literacy was also critical in the eyes of respondents working in most occupations aside from taxi and transport, where there was generally less flexibility around levels of pay and means of remuneration. Perhaps the most important element was being able to evaluate market rates for different pieces of work in order to judge what counted as fair payment and what did not. However, respondents also discussed how they needed to understand how to structure a budget around terms of reference, request additional payment for services outside the scope of a contract, raise invoices and tackle non-payment.

Lastly, respondents in all manner of gig occupations explained how a wide range of 'soft' skills were required because of the nature of their employment status and work structures. This included motivation, organisation, flexibility and time management. They explained that they frequently needed to respond to work at very short notice, deliver it to very short timetables and continuously motivate themselves to look for more work.

‘Being quite self-motivated ... You’re just logging into an app, so I mean you’re technically reporting to them online, but you’re not meeting anyone face-to-face, so you have to be quite self-disciplined at that.’

Taxi/transport worker

Skills gaps

In general, respondents did not feel that they had any substantive skills gaps which prevented them from accessing work via the gig economy. For example, interviewees working in taxi and transport roles consistently said that the only skills they needed were knowing how to safely operate a bike, car or other vehicle, and good communication skills. Many interviewees, in fact, felt they were overqualified for much of the range of work on offer, much of which was characterised as fairly generic and requiring less seniority than many had been used to in their work outside of the gig economy. This could make it hard to access work:

‘Because I’ve managed quite big projects and I’ve never actually had a very specific office administration job, for example, it is quite difficult to prove that you have the lower-level skills to be able to execute these tasks.’

Office/online/administrative worker

However, respondents did identify a few common areas where they felt their skills could be improved. A number who considered themselves freelancers running their own business (notably not in taxi and transport) felt many individuals did not understand the implications or necessities of being self-employed or setting up and managing their own business.

Another particular gap amongst respondents (again other than those in the taxi and transport occupations who did not see the same need for it) was financial literacy – in particular, how to manage personal finances. Respondents discussed how they never had an opportunity at school or later in life to learn how to complete a personal tax return or how to understand their P60 and P45 forms. For some interviewees, this made navigating personal finances a very stressful experience.

The other main area of skills gaps was specific technical competencies related to their gig occupation. This was most prevalent amongst respondents in the professional, creative and highly skilled occupations. For example, one respondent described how a particular electrical qualification would allow her to access more senior production work. However, the desire for more finely honed occupation-related skills generally tended to relate to specialised ICT skills.

Lastly, a few respondents across different occupations described how they felt a bit uncertain about dealing with very difficult clients and situations.

Skills specialisms

Generally, respondents were aligned to a single broad gig occupation and tended not to work across platforms in a number of different sectors. However, a number of respondents who used the gig economy as supplementary income stream quite often had work in another sector. For example, one respondent was working as a copywriter via online platforms, but also had a salaried job retraining as a part-time legal assistant, which was their main interest. Most respondents felt that it was a better strategy to focus on one area and try to perfect their reputation and approach, particularly as their career progressed.

‘Moving forward – and I think I’m probably going to look at this in the next couple of months – I probably will want to try and start specialising on one type of client, just from a client attraction point of view. To show that you’re a specialist in their sector and in their business is a real benefit, but I’m not quite at that stage yet, because I’m just starting out.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Training opportunities

As a general rule, access to training was a rare occurrence for respondents working in the gig economy. Training was consistently sourced and paid for by interviewees themselves, and carried out during what would have otherwise been paid work time. The one exception was some fairly limited induction training.

Induction training

For many respondents, the only opportunity for formal training was induction. This was typically a brief orientation, which explained how to use a particular platform and the basic tenets of correctly completing tasks. Interviewees were often unimpressed with this training, finding it cursory and basic.

‘They gave us a little talk and stuff really. Yes. I wouldn’t even call it training.’

Taxi/transport worker

Induction training was sometimes delivered online via the platform respondents used. However, taxi and transport drivers had some limited in-person orientation to understand the practical side of their work, alongside how to operate the platform. Generally, this made use of work shadowing of a more experienced gig worker, although some instead watched training videos at a particular site. Some respondents questioned the quality of the work shadowing they had as they were unconvinced their colleague was accurately following all company rules. Inductions usually covered how to complete a few tasks from start to finish, following organisational codes of practice and health and safety regulations.

'When you go to pick up your kit, you're slotted in a schedule and you're in a meeting with the rider lead, I think they call it, and you'll chat to him. He'll tell you about possible insurance you can take out on your bike, like he recommends a policy from a particular company that he thinks is good, and then he'll tell you the highlights of the Highway Code. He'll say what you can do, what you can't do, what's expected of you. So, the usual things really when dealing with the public - you know, avoid swearing, avoid profanities, bad language etc. - and then he'll tell you the best way to set up your equipment, what time for that time of year at least is best to turn your lights on at night.'

Taxi/transport worker

Formal training

In general, interviewees who were able to self-fund training worked in professional, creative and higher-skilled occupations, which attracted better pay and therefore greater disposable income, allowing them to turn down paid work. Some office and administrative workers also self-funded training, although to a much lesser extent. As such, formal training was, in almost every case, sought out and paid for by respondents themselves and completed in their own time.

All respondents who had participated in formal training felt it could keep them up to speed with developments in their sector, giving them a competitive advantage and making them more attractive to potential clients.

'I've done lots of odd little courses here and there ... just little things to add extra skills around my professional offer of services, so I'm more employable [in] different types of jobs.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Respondents who were able to engage in formal training carefully planned which courses, looking at what work was on offer, what skills they needed for their work and what would give them an 'edge' over other people using the same platforms.

Informal and on-the-job training

Respondents had more access to informal or on-the-job training rather than formal courses, although again this tended to be amongst the professional, creative and highly skilled as well as office and administrative workers. Most typically, informal training involved looking at amateur tutorials on video-sharing sites, which respondents felt gave them enough of a grounding to understand as much as they needed to about a particular task or approach.

'I use YouTube loads ... There's loads and loads of stuff on there, and I feel like animation is one of those things. Once you know the basics, if you watch a tutorial, it's really easy to understand the programmes.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Other respondents explained there were some limited opportunities to learn from peers and more senior colleagues on-the-job. This was restricted to those working in the creative and professional industries who had access to longer-term contracts of a few weeks or more where they would work as part of the team and with senior leaders. The following individual was a dancer who had founded their own company and was also working in the sector through online platforms.

'I suppose, on the job, there might be ... Through repetition, you'd be improving your skill as you'd be training. It might involve learning new techniques, to adopt a certain style that they want, or effect. So, I suppose, yes, you might be training on the job.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

However, a number of respondents explained that it was often simply not possible to undertake any on-the-job training because clients and customers were normally looking for the 'finished article' with an existing track record related to that particular piece of work. One respondent, who worked as a writer and editor, explained that if a job posting had six or seven components, even if they were not hugely familiar with just one they had little chance of securing that piece of work.

'Well, the interesting thing is, with the contract work, you kind of have to arrive as a fully fledged person and I think anything outside of that ... Interestingly, I haven't actually done any training since I've become a contractor.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Barriers to training

Many respondents had very limited (or no) access to any substantive, meaningful training within the gig economy and a range of different barriers were cited. The most common was that respondents could not spare the time or resources.

Some respondents explained that many formal training opportunities were not practical because the classes were scheduled to take place during their typical working hours, or because courses were lengthy and would require giving up too many opportunities for paid work. Respondents explained that this lack of flexibility made it hard for people working in the gig economy to find training that could suitably fit around their existing commitments.

'When I've looked at [courses in FE colleges], they're not flexible enough to get something out of it. They're basically set up for apprenticeships and that won't be suitable for me.'

Physical skilled worker

The cost of a lot of training was also prohibitive because formal training was self-funded.

There was a pervasive desire for training amongst respondents who did not have access to it. They saw the lack of access to (funded) training as something that put their career development and job security at risk. A number of interviewees felt training was essential to keep 'ahead of the curve' and remain competitive. Some respondents explained they would like greater policy intervention to help them access professional development.

'Training needs to be a bit of a bigger and better thing ... If you're training on a job or getting some kind of experience on the job as a freelancer, where you're getting more qualifications to up your career path and stuff like that, that would be amazing, but to my knowledge I haven't really been offered that.'

Taxi/transport worker

'The one thing with being a freelancer is you don't have that ongoing skillset advancement unless you push yourself to do it on your own time. If the government could do more... offer good-quality training to keep skillsets, technical skillsets, up-to-date, because it's a nightmare trying to keep up with evolving technologies.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Use of previous skills

Respondents across different gig occupations had different views about the extent to which they were able to use their skills, experience and knowledge in their gig economy work. Those working in taxi and transport were often the least positive and felt that prior training and experience was rarely, if ever, put to good use. Several people mentioned that working in taxi and transport had not been a real choice for them, and would not have been what they would have wanted to do with their career. However, they explained that they needed to find quick, reasonably reliable income. This included several respondents who had experienced fairly lengthy periods out of work due to health conditions, accidents or redundancy and other reasons for periods of long-term unemployment.

'I look around and everyone I'm working with in security ... Doctorates, masters, degrees in aeronautical sciences and engineering ... No one can get a ... job. There's no work out there other than [the] casual economy.'

Physical low-skilled worker

Respondents in taxi and transport often felt there was a stark divide between their prior experience and their current work. In particular, they did not see how their formal education or ‘the theoretical side’ was meant to help them in employment. They tended to speak with more frustration when they had higher levels of educational attainment. Respondents with Higher Education (HE) qualifications felt the work had the least in common with their educational experiences. The following individual was studying fashion management, but was engaged in online marketing and administrative tasks.

‘When I’m working in jobs, I’m rarely using the skills that I picked up in university. I’m using the skills that I’ve picked up in other jobs, which is great, but I never pick up skills I’ve paid to learn, which is very annoying.’

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

However, not all interviewees in lower-skilled occupations felt that prior experiences could not be drawn upon. A number of taxi and transportation drivers explained that prior customer service work had very much helped prepare them to work with customers in a polite and professional manner.

Similarly, low-skilled physical workers suggested that developing good writing and communication skills in Further Education (FE) and HE had helped them to be more successful when applying for work or promoting their services. Nevertheless, they, like some taxi and transport workers, were frustrated by feeling underutilised and unable to access work they found more challenging, technical and engaging.

By contrast, skilled physical workers who had some vocational education and training that was directly relevant to their current work were significantly more positive. Their narratives highlight how they felt they had more opportunities to use their professional knowledge of, for example, the intricacies of the construction sector. However, a number were still dissatisfied that they were not able to fully capitalise on their prior knowledge.

Respondents in creative occupations were the most positive and emphatic that their gig work aligned closely with their formal training and work experience. Performing arts and/or artistic courses and track records were pivotal in being able to access work which was directly related to their training. Along with those in professional and highly skilled occupations, those interviewees with HE qualifications were also the most positive when discussing how university and professional experiences helped throughout their career in the gig economy. The following quote is from an individual who trained as an actor and who was getting voiceover work through online platforms.

‘It’s prepared me for the side of it which is the kind of creative side, I suppose. You know, I think it’s helped me be better at it, because we have to do things like read scripts and that’s all the sorts of things we did on our course.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Opportunities for progression

Regardless of what stage they were at in their career, taxi and transport drivers generally did not feel there was any scope for career development within their occupation or the platform they worked for. A number of reasons were given, including believing there was a flat organisational hierarchy with few additional responsibilities on offer (e.g. area drivers, induction or middle management). Some also suggested that the platform's management and back office functions operated at arm's length from drivers, making it harder to move within the organisation. In other words, respondents generally felt that their relationship with the platform did not extend beyond using the app to secure work.

Similarly, respondents in physical low-skilled and skilled occupations did not think there were many opportunities for progression, aside from taking on a greater volume of the same work, developing closer, more stable relationships with certain clients or working at a more intense pace as they grew more familiar and adept at certain tasks. However, several in lower-skilled occupations discussed how this was not of great concern as they were not intending to remain in the same occupation long term. Instead, it was a 'stopgap' to get 'a quick bit of cash' whilst they were between salaried jobs or in training (which, they hoped, would lead towards a different career trajectory).

In contrast, respondents working in professional, creative and highly skilled roles were generally more hopeful about the opportunities they had. Typically, they envisaged this would mean accessing more prestigious and high-profile work for 'big name' clients as their track record and relationships with clients gradually accrued. Respondents highlighted the fact that not every job they secured via online platforms supported their career progression in the way they wanted, but many felt they were able to access enough of the right sort of work to grow their career. Interviewees working in these roles emphasised the huge importance of reputation and reviews to access good quality, well-paid work in the gig economy. Respondents who were further on in their careers and had more established reputations saw the most opportunities for progression, as their name, profile and reviews or ratings on platforms were able to open doors to sought-after contacts and competitive work.

'What it is is on the profile ... You update everything on there, and so by being able to update my credits ... Obviously, the people who are coming towards you, the people who are placing adverts ... They're obviously going to see that.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Office and administrative workers were less positive, but still felt they had scope for career progression in the gig economy. Respondents in the early stages of their career saw their progression in terms of becoming a bit more 'savvy' about picking the right jobs, and becoming a little quicker at completing work, thus being able to bring in more money. Those further into their career were instead looking towards building a solid client base and developing their reputation as a safe pair of hands, as well as being a bit more selective about the work they took on and how they chose to complete it.

'Looking at working with bigger names rather than regular writing for other places ... So, if a company would approach and say, "Do you want to be our blog writer for our website?" that would be something I'd love, because obviously that's regular content, regular payment, rather than having to spend a lot of time looking for work or replying to [public relations people].'

Office/online/administrative worker

8 Main perceived advantages and disadvantages of working in the gig economy

Summary

This section explores the main perceived advantages and disadvantages of working in the gig economy. These tended to be wide-ranging and often depended on an individual's personal situation or the type of work they undertook. However, there were definite commonalities across interviewees.

Main advantages

The main perceived advantages of working in the gig economy can be grouped as follows:

- Flexibility in terms of setting working hours, being one's own boss and deciding whether or not to accept work
- Being able to fit work around other commitments, such as studies or childcare
- The ability to earn a secondary income
- The freedom to travel and work remotely
- In some cases, mostly in the professional and creative sector, the opportunity to gain experience and skills.

Overall, although the apparent advantages of working in the gig economy varied, the ability to work flexibly, and the control this afforded individuals, was a commonly-cited perception. Interviewees spoke positively about being able to set their own working hours, and decide their own schedules and working arrangements in general, which is generally consistent with being self-employed. Many described this as 'being their own boss', which was viewed positively, with interviewees valuing the freedom that this entailed. For example, one interviewee, working as a delivery worker, liked the fact 'you don't have a boss breathing down your neck, telling you what to do', describing this as 'liberating'. Some also mentioned that an added benefit was that they no longer had to commute to work, which saved them valuable time. Others said that they enjoyed having the choice over whether or not they accepted work, rather than being compelled to do whatever their boss might tell them to do. Some expressed satisfaction that they were not exposed to the office politics that inevitably accompany office-based employment.

This perception of flexibility and freedom was common across all occupations. The following quotes are taken from individuals in a range of situations and occupations. Some had previously worked in an employed environment and now relished the freedom they had as a self-employed worker.

‘Even if I am away, I can still work remotely. I can do things on my phone. I can do things for a couple of hours a day, even if I’m away on holiday. So that’s the benefit of doing this really. I haven’t got to be in situ at a company. I can be wherever I need to be.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

‘I mean, number one for me ... It’s having choice over what I do and choice over my schedule. For me, that’s paramount ... This whole 9am to 5pm rat race and rush hour and all that kind of stuff ... I find it really annoying. And then obviously you’ve got the comfort of your own home as well, which then means you can, sort of, switch off the computer and just go and do things – you know, your own personal stuff that you want to do.’

Office/online/administrative worker

‘The advantages are... I work for myself. So, I don’t have anyone telling me what to do or being rude to me or giving me targets.’

Physical low-skilled worker

For some, the added flexibility that working in the gig economy afforded them took on further meaning, as it allowed them to fit their work around other commitments such as university, as well as other personal interests and activities. This tended to be the case for those engaged in occupations such as delivery and taxi work, routine office administration and other relatively low-skilled jobs such as cleaning and dog walking.

For several individuals, predominantly women, it allowed them to remain in the labour market without missing out on spending time with their children, as they were able to fit their work around tasks such as the school run. This was particularly beneficial during school holidays, with one interviewee commenting that paying for childcare during this time was one of the biggest expenses for most parents. Another mother commented that being able to always be there for her children whilst still being able to work was the ‘holy grail’. This tended to be the case across sectors and occupations, although those doing routine office administrative tasks online were particularly represented here.

‘It gives you a lot of freedom. It gives you a lot of flexibility. I was forced into it really, with health, but the thought of, “Actually, if I carried on doing this, then I could spend more time with future kids ... I could follow my passions.”’

Physical low-skilled worker

‘I love the freedom and the variation of the work. I love not being tied down. I love the fact that I don’t have to go back to work right now and I can spend time with my 15-month old son, and it’s really precious.’

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Having flexibility in terms of how and when to work was extremely advantageous to interviewees who suffered from health conditions, both physical and mental. For these individuals, having autonomy over their workload allowed them to adapt to how they were feeling on a particular day. For example, on a particularly bad day, it would be possible not to work and make up the time at a later date, which would not be possible to the same extent in an office-based employed job. In particular, one interviewee felt that working in a busy office environment would be too 'stressful' and that working from home suited her. Another interviewee described how working in the gig economy had allowed her to gradually return to work, having left employment a number of years previously due to depression. Although this individual was still working part-time hours, she greatly valued the flexibility of working from home and being able to decide her level of commitment to the amount of work she could take on.

'It's really useful, in that it helps me ... Having something to do gives me a focus, which helps my health anyway, but also just the flexibility of it is really probably the key thing that's really helped. If I'm having a bad day then I don't need to do as much. There are some things I've got commitments for. If I've got to take a dog for a walk, I've got to take a dog for a walk, but that's good, because it gets me out of the house, but if generally I'm having a bad time I can pull back on what I'm committing to.'

Physical low-skilled worker

Other perceived advantages to working in the gig economy included the ability to earn a secondary income, for example to save for a specific event or purchase, or to support studies, the freedom to travel whilst working remotely, which is linked to the flexibility associated with working through online platforms, and the variety of work available. A few interviewees also viewed their work through the gig economy as a means of personal and professional development. This was in part related to the variety of the work that was available to them, which they felt was beneficial in terms of being of interest, but also in terms of developing their skills. This was mostly the case in the professional and creative sector, however, which the quotes below demonstrate.

'I'd rather work for myself and I'd rather have the freedom and the independence to take or leave work as well. So, if I do want to go away and disappear off for five weeks somewhere, I can just say to everyone, "Right. I'll be doing some of it remotely."'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

'I think it's both personal development and a good side income, but I also see it as something that develops me, in a way, and broadens my horizons and diversifies my everyday activities.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Main disadvantages

Interviewees also identified a variety of perceived disadvantages to working in the gig economy. These can be grouped as follows:

- Lack of security in terms of work, working hours and pay
- Lack of employment rights, such as access to sick pay and maternity pay
- Low pay
- Loneliness and social isolation.

Whilst many of those interviewed cited flexible working arrangements as an advantage to working in the gig economy (see above), a significant proportion also expressed concerns about the irregularity of work, as this also meant that their income was not fixed. Some said that they would prefer to work in an office environment, in which one has a set salary at the end of the month. This depended, however, on whether the gig economy income was the main source of income for an individual. If this was the case, they were more likely to be worried about irregularity of work, working hours and income. Perceptions of instability were common across all occupations.

'It can be unstable. Nothing is guaranteed. Payments can be sporadic and you do have that competition from areas like India and China and the Philippines where people charge more than half less than you do.'

Office/online/administrative worker

'It's not regular. That's the only thing. You never know what you're doing. You don't know if you're going to get the work or if the work's going to be there. That's the downside.'

Physical low-skilled worker

There was also mention of the fact that self-employed gig workers were not covered by employment benefits, such as sick pay, holiday pay, maternity pay and pensions. This was not seen as something that was unfair, more that it was a disadvantage associated with this way of working, and accepted as such.

Many also reported low pay to be an additional disadvantage, with some interviewees stating that they received pay that was below the National Minimum Wage if they tried to calculate an hourly rate from the work that they did. In some cases this was because the online platforms individuals used were global, and workers from other countries were able to undercut them and drive wages down. This competition from abroad was also disadvantageous in terms of securing quality well-paid work (see also the section above on income).

In the case of taxi workers, the instability not only related to the number of hours worked, which they could largely choose, but also to the availability of clients. They could find

themselves in a situation where they were losing money if no clients were available and they were driving round and using fuel. Other taxi drivers had a daily target for earnings and could go home once they had achieved this target.

Other disadvantages included a sense of loneliness, as many of those interviewed worked from home. Interviewees described missing working in an office where there was the opportunity to socialise and meet new people. This was the case particularly among those who had previously worked in office environments or who had worked as part of a team.

'The only downside is being on my own all the time. You do have to make more of an effort then to go out and socialise and speak to real people, not just the cat.'

Office/online/administrative worker

Box 5: Individual gig economy workers – recent graduate and gig worker in voiceover

One respondent graduated from university in 2016 and lived at home with his parents. He had gained a BA in Writing, Directing and Performance and since graduating had been seeking work as an actor, writer and doing voiceover work from home. To support his voiceover work he had turned a small room in his parents' house into a studio, spending around £700 on equipment, including a microphone and sound insulation. He has been applying for and winning work in the gig economy through a number of different platforms, some generalist offering access to a variety of work types, and some specialist to voiceover work. Alongside working, he was also undertaking a short university-based evening course in voiceover technology.

He reported that, in his experience, the gig economy platforms offered an easy way to access opportunities. He also felt it was a good way to build a portfolio of work, experience and contacts so that in the future he might gain work from an agent. Although many of the platforms he used to find work were used by individuals internationally, the nature of voiceover meant that clients sometimes specified that they wanted an English accent, which limited the size of his competition. He preferred to bid and try to win longer audio book gigs, rather than short voiceover commissions, as these offered him a more stable workflow. He was very positive about the opportunities that the gig economy had offered him, first as a means of being able to access this type of work, as it has low barriers to entry, and second as a means of developing his skills and expertise in the industry:

'I think there's an amount of freedom or independence you get where you can be enterprising, sort of entrepreneurial, in your own way, and you're not so dependent on other people ... The fact that there's no barrier to entry I think is a big thing as well. I mean, if I could just wander up to a big employer, people who are hiring voiceover people, or an agent or something, and just say, "Give me work," I totally would do that, but it's not as simple as that. Whereas with this stuff I just had to put a photo up, write a bio and record some samples in my own home studio, which I can do, and then I was ready to go and I could say, "Yeah, I am a voice actor and I'm an audio book narrator." I could actually just say it, because that's the site allowing you to do it, you know.'

Despite the advantages that he felt the gig economy offered, he did not want to be working in the gig economy forever, largely because the number of hours he actually needed to work to successfully deliver the contracts meant that, in his view, his pay rate was quite low:

'I don't want to have to do this forever because it's very tough and there's so many people on [the platforms] and people undercut each other a lot on there. It's not going to be very easy to make a decent living through them, but they're good for allowing people to get a foot in the door and get off the ground a bit with it.'

9 Future plans

Summary

This section outlines the future plans of respondents, starting with work and personal goals and focusing on a common theme of entrepreneurialism. It then examines respondents' feeling towards future finances, and how they are going about planning for the future, including plans for retirement and savings.

Overall, personal goals tended to vary according to age. Respondents aged 18-29 said that they wanted to start a family, buy a house and travel. For those aged 50+, personal goals included winding down on the way to retirement, undertaking a diploma and keeping healthy. Work-based goals tended to differ according to occupation. Generally, those in professional, creative and high-skilled occupations saw their gig economy work as a way of developing the skills they needed to realise future ambitions. However, the majority of these respondents did not feel that their gig economy work offered them a career. Those working in office, short online tasks and administrative occupations included students who wished to focus more on study and pursue a career related to their degree; those who aimed to re-train; and those who wished to carry on working in their occupation, but not necessarily within the gig economy. The majority of respondents in these occupations felt that their gig economy work could not offer them a long-term career because it was not sustainable. The majority of those in physical low-skilled occupations did not wish to pursue future goals within the gig economy.

Feelings about future finances varied and were dependent on individual situations. Some respondents had specific goals and were using their gig economy work to work towards them. However, uncertainty was a theme that ran through many of the interviews, alongside a feeling that they were doing this probably for a limited amount of time, but at the moment had no real plans to change the way in which they were working. Similarly, most respondents also said that they were not saving for their pensions. They knew that this was a short-term strategy and would like to do something about this in future. Some also felt that this was a subject with which they knew that they had to engage at some point, but were reluctant to, even though it was a source of vague anxiety.

Work and personal goals

Personal goals

The subject of personal goals was mentioned less often than that of work-based goals. However, there were some common personal aspirations and plans, and these tended to vary, predictably, according to age. For example, respondents aged 18-29 expressed goals of starting a family, buying a house and travelling, which did not seem to be mutually exclusive. For example, one respondent aimed to '*buy a house and maybe have a family over the next five years*'. Although the aim to start a family was more commonplace among those aged 30-49, travelling was just as popular across both 18-29 and 30-49 age groups. For some, the prospect of having children was linked to the idea of travelling, whereas others wanted to wait until their children grew up.

For those aged 50+, the focus on work-oriented goals was even more prevalent. However, personal goals included winding down on the way to retirement, undertaking a diploma and keeping healthy.

Work-based goals

Work-based goals tended to differ according to occupation. Generally, those respondents in professional, creative and high-skilled occupations saw their work in the gig economy as a way of developing the skills they needed to realise their future professional ambitions. The use of online platforms allowed many to build up a portfolio of work, with the idea that this could demonstrate their competencies to future customers. By doing so, respondents aimed to gain more secure work in the form of higher-paid, longer-term contracts and traditional employment. Although this was most prevalent in those involved in digital media and user testing, it was also found among other respondents, such as actors.

Such attitudes were evident across respondents of all ages, including early and middle career stages. Those in the middle of their career often viewed online platforms as a stepping stone or networking tool which was conducive to realising their future goals, rather than as a long-term stable source of income. However, the majority of respondents in these occupations did not feel that their gig economy work offered them a career. One core reason for this was that this work gave them the opportunity to develop skills, but that they did not perceive it to be financially viable to use online platforms for anything but temporary employment. This was more commonly the case if respondents had increased responsibilities and outgoings, such as starting a family or moving out of their parents' house.

'I think they're a platform into another platform almost. The gigs that I could get out of this could progress and go further. So, yes, I think they could ... I don't see it as a career, using these platforms. It's good for extra money. It's good for getting a foot in the door somewhere. That's kind of how I see it.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

'I think, at this stage, I would say temporary, for now, just because I know eventually I wouldn't ... When I start my family and stuff like that, yes, then it wouldn't be sustainable on the platforms.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Whereas respondents in professional and creative occupations sought to employ the same skills outside of their gig economy work, those in taxi- and transport-based roles did not. The skills learnt, developed and applied in their work had limited transferability in terms of what they wanted to pursue in the future. Although this may well be expected in student respondents, who expressed ambitions in line with their studies, it was also characteristic of those for whom this work was their sole activity. For these respondents, future work goals included, but were not limited to, working in: the restaurant trade, property development, the motor trade sector, retail or catering.

Starting a business was the dominant theme in terms of respondents' future goals, rather than traditional full-time employment. It was also clear that, for the majority of those working in taxi and transport occupations, their current main activity did not align with their future goals. For example, only one respondent said that their future goal involved transport in the form of 'the trucking industry'. Despite this common misalignment between their current occupation and future goals, respondents did not clearly state that their current role hindered their future plans. Conversely, it was often viewed as a way to save money towards their future business.

'I'd need to save up a little bit of money, but with any business, when you open up, you have to wait. Patience is key to getting customers and building your reputation. It will require quite a bit of savings, yes. So, over the years, in five years' time, hopefully I'll have enough saved up by then. It will possibly be my next project to try and do that.'

Taxi/transport worker

Very few respondents viewed this occupation as a viable career option. The reasons for this varied, from working too many hours to increasingly fewer opportunities. Consequently, the majority of respondents were either waiting for something better to come along or saving towards starting their own business.

Those working in office, short online tasks and administrative occupations were a heterogeneous group in terms of future plans. However, they can be categorised as follows: students who wished to focus more on study and pursue a career related to their degree; those who aimed to re-train in order to pursue goals in another, unrelated sector, including massage therapy and web design; and those who wished to carry on working in their occupation, but not necessarily within the gig economy. In terms of the latter, the majority aimed to move away from using online platforms in order to pursue self-employment or establish their own business, but by making use of the skills that they were using at present. This involved devising training materials, digital marketing, funnel marketing, editing and proofreading. One reason for this, expressed by multiple respondents, was that it would enable them to have greater autonomy over what work they did and for whom.

'My focus this year is to do some more research, find some more good contacts and make a name for myself looking at the training material side of it, and try and build that as a little self-employed business. I'd rather be reliant on myself to find work than a platform.'

Office/online/administrative worker

For respondents who wanted to continue working using online platforms, one goal was to become more efficient. Due to the single fee paid for many administrative-based tasks, some respondents aimed to improve their efficiency and therefore carry out more tasks in less time in order to increase their income. This was common for individuals whose work involved translation or completing surveys, which could be due to the limited scope for producing individualised, unique work. By contrast, those who used writing skills, such as

blogging, aimed to secure work with bigger or more regular clients in order to both receive a regular income and spend less time pursuing work.

'I'm quite enjoying it, so I don't really see why I will be stopping, as long as I can get better at it and get faster at it. It's fairly fast results-based marketing, which means I don't really see myself stopping anytime soon, unless I really run out of time and I can't afford, time-wise, to do it anymore.'

Office/online/administrative worker

In essence, the majority of respondents in these occupations felt that their gig economy work could not offer them a long-term career because it was not sustainable. The cause of this was attributed to a saturated market in which some individuals were competing with those from less affluent countries with lower living costs. Consequently, respondents expressed that there was little room to grow their work and get to a point where they could live comfortably on their income.

The majority of respondents in physical low-skilled occupations did not wish to pursue future goals within the gig economy, but there were differences by age group. Whereas many respondents aged 18-29 expressed more independent-centred future goals, such as establishing a business in an unrelated industry, those aged 30-49 did not. However, their ideas around this were generally vague, with no clear plans as to how they were going to achieve it.

'The next few years is going to be a bit more exploration. I'm going to travel some places and get some inspiration, come back or stay somewhere else, probably start my own little business doing something, probably in the music industry. That would be great, if I could do something that is self-sufficient. It would be nice to use my degree as well.'

Physical low-skilled worker

By contrast, those aged 30-49 expressed a desire to seek more secure, full-time employment which didn't involve the type of work they were currently doing, but were still open to using online platforms to boost their wages once this had been achieved. The given reasons for seeking full-time employment included stability, a pension, reduced childcare expenses as a result of children starting to attend school, and a desire to return to a previous career. These goals were often quite clearly expressed.

Entrepreneurial goals

One common theme across all occupations was the high number of respondents who aimed to establish their own business and employ others, become self-employed, or build on their existing self-employed work as part of their future work goals. However, for the majority of respondents, these goals could not be realised within the gig economy itself. As noted above, within physical low-skilled occupations, this tended to be the goal of younger respondents, although for all other occupations, those in the 30-49 age group were just as

entrepreneurial. For those aged 50+, this entrepreneurial spirit tended to subside, with many stating an intention to scale down their workload towards retirement.

'I try and keep at least one to two days a week free where I can approach new clients and potentially promote my own company. If I can, I try and take contracts in the name of my company – not in my own name – which means that the more credibility it builds and the more contracts I can take on, in the long term I can change it back to being a business rather than a one-person job.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

One reason for pursuing further self-employed, freelance-based work was the nature of the industry in which some respondents operated, in which contracts are tendered for at stipulated prices and time periods. However, for many, this was a way of escaping the conditions related to more traditional employment, such as working in an office environment at specific times and having to answer to a higher authority; they wanted more autonomy in their work life.

'Yes, but when I'm finally ready, I know, yes, I would definitely... Eventually, I might have to go and do that, but ideally I would just prefer to start a business... that I will be able to pay myself a salary and I wouldn't have to work for anyone.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

By contrast, some respondents intended to find more secure, traditional employment, whether part-time or full-time. This was most common among students, who were using the gig economy as a means of income until they completed their studies and were able pursue a career relevant to their chosen field. Those who wanted to work on a part-time basis were often open to the idea of continuing to work in the gig economy.

One common theme across occupations was those respondents who viewed the gig economy as a stopgap. This was due to both having future plans that lay outside of the gig economy and its non-viability as a career option. The quote below is from an individual working as a cleaner.

'No. This is a stopgap for me. This is just to make a bit of cash quickly and get back home again, but I want to get my career back on track when I'm feeling better. This is just a stopgap, and there's no way I'm going to be using it in the future.'

Physical low-skilled worker

Future finances

Feelings about future finances

Feelings about future finances varied and were dependent on the specific situation of individuals. Some respondents had specific goals in mind and were using their gig economy work to work towards them. However, many did not have much of an idea about how their life and their future finances were going to pan out. Uncertainty was a theme that ran through many of the interviews, alongside a feeling that they were probably doing this for a limited amount of time, but at the moment had no real plans to change the way in which they were working. The following quotes are from an individual engaged in short administrative online tasks, one who was working as a cleaner, and one who was working part-time as a delivery worker alongside a part-time job as a medical practice manager.

'I feel very uncertain about my finances generally and I have done for probably the past year and a half, since I graduated.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

'How do you feel about your future finances?'

'Oh, I don't know. Terrified probably is the word I'd be using right now.'

Physical low-skilled worker

'I'm a little bit uncertain. I'm not going to lie; I always have felt uncertain since I've done this sort of freelancing thing and been self-employed and all that jazz, because you just don't know. You just don't know what the future holds. If I had some security of sick pay or maternity pay or whatever then maybe I would feel a little bit more secure.'

Taxi/transport worker

In the creative sector, there was general uncertainty about the future and future finances, which in some ways is usual for those in those types of jobs. Some were working in low-skilled gig economy jobs in order to support their creative activities, such as the individual in the first quote, who was a musician but supporting themselves through delivery work, and the individual in the second quote here, who had worked in film production, but was working in low-skilled manual jobs in order to see themselves through a slack period.

'I don't think about that really at the moment, because working as a freelance musician is not steady, no organised lifestyle. In the long run, you know, you just worry about next week, "How am I going to pay rent next month?" and stuff like that.'

Taxi/transport worker

'I have no savings. I have nothing right now. So, that's the next big thing on my list, get some savings together and start figuring all of that out. This year, I don't even know how I'm going to pay my taxes from 2015, let alone save anything. When my cat had to have surgery in the summer, a friend of mine gave me the money and then I paid her back.'

Physical low-skilled worker

One respondent stood out as being extremely organised when it came to personal finances, although this was very much the exception. This individual had worked in a variety of different jobs, had been made redundant from their most recent job, and was currently earning money through online platforms as a transcriber as they had a young child.

'I have a white goods column in my spreadsheet. You can't believe how organised my spreadsheet is! What things can come up that we can't afford? Okay, the fridge will break, so let's put a few pounds a month away for that and then, when it happens, we've got it.'

Office/short online tasks/administrative worker

Saving for pensions

Similarly, most respondents also said that they were not saving for their pensions. They knew that this was a short-term strategy and would like to do something about this in the future, but at present did not feel in a position to pay into a pension scheme. Some also felt that this was a subject with which they knew that they had to engage at some point, but were reluctant to, even though it was a source of vague anxiety. Others were very honest about how anxious they were about their pension situation. This is, of course, consistent with the position of many self-employed people, whether or not they work through online platforms. Some had pension provision from previous employment, although in most cases this was not enough to live on during retirement. The following is a selection of representative quotes from individuals.

'I am worried about the pension thing. I'm not going to lie; it does worry me, because I'm 40. I think, in my 20s and 30s, I didn't even think about it, but now it is a worry, because I think, if I've only got 20, 25 years left, how am I going to earn enough to see me through after retirement? It is a concern.'

Office/online/administrative worker

'Are you saving for your retirement at all?'

'No. I need to. I'm frightened. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think about that.'

Office/online/administrative worker

Some were actively against using pension schemes as an option, due to them providing poor returns, being expensive or insecure.

Age made a difference in terms of general attitude towards pension provision. Without prompting, respondents in the 18-29 age group rarely considered retirement as a part of their future finances, and savings were aimed at shorter-term plans, such as holidays. For example, only one respondent said that they had contributed to a pension. For those aged 30-49, saving for retirement was more of a topic, although the majority were not doing anything about it. For many in this age group, saving for retirement was something that they were currently looking into, or something which was becoming a concern. For the two respondents aged 50+ who had no retirement plan, one was planning to '*die with my boots on*', and the other expressed feelings of deep concern. Consequently, with greater prevalence came greater feelings of uncertainty and anxiety.

For respondents aged 30-49 who were saving for retirement, only two were doing so by paying into a private pension fund. In fact, the majority of respondents with a pension, across all age groups, started that pension as part of a current or previous employment-based scheme. Those who had left employment said that they could no longer afford to pay into any sort of pension scheme. In addition, some noted that they felt financially secure, not because they were paying into a pension, but due to their partner's workplace pension.

Some of those respondents were quite a long way into their working lives, with no hope of a significant pension. The quote below is from an individual who had worked in a variety of jobs in sectors such as buy-to-let, housing and energy consulting. They were now self-employed as a consultant.

'I've got pension from when I used to work full-time, but it's not a lot. It won't give me a big income, so I'll just have to hope that I can keep some tenants, and that's all really. I mean, I might save to some sort of pension later, but I don't really know if I'll get to that stage. I mean, I'm almost 50 and it's not that many years away, so ... Maybe in five years' time I'll start saving, but, I mean, I'd have to save an awful lot in a short period for it to make much difference, because obviously I wouldn't have an employer contributing to one.'

Office/online/administrative worker

Those who had properties that they were letting out were hoping that this would give them some financial security in the future, as they had not built up a great deal of provision during their working lives. One respondent talked of the fact that income from property represented the only way in which to earn income in retirement.

'I think my second property really is my pension pot. I've had to resign myself to the fact that I'm never going to have a personal pension, and I've had to try and find another way to secure things for the future.'

Professional/creative/high-skilled worker

Conclusion

This report highlights the diversity of the gig economy, both in terms of the types of individuals undertaking this work and the work that they are doing. Individuals come from a variety of backgrounds, with a range of differing experiences and skillsets, and find themselves undertaking gig economy work for a diverse range of reasons.

We found that the experience of individuals depends heavily on whether or not they are carrying out gig economy work as their main source of income. If this is the case, they are potentially vulnerable to fluctuations in working time and therefore pay levels, short notice of working schedules, and suffer from a degree of precariousness in terms of a lack of employment rights. By contrast, individuals who are working in the gig economy in order to top up income are less vulnerable to fluctuations in the amount of work available and also typically have more freedom to choose which jobs to accept and reject.

Gig economy work is highly flexible and this is very much appreciated by those engaged in it, with many feeling that this flexibility is a fair trade-off for any lack of security and employment rights that resulted.

The underlying skill level of individuals varied significantly, depending on the individual and the type of work in which they were engaged. The majority of gig economy workers were receiving no formal training and limited informal or on-the-job training. There was also limited opportunity for career progression.

A large proportion of respondents were relatively content with their working life and had no expectation that it should be any different in terms of workflow, control and scheduling. However, there was a certain short-termism, in that very few individuals were saving, or were able to save, any of their income. Most were not saving for their retirement.

In terms of health and safety issues, support from online platforms in emergency situations was seen to be patchy. There were also some safety concerns surrounding checks carried out by platforms prior to individuals working in clients' homes or other private locations on a one-to-one basis

Although the perceived advantages of working in the gig economy varied, the ability to work flexibly and the control this afforded individuals was a commonly-cited perception. However, some might find themselves financially vulnerable when working in this way, due to fluctuations in the amount of work available and a limited ability to save. Despite this, many seemed unquestioning of this flexible and patchwork working life, in which income is derived from a variety of sources. This may point to a change in overall attitudes to work for some groups in the UK.

Glossary of online platforms

Below is a list and brief description of some of the online platforms used by respondents to find work in the 'gig economy', although the list is not exhaustive. The sector is dynamic and new platforms emerge over time, or change name or focus. For example, Upwork was previously called Elance, and Uber recently launched UberEats.

Bark

The platform enables customers to post a request for a service covering a range of occupations, such as personal training, plumbing or cleaning. The platform then matches these requests to a number of suitable individuals working in the required location who have profiles on the site. If the worker is interested in the job, they make use of 'Bark credits' – essentially a small introduction fee – to make contact with the customer through the platform. The platform does not take any commission from the transaction and does not have an escrow service.

Clickworker

The platform has over 800,000 'Clickworkers' registered with them to perform small tasks (microjobs) via the online platform on a fee basis. The Clickworkers process the jobs independently and remotely, according to their own schedule and on their own computers. The microjobs offered come from customer projects that are divided into self-contained microjobs and put at the disposal of Clickworkers for processing.

Deliveroo

Deliveroo is an app that offers the delivery of food from local restaurants to homes and offices in some parts of the UK (mainly urban areas). Workers can either ride a bike or drive a car to make deliveries. The financial transaction is handled through the app, and riders are paid varying rates depending on a number of factors, including their location and the time of day.

Fiverr

Fiverr is an American-based marketplace platform, including services such as logo design, writing and translation. The platform offers an escrow service, and payment is made as soon as the service is completed. The platform keeps a 20 per cent service fee from the transaction.

Freelancer.com

Freelancer.com connects over 23 million employers and freelancers globally, from over 247 countries, regions and territories. Through the marketplace, customers can hire freelancers to do work in areas such as software development, writing, data entry and design through to engineering, the sciences, sales and marketing, accounting and legal services.

PeoplePerHour

PeoplePerHour is a platform that connects freelancers working remotely and online to customers. It covers a number of occupations, including design, writing and translation, business support and web development. Sellers can search for jobs and send proposals directly. Up to 15 proposals can be sent per month for free, after which sellers have to buy more proposal credits to submit responses to customers. The platform offers an escrow service.

Spotlight

Spotlight is a casting platform specific to the theatre, television and film sector, which connects performers, agents and casting directors. It works through a series of membership options with an annual fee. Casting directors and agents can search the online profiles.

TaskRabbit

TaskRabbit is an online platform that notifies registered 'Taskers' of potential jobs nearby. Tasks tend to be provided in a specific location and include services such as cleaning, delivery and flat-pack furniture assembly. Taskers select work through an app and the platform uses an escrow service, with a percentage retained by the platform.

Uber

Uber is an app that provides customers with a taxi service. The service is provided in certain cities and surrounding areas throughout the UK. Drivers need to have a private hire licence and a vehicle that meets the platform's standards. Customers request a taxi via the app and the platform offers a payment mechanism. The platform takes a percentage of transactions.

Upwork

Upwork offers services that can be provided remotely via a computer, including customer service assistants, designers and creative, sales and marketing experts. Freelancers bid for work online. The platform offers an escrow service and charges freelancers a 20 per cent, 10 per cent, or 5 per cent service fee depending on the total amount they've billed with a client.

Discussion guide

A Introduction

Introduce self and IES (independent research organisation).

Introduce the research. The aim is to interview people who are working in the 'gig economy': those finding work via online platforms (e.g. Uber, TaskRabbit, etc.) We are interested to hear about their experiences in order to find out more about this form of work and to better understand how it operates and why and how people are involved.

The interview will cover:

- Your work history
- Your experiences of working in the 'gig economy'
- Your plans for your working future.

The research is for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (the government department with responsibility for labour market policy and employment law, including pay and conditions and employment law). The Department for Education (DfE) will also have an input into this research. The research will help the department to better understand these new ways of working in order to inform policymaking.

Explain about confidentiality. Note that no personal data will be shared with BEIS or any other organisations without the express permission of the respondent. Note that all views will be reported anonymously and this means not mentioning individuals or organisations by name. Data will be securely deleted/destroyed at the end of the project and not used for any other purpose.

- Likely length of discussion (approximately 45 mins to one hour).
- Remind interviewees that participation is voluntary and they can opt out at any time.
- Explain about the £30 incentive for phone and £40 for face-to-face (cash).
- Ask if they have any questions/clarifications about the research.
- Ask them to sign the consent form (provide oral consent for telephone interviewees).
- Explain about recording and seek permission to record. If no permission given, take notes.

B Timeline: experience of work

We would like to use a timeline to briefly discuss key events in your work history, including any family or other circumstances that have affected your work and any periods you may

have had learning or out of work. Could we start with when you left full-time education and work up to your current situation, which we will then discuss in more detail? We can mark on activities and time periods as we go along.

Respondent/interviewer to mark key points on the timeline.

The past

We want to understand what has shaped your past experiences, leading you to working in the gig economy.

Probe for the following types of events to get a potted history:

- How old were you when you left full-time education? Probe for qualifications obtained and ask which level of qualification.
- What type of work/employment did you hope to obtain when you left education? Probe for level of qualification.
- Do you think the education you've received prepared you well for your current job in the gig economy?
- Employment/work since leaving education (type of work undertaken; full/part-time etc.) Interviewer to get a sense of precariousness of employment and how career builds.
- Are you still in some form of education? If yes, how does this fit around your gig economy work?
- Qualifications gained and periods of learning. Probe for any in-work training. Probe for level of qualification.
- Any periods out of work? Get a sense of any 'cycling' between work and benefits.
- Any prolonged periods of ill health?
- Voluntary or community work?
- Caring commitments (children and/or other relatives)?
- Other key life events affecting work, such as moving country, moving area, career breaks?

Now

After we have discussed your past situation and circumstances, we want to discuss in detail your current situation, focusing on your work in the gig economy.

- What type of work are you doing through online platforms?
- Details of nature of jobs/tasks.

- Pay rate, hours.
- Geography and proximity to home.
- What are your reasons for working through online platforms, as opposed to finding work in a more traditional way?
 - Probe as required: flexibility, financial, lack of alternative work, work–life balance, match to skills, employment prospects, ‘stepping stone’ to other employment, fits caring responsibilities, access to training, variety/diversity, control over workload, control over work pattern.
 - Did you actively choose to work in this way?
- Why are you doing this type of work now? Probe for no other kind of work available, need for flexibility, fits life circumstances.

The nature of the work

- How many and which online sites/platforms do you use to find work (e.g. Uber, Freelancer, Handy)?

Skill levels and training

- What skills are required to undertake the work you do? Probe: technological skills, communication skills, and for any specific qualifications/licences required.
- Did you have to undergo any training to secure work via these platforms or are you using your own skills/experience? If received training, probe for details (e.g. who paid, format, level).
- To what extent do you feel you are using your skills, qualifications and experience gained through work via these platforms?
- Are there any skills that you think you are lacking, that make it harder for you to do your job?
- What opportunities do you have to progress in your current work through online platforms?
- Do you view this as a career, or more along the lines of temporary employment? If you see this as temporary employment, how relevant and transferable are the skills you are learning for your future career?

Experiences of working in the gig economy

- What are the work opportunities like in your area/what kinds of jobs are available? Probe for their assessment of the local labour market, and the availability of work.
- What are your experiences of finding and getting work through online platforms? If working through more than one platform, probe for any differences between the two.
 - Do you have to commit to working a minimum number of hours per week?

- Could you describe to me an 'average' day/week? How many hours do you tend to work? What drives any variation?
- Can you access the type of work you would like? Can you access the amount of work you would like? Probe for any differences between the two.
- What are your experiences of working in this way? If working through more than one platform, probe for any differences between the two.
 - How far ahead do you know your work schedule?
 - How do you prioritise work against other commitments?
 - How is the pace of work?
 - How much do you have to invest in equipment/resources you need to work (e.g. Smartphone, transport, training/knowledge acquisition/anything else)?
 - How would you describe your working conditions? Probe for any impact on health and wellbeing and safety.
 - How do you feel about the balance of the control over what/how you work between you and the platform?
- What are your feelings about the pay you receive? If working through more than one platform, probe for any differences between the two.
 - How does this compare to rates of pay you have received for work in the past?
 - Is this your main source of income? Probe for any other sources.
 - If not, what proportion of your income do you think you earn in this way? What is your other source of income?
 - Are you the main earner in your household? Are other members of your household in employment? Probe for brief details of the type of work (employed full/part-time; gig economy worker etc.)
 - What proportion of your household income is earned in this way?
 - Are you able to save regularly?
- Do you have any employment rights in areas such as sick pay, pensions, maternity, and holiday pay?
 - If you're not entitled to these rights, how do you feel about this and what sort of impact does this have on your working life?
 - Are there rights that you feel you should receive that you don't currently have?
 - How do you manage if you are ill and unable to work?

- How do you balance work with holiday/time off?
- Are you a union member? Are you able to join a trade union (should you wish)?
- How (if at all) are you saving for your retirement?
- What are your experiences of access to training whilst you've been working in this way? Note: we are interested in access to training both related to their gig economy work and work-related training more broadly.
 - Probe for any training received/undertaken whilst working in the gig economy. Where was training undertaken (FE, HE, online)? Who funds it? Duration? Level?
 - Have there been any barriers to you being able to access the training that you think would be useful (e.g. if the online platform isn't flexible enough, or funding is not available from the platform, or you don't earn enough to fund it yourself)?
- In your view, what are the advantages of working in the gig economy?
 - Probe for: level of employment regulation covering this type of work; starting point to test ideas to build a business/test creativity; variety; challenge/financial rewards; flexibility; work–life balance; level of autonomy.
- In your view, what are the disadvantages of working in the gig economy?
 - Probe for: access to employment rights such as sick leave and maternity pay; blurring work and non-work boundaries; isolation from colleagues/the organisation; pace of work/productivity; security of employment; work–life balance; level of autonomy.
- Would you recommend working in the gig economy to a friend/relative? Why/why not?
- Do you feel that you are self-employed, or does it feel more like you are employed by the online platform? Probe for why this might be – ask for specific examples.

The future

After discussing your current situation and circumstances, we want to think about the future of your work in the gig economy:

- What are your work goals/aspirations for the future? What are your personal aspirations for the future?
 - Short-term goals (in the next year) - what steps have/are you planning to take to achieve these?
 - Longer-term goals (over the next five years) - what steps have/are you planning to take to achieve these?

- How long do you plan to work in the gig economy? What opportunities do you see for yourself to progress at work via these platforms (e.g. increasing earnings, increasing qualifications)?
- If you don't plan to work for long in the gig economy, why is this?
- What might help you achieve what you want? What might hold you back?
- How do you feel about your future finances?
 - Probe around: ability to save, planning for retirement/pensions, access to a mortgage/loans.
 - How would you cope with unexpected costs (e.g. replacing household goods)?

Online platforms

- How satisfied are you with the online platforms through which you have found work?
- Do you think that they should be providing anything different?
- Is there anything that you think the government could do to help?

Other

- Is there anything else that you'd like to say?



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BEIS/16/