



Better work in the gig economy

Enabling gig workers to live with financial security, dignity and dreams

doteveryone

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Doteveryone is the responsible technology think tank.

We're fighting for better tech, for everyone.

We want to see a world where responsible technology is the new normal. We're working to change how tech is made and used so that it supports a fair, inclusive and sustainable democratic society.

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Foreword

We have seen many gains as a society and as consumers from the fantastic pace of technological change and the flexible and independent nature of work today. But, as this research shows, there are many perils. We underestimate them at our very grave risk.

The gig economy can be fantastically empowering if you can work on the terms you wish for. But it can also be destabilising, dehumanising and dispiriting if you don't. The convenience of a taxi ride or a takeaway must not be traded for the rights of people to work with financial security and dignity and to fulfil their dreams for the future.

The recommendations in this report are designed for the furthest first. If we meet the needs of those made most vulnerable by the impacts of new technologies, we will serve the interests of everyone in society.



Martha Lane Fox
Executive Chair & Founder
Doteveryone

January 2020

Executive Summary

The future of work is happening now and not on some far-off horizon. One in ten Brits takes a job via a digital platform at least once a week. And the services they provide - the almost instantaneous taxi rides, cleaning, manicures or babysitting - are now taken for granted by consumers.

The data-driven innovation that matches customers' wishes to workers' capabilities has opened new opportunities for those who already had them. For those with existing skills and financial means, gig work offers flexibility and freedom.

But for those who don't, the app has become a trap. They have no option but to work gigs, and no way out once they've begun.

In this research we listened to those who are in the trap. They told us how gig work strips them of financial security, dignity and any dreams for the future.

We heard from them how gig work is 'like quicksand' - low pay becomes unlivable pay after costs are accounted for - and the promise of flexibility is an illusion when, in reality, workers must be available 24/7 and scramble for every gig available.

We heard how workers wished they'd be treated 'like people not robots' and how management by algorithm strips people of their dignity.

And we heard how people 'don't know what comes next' as the always-on, piecemeal work they do makes it impossible to think or plan for a different future.

The gig economy does not have to be this way. Doteveryone fights for better tech for everyone. We're working to change how tech is made and used so it supports a fair, inclusive and sustainable democratic society.

Collaborating with gig workers we formulated ideas about how to create better work in the gig economy for those that digital disruption has left on the fringes. We propose policy change for the long term and have prototyped best practice for platforms to implement immediately. The recommendations meet the needs of those most disadvantaged, and in doing so they serve everyone.

Dot everyone's recommendations

1

Financial security

The Government should develop and enforce a Minimum Gig Wage that accounts for the costs of doing gig work.

Platform modification: Platforms should provide greater data transparency to show workers how their earnings and costs fluctuate, and inform customers about how much of the price they pay is split between the worker and the platform.

2

Dignity

Companies should create governance structures that give gig workers a voice in the design of the platforms they work for.

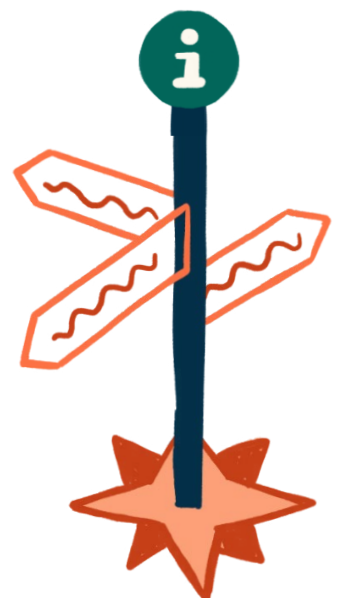
Platform modification: In a world where interactions are mediated through an app and often automated or ignored, we propose that workers can have access to human interaction to solve their questions or seek redress.

3

Dreams

The Government should adapt the National Retraining Scheme to provide the holistic support that gig workers need.

Platform modification: Help Hotspots would provide a broad range of drop-in support for people in locations and times that fit into gig workers' daily lives.



Introduction

Responsible technology in the gig economy

“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 or payment-by-task basis”¹

Definition of gig work, Institute for Employment Studies

From pizza delivery and taxi driving, to dog-walking and childcare, digital platforms now use data and algorithmic decision making to allocate tasks to a pool of workers according to demand.

Praised for unleashing disruptive innovation and driving efficiency, bringing convenience and low prices to customers, and allowing workers flexibility to accept work when it suits, the platform economy has grown to be worth an estimated £2bn to the UK economy.² The number of gig workers has doubled from 2016 to 2019, with one in seven working age Brits having done platform work at some point in their life.³

But this work lacks the safety nets of traditional employment. There is too often no sick pay, no living wage, no holiday entitlement or parental leave. The income can be erratic and costs - like a car repair - can be crippling. Platforms argue gig workers are self-employed. But it's a position that's being challenged. California's Assembly Bill 5 (2019) has ruled platform workers must be treated as employees, giving hundreds of thousands access to new rights.

In the UK, the Government plans to implement the Good Work Plan,⁴ based on the 2017 Taylor review⁵ that will “improve clarity on employment status.”

¹ Institute for Employment Studies (2018) *The experiences of individuals in the gig economy*. <https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/resource/experiences-individuals-gig-economy>

² PwC (2015) *Work 'gig economy' set to be worth £2bn in the UK by 2020*. https://pwc.blogs.com/press_room/2015/12/work-gig-economy-set-to-be-worth-2bn-in-the-uk-by-2020-pwc-research.html

³ TUC (2019) *UK's gig economy workforce has doubled since 2016, TUC and FEPS-backed research shows*. <https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/uk%E2%80%99s-gig-economy-workforce-has-doubled-2016-tuc-and-feps-backed-research-shows>

⁴ The Queen's Speech (2019). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/839370/Queen_s_Speech_Lobby_Pack_2019_.pdf

⁵ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2017) *Good work: the Taylor review of modern working practices*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-work-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices>

Some say these proposals don't go far enough,⁶ and the RSA⁷ and Demos⁸ among others, have recently called for further reforms such as portable benefits and government advice services to support precarious digital gig workers.

Everyone believes that the responsible use of technology can promote a fair, inclusive and sustainable democratic society. In this research we have worked with those living on the gig economy breadline to understand from them what's needed to make the gig economy fit this vision. Together we have created ideas for new social safety nets for gig work. These include both actionable recommendations for policymakers to create long-term structural change, and prototyped concepts that platforms and workers can start using straight away.

A focus on the 'furthest first'

The gig economy is varied. Gig workers are not just Uber drivers and Deliveroo riders. There are also graphic designers and translators, masseurs and beauticians, handymen/handywomen and cleaners. Some work long hours and others don't. Some earn a good income and others don't. Some are entrepreneurs, others aren't.

Building from existing Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy research⁹ that explored the experiences of gig workers, we divided gig workers broadly into two groups.

Some workers have already built strong safety nets, through financial independence from savings or other income streams. They can choose whether or not to engage in the gig economy and have alternative career options through education or planned training. They can dip in and out and work gigs flexibly to top up their income.

But there are workers who cannot choose to leave the gig economy. They lack financial safety nets and have limited employment options. Gig work is a last resort which they become reliant on. They rarely benefit from the promised flexibility of gig work as they can't afford to turn down jobs. They get trapped in a cycle of working long hours in low paid precarious jobs.

Our research focuses on this second group - the workers who get most of the downsides of the gig economy, with few of the benefits - and our policy recommendations and prototypes are focused on them. We call this 'designing for the furthest first': the proposals are aimed at supporting those with the greatest needs, but in doing so will benefit everyone in the gig economy.

⁶ WIRED (2018) *The government's Good Work Plan leaves the gig economy behind.* <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/good-work-plan-uk-gig-economy>

⁷ RSA (2017) *Good Gigs: A fairer future for the UK's gig economy.* https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/pdfs/reports/rsa_good-gigs-fairer-gig-economy-report.pdf

⁸ Demos (2019) *The Liquidity Trap: Financial experience and inclusion in the liquid workforce.* <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Liquid-Workforce-Digital-Final.pdf>

⁹ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2018) *The experiences of individuals in the gig economy.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/679987/171107_The_experiences_of_those_in_the_gig_economy.pdf

Understanding the lives of digital gig economy workers

Our research has explored the everyday lives of those working on platforms who lack financial safety nets and work long hours. We conducted over 20 hours of in-depth interviews with gig workers from across the UK, from Deliveroo riders in Milton Keynes to TaskRabbit handymen in Bristol (Names used throughout this report have been changed to protect participants' privacy). Alongside this we ran contextual inquiries with Uber drivers in Stoke-on-Trent, digging deeper into their experiences by speaking to them as they went about their working day.

We also spoke to platforms about the support they offer for workers. And we engaged with fintech start-ups, micro-learning providers and civil society organisations thinking about the future of work to understand what other forms of support are emerging.

These conversations demonstrated the need to develop new social safety nets, focused on three pillars of better work for gig workers:

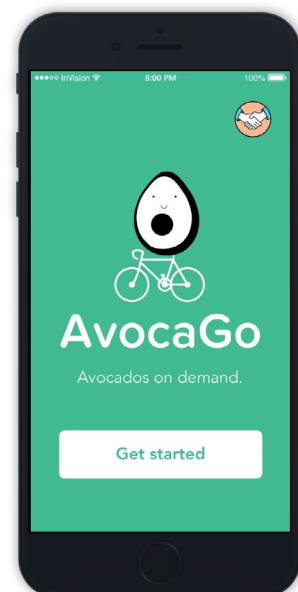
- **Financial security** - pay that is enough for people to live and thrive
- **Dignity** - work that treats workers as humans, not a robot or datapoint, that allows them to voice their needs and be respected as individuals
- **Dreams** - a chance to plan a future beyond the next piecemeal gig so they can have career progression

We have worked with gig workers to co-design policy changes that address these needs.

And we developed an imagined platform - **AvocaGo** (fig 1) that caters to the customer's every avocado need - which prototypes what the best practice, responsible technology approach to gig work might look like.

These concepts have been tested with policymakers, platforms, trade unions, the public and workers themselves to understand how we can make them a reality.

Fig 1 - Imagined platform - Avacago



1

Financial security

Gig workers - like everyone - should be paid fairly. Their work should be compensated so they and their families can live and thrive. But for some in the gig economy, financial insecurity is a major problem. This makes the promised flexibility of gig work an illusion as workers need to put in long hours to make ends meet.



The gig economy feels like quick-sand

Christina is a 28 year-old mother of two balancing a part-time psychology degree with 40 hours a week working on a cleaning platform. Her work leads to daily financial struggles, triggered by low-pay, unstable hours and competition between workers driving down earnings.

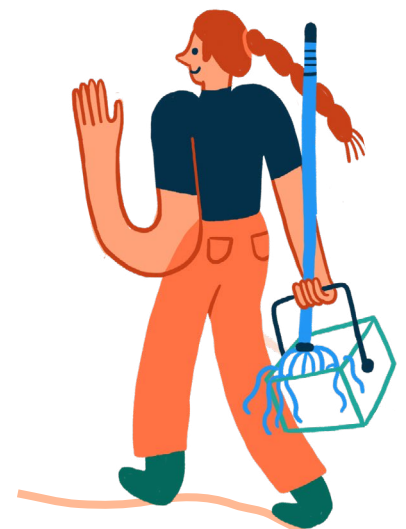
“The gig economy feels like quick-sand and you need a lot of support to get out of it... [the platform] wants to keep you in this low-paying box so you don’t evolve. If there’s no work then you’re screwed... I have a dry week around once a month.”

It’s become a competition for who’s going to go above and beyond. If a customer asks for the house to be clean but not the fridge, that cleaner’s going to clean the fridge for free to secure more jobs.”

Responding to these financial headaches creates a host of ripple effects on her personal life, studies and mental health.

“It’s really stressful and you start contemplating doing two or three gigs at once. But you know you’re already physically and mentally stretched enough... if I wasn’t stretched and tired so much I could focus more on studies.”

I got a crazy bill out of nowhere - it means two things: dig into the forbidden [savings] pot or ask my parents. I hate asking my parents as they don’t understand how I’m [educated] and putting myself in this predicament so I usually dip into the pot.”



I thought it was going to be easier and give me the flexibility to organise and be more financially independent... actually the biggest problem is pay. [There's] not enough to pay bills.

- Delivery rider, London

Gig workers are more likely than others to 'live in their overdraft'

Fundamentally, this is a problem of low pay. The rates on offer to these gig workers leave many struggling to make a decent living.

As one worker said, "you can't support yourself with [gig work] because there's so little. Technically you can but you're doing so many hours in rain, snow and you get sick so it's not practical to survive on it."

Work that is supposed to be flexible becomes never ending.

If you want to get the money you've got to be available seven days a week... you've got to accept.

- Handyman, London

And there are additional financial burdens. Gig workers are more likely than others to 'live in their overdraft'.¹⁰ They have unavoidable overheads: paying off car loans or upfront sign-on costs, maintaining bikes, buying cleaning products and tools, time spent waiting for gigs, time spent creating profiles, managing ratings or navigating the platform - all of which eat into an already low wage.

I do 60 hours, I make £750. But then you have to deduct expenses, around £150 on fuel. I can take out £600 but then you pay insurance, VAT for cars. It's been four weeks where I've made no more than £400. You're just managing your expenses and taking £150 - £200 home - Driver, London

Some larger gig platforms are taking on a share of these financial risks. Uber and Deliveroo both offer workers free accident and injury insurance. But these protections are capped and contingent on meeting eligibility criteria (Uber drivers must have completed a minimum of 150 trips in the 8 weeks preceding an accident or illness,¹¹ for example), and on many other gig platforms these benefits are non-existent.

Without social safety nets from an employer, gig workers must bear these costs too. But when money is so tight, personal insurance or pension contributions become unaffordable luxuries, making workers extremely vulnerable. One cycle courier said she thinks "about [nearly] crashing every day, there is definitely a chance of it happening in the long term. It's not clear what you can do to financially survive if you do have an accident."

The gig economy exacerbates these challenges through the way platforms use the data they hold to constantly change the terms for workers. For example, some platforms give short term incentives to lure workers onboard, but these evaporate once the company has established control in a market.



¹⁰ Nationwide Building Society (2020) Based on Nationwide account holders who did not have a positive balance between May 19 - July 19. Internal analysis.

¹¹ Uber (2019) Ensuring Independent Drivers are not on their own <https://www.uber.com/en-GB/newsroom/ensuring-independent-drivers-not-on-their-own-2/>

In the beginning Uber paid £10 to get all the Deliveroo riders to quit their jobs. So everyone was moving. Then they get you hooked on, and they dropped it right down to £3.50 a delivery. - Delivery rider, London

Platforms use their data to constantly tweak the rates of pay workers receive, driving costs to the minimum and creating hypercompetitive markets. This keeps prices low for customers and enables them to grow their market share.¹²

But it isn't a level playing field between platform and worker. Workers are often not able to access all the information that determines how their pay and demand for gigs change in the short and long term. Instead they live in permanent uncertainty and have to guess what their real wage is, how best to use their time, and how to plan their financial futures.

Some workers described a cat and mouse game where they would try to find ways to beat the system, only to have those opportunities closed off.

They made loads of changes to make it more difficult... they stopped telling you where you're delivering to which makes it very difficult to plan for more than one [delivery]. I think the reason they did that is to stop you from working on other platforms. Their excuse was "people are declining deliveries" but I don't believe that. Every time we found hacks, they'd react to stop it. You're trying to make as much money as you can and they're trying to restrict you - Rider, London

These tactics condemn gig workers to a cycle of piecemeal labour - living precariously from one gig to another with no transparency about their expected income and no ability to plan their finances.

Achieving a Minimum Gig Wage

For gig workers to have financial security, first and foremost they need to be paid more. The National Minimum Wage (NMW) has improved the situation of the UK's lowest paid workers,¹³ but does not protect self-employed gig workers.

We are calling for a legal obligation on gig platforms to pay a Minimum Gig Wage.

As recommended in the 2017 Taylor Review,¹⁴ a regulated floor will create a base level across all platforms, protecting workers from unfettered competition. But a minimum wage alone does not account for the additional costs of gig work. The Minimum Gig Wage would include an allowance to cover a fair amount of the extra costs gig workers face, including the full cost of statutory employee benefits and protections that employees enjoy. This would mean gig worker's 'take home' pay (after costs) would achieve parity with employees and make purchasing employee benefits and protections viable.

¹² Mastercard (2019) *The Global Gig Economy: Capitalizing on a ~\$500B Opportunity*. <https://newsroom.mastercard.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Gig-Economy-White-Paper-May-2019.pdf>

¹³ Resolution Foundation (2019) *Low Pay Britain 2019*. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/low-pay-britain-2019/>

¹⁴ Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (2017) *Good work: the Taylor review of modern working practices*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/good-work-the-taylor-review-of-modern-working-practices>

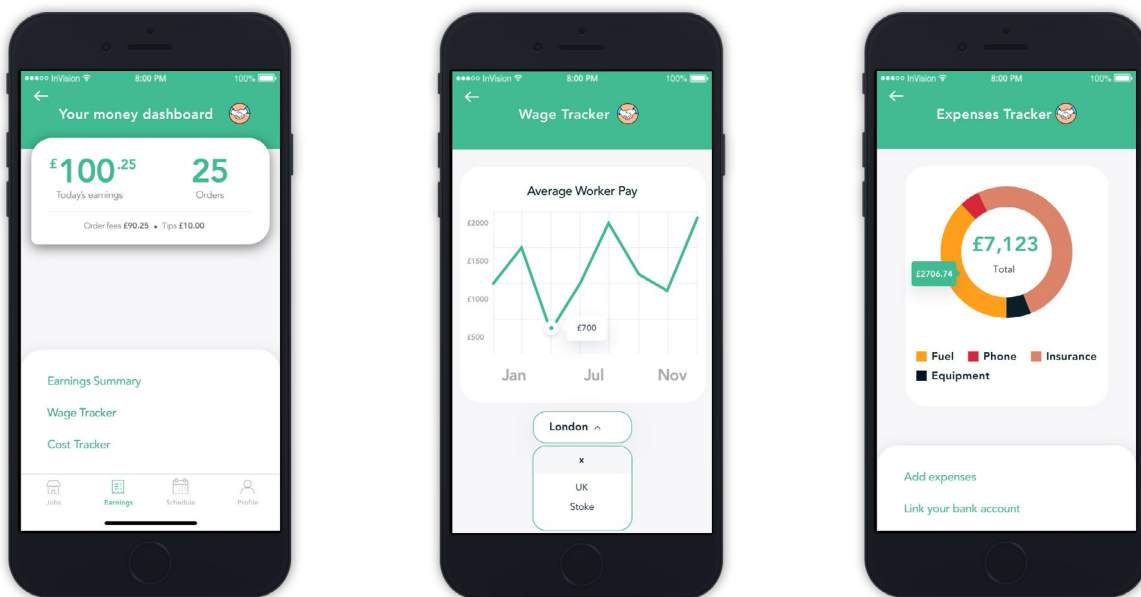
Giving workers and customers the information they need

With a Minimum Gig Wage, gig workers will have certainty about their baseline rate. But financial planning is still difficult when gig availability fluctuates and costs vary.

With our imagined platform, the on-demand avocado delivery service AvocaGo, we explored how to help workers overcome this. Our [prototype platform dashboards](#) show workers a breakdown of how their earnings and costs vary over time (fig 2).

This information allows current and prospective workers to make better decisions about whether and when to work, reducing downtime between gigs and providing a more accurate reflection of the 'take home' pay workers get.

Fig 2 - Prototype platform dashboards showing how workers' earnings and costs vary over time



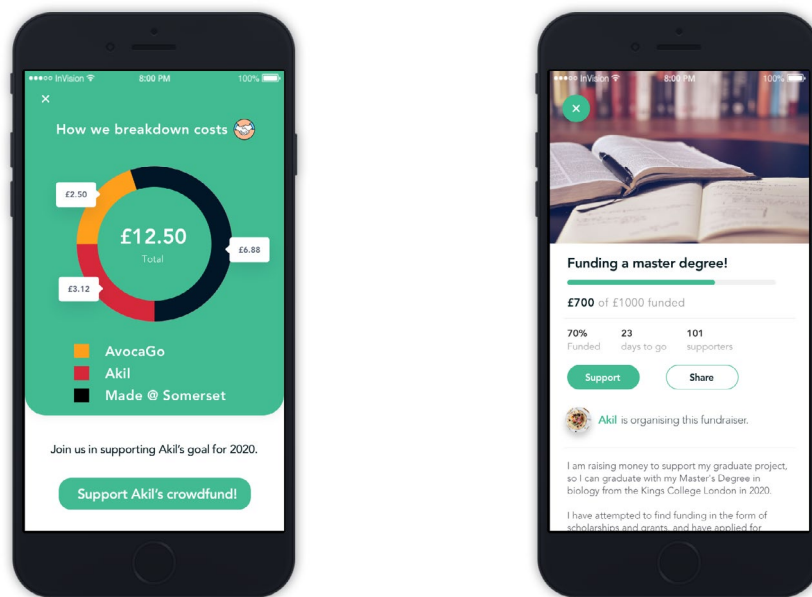
Emerging fintech services such as Trezeo, the income-smoothing app, aim to help self-employed and gig economy workers manage uncertainty around their income. A number of gig platforms, such as TaskRabbit, show breakdown of costs, including the service fee and VAT, to workers and consumers. But there are not, to our knowledge, any services that integrate these insights together to give workers a clear and holistic picture of their overall financial situation.

This kind of data can even be used to support collective action: workers' unions in Scandinavia have analysed market and worker data using artificial intelligence to inform and develop their negotiating strategies.¹⁵

The AvocaGo dashboard also shares information with customers.

As demand for ethical consumption grows,¹⁶ customers can help ensure the people providing the services they use are getting paid fairly. So while AvocaGo customers can buy all the avocados their hearts desire, they are also informed about how much of the price they pay is split between the worker and the platform. We also included an alternative tipping page where customers can add an amount to a savings fund for something of the workers choice (fig 3).

Fig 3 - Customer facing dashboard and worker fundraising page on platform prototype



This could incentivise AvocaGo to pay its workers a higher and more 'ethical' price to distinguish it from its competitors.

¹⁵ International Labour Organisation (2019) *Organizing On-Demand: Representation, Voice, and Collective Bargaining in the Gig Economy*. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_624286.pdf

¹⁶ Triodos (2019) *The rise and rise of the ethical consumer: UK ethical markets worth over £83bn*. <https://www.triodos.co.uk/articles/2018/the-rise-and-rise-of-the-ethical-consumer>

2

Dignity

Work is part of people's identity. It can be a source of pride, build communities and define individuals. But that does not happen if people cannot work with dignity. The people we spoke to who were reliant on gig work described how management by algorithm - where a faceless app mediates all their interactions - leaves them voiceless and disrespected.



I wish they'd treat us like people, not robots

Pawel is a 22 year-old cycle courier working 50 hours a week on a delivery platform. He moved to the UK three years ago in search of work. Disrespect from customers and the platform alike cause him significant stress.

"On the streets people talk to you in a different way - they think you're just like a McDonald's worker kind of thing. They're thinking this is a low-paid job and you don't deserve respect. Some drivers I know are racially abused riding round London.

[Platforms and customers] should treat us like people rather than robots or slaves."

But when he tries to push back against these experiences, his voice is rarely heard:

"If you call them, they don't answer the phone or it's in call centres far away. If you're a customer they answer the phone immediately... they don't care about us, they care about the people that buy stuff.

I did in the beginning write emails - long emails - pointing out ways the platform could work better for [workers]. With screenshots, detailed explanations of how they were making our lives difficult, but I realised that they don't care about that. If you make any issues for them, they'll just fire you or find a way to stop giving you work."



When I went to sign-up, I was loyal to the company, but then you realise that they really don't care about you. You're just a number. - Delivery rider, London

The gig economy is founded on the concept that work can be parcelled out into tasks that any available worker can undertake. But for workers, that leaves them feeling anonymous and unrecognised.

The general consensus is that everyone is pissed off, nobody really wants to be doing it, but a lot of my colleagues are quite miserable. Mental health is a big issue in the industry.

-Delivery rider, London

These experiences are compounded by a distance between many platforms and those that work on them. Many digital gigs come with no more than generic automated support, facilitated by chatbots and boilerplate FAQ webpages. These services can often lack the nuance and context needed to adequately address workers' needs.

The workers we spoke to described the dehumanising effect of this robotic support, that implies their concerns are not worthy of a conversation:

If you have an issue and you call them they'll do their best not to do anything about it - It got to a point where they had call centres in the Philippines where the people just had scripts - Delivery rider, London

Describing the frustration of not being able to explain or contextualise his actions, one driver spoke of how this strips him of agency and makes the knowledge he's built up through hundreds of hours of gig work redundant.

Some platforms do make efforts to build relationships with their workers - Uber hosts driver dinners in certain areas, for example, and Deliveroo holds rider focus groups, awards ceremonies and 'digital easter egg hunts'. But these initiatives typically reach only a fraction of the overall workforce, and are held on platforms' terms.

Changes to the design of apps or algorithmic decisions made by platforms are often imposed unilaterally, or at best after consultation with a relatively small group of workers.

Workers' financial insecurity makes them powerless to rebel: "Ultimately they [apps] don't care, they're like 'regardless we know you're going to work for us whether we put these plans in action now or ten years from now.'"

Many digital gigs come with no more than generic automated support, facilitated by chatbots and boilerplate FAQ webpages

Academic research by Meijerink & Keegan confirms this first hand experience:

As the term implies, the centrality of the “app” in app-working relationships is absolute. That the algorithm underpinning the app is designed, developed, and implemented heavily or entirely by marketing specialists and system designers within organisations, with little, if any, worker contribution, challenges established thought on the HR function’s role in effectively managing working relationships.¹⁷

One-sided communication between worker and platform can have insidious effects

This one-sided communication between worker and platform can have insidious effects, with workers put off from rejecting jobs, raising complaints or acting to collectively assert their rights for fear of backlash from customers and the algorithms that rule over their working lives.

A driver from Stoke-on-Trent described their fear of “revenge ratings” because the platform design dictates that the gig worker must rate customers first, which then disincentivises drivers from leaving bad reviews of problem passengers in case their own ratings suffer in return. And the disrespect workers encounter from the platform is mirrored in their interactions with their customers.

They see the number, they don’t see me, they don’t talk to me directly... that’s the difference between what I’m doing now and what I want to do - Rider, London

Although they do receive tips and gratitude in some places, they’re also on the receiving end of verbal and physical abuse in others: “if anything goes wrong customers take it out on you and they don’t care that it’s not your fault.”

This abuse, understandably, takes its toll on these people. Many of the workers we spoke to called for greater mental health support from both platforms and government.

Strengthening worker representation through platform co-design

Gig platforms are in a state of constant evolution. User and worker interfaces, matching and pricing algorithms, economic models and other design features are iterated on a daily basis to keep up with technological progress and the needs and wants of the markets in which they operate.



¹⁷ Meijerink & Keegan (2019) *Summary of ‘Conceptualizing human resource management in the gig economy: Toward a platform ecosystem perspective*. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 34(4), 214-232. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-07-2018-0277>

But our research shows workers are typically excluded from these development cycles: changes are imposed on them, not made with them. To give workers the respect they deserve and capitalise on the valuable knowledge they hold, companies must give them a stronger voice by changing how platforms are designed and developed.

We recommend **companies establish governance structures that give gig workers a greater voice in the design of platforms**, that enable them to co-design features that directly affect workers and provide commitments for how organisations will engage with them.

These structures could take the form of a worker co-design council, representation on boards or workers voting on key decisions, for example.¹⁸ Workers must have the formal power to approve and shape major design changes, and must be represented as platforms' apps, algorithms and commercial strategies evolve. This will help to redress the power imbalance between platforms and workers, and in the long term will benefit companies as they learn from their workers' insights and improve retention of workers.

These co-design collaborations could, for example, redefine ratings metrics, design features of the worker interface to improve performance and support task discretion, or mandate levels of access to human representatives of platforms if workers need support.

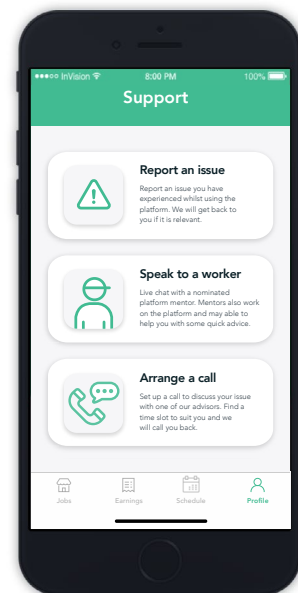
Redesigning worker support to include human interaction

We wanted our imagined avocado delivery platform, AvocaGo, to respect workers' desire for meaningful and timely human responses to any issues they encounter.

Our prototype idea is simple. In a world where interactions are mediated through an app and often automated or ignored, we propose that workers can have access to human interaction to solve their questions or seek redress.

This could happen through the app which triages workers to get immediate assistance from a fellow worker, or book a video call meeting with a platform representative (fig 4).

Fig 4 - Prototype platform's support page



¹⁸ Nesta (2019) *The rise of 21st-century unions*. https://www.nesta.org.uk/feature/ten-predictions-2020/rise-21st-century-unions/?utm_source=Nesta+Weekly+Newsletter&utm_campaign=72db5366d6-EMAIL-CAMPAIGN_2019_12_17_09_55&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d17364114d-72db5366d6-181949385

3 Dreams

Everyone has dreams for their futures. But for workers who are stuck in a trap of precarious gigs, it's hard to make these a reality. When tasks are reduced to their simplest form, there's no incentive for workers to grow and develop. Long hours and financial insecurity make it hard to make plans. The career progression that's available to people in employment becomes unattainable.

Some larger players in the digital gig economy are investing in the development of their workers - Deliveroo's recently-established Rider Academy offers workers opportunities to pitch business ideas to an investor panel and access to online qualifications and a limited number of degree scholarships.¹⁹

“ I don't know what comes next as I can't keep working

Greg is a 42 year-old driver from Stoke-on-Trent who joined a platform as a temporary stop-gap between manual labouring jobs. The schedule of labouring allows him to see more of his teenage son and wife, but he's finding it difficult to progress back into this world.

“Since working [gigs] I have put on a stone, I'm not using any of my muscles. My fitness is bad so it won't be easy to get back into the manual labour.

And when you're driving on the job... You don't learn any routes because the phone is just telling you which way to go so it is a bit mind numbing.

I don't know what comes next as I can't keep working [gigs] as I can't get a new car when this one dies. And I don't have time [to research alternative] careers or go to the gym - sometimes I'm sitting here waiting for a job for an hour and a half!”



¹⁹ Deliveroo (2020) The Deliveroo Rider Academy <https://www.deliveroorideracademy.co.uk/>

Obviously I don't want to do it for the rest of my life - Rider, London

But the workers we met have diverse aspirations that extend beyond pitching ideas on Dragon's Den or pursuing formal qualifications. We heard a cycle courier describe their dreams of becoming a stunt-woman. We met a micro-tasker looking to start up a family-run removals business with his son. One driver simply wished to be as rich as Floyd Mayweather. But none had a clear roadmap for achieving their goals.

Careers fragment into unpredictable micro-chunks, framing workers' worldviews in units of minutes and hours and narrowing their horizons

There are no ideas I have right now. I'm thinking about my own business but I need to have money to invest... I really don't know what I'm going to do after two years

- Driver, Stoke on Trent.

The work conditions of the gig economy - the low pay, long and volatile hours, and poor sense of self worth - create barriers to making plans:

I do not have the time to improve my skills, because my number one priority is to be earning enough to survive, be comfortable - Microtasker, Birmingham

Careers fragment into unpredictable micro-chunks, framing workers' worldviews in units of minutes and hours and narrowing their horizons. Some gig platforms are inherently hyper-short-term - nearly two-thirds of jobs on MechanicalTurk, where businesses can "crowdsource remotely located workers to complete discrete and repetitive tasks," take no more than a few minutes at a time.²⁰

I could be closer to [my goal] if this gig work was a bit more reliable... if I wasn't stretched and tired so much I could focus slightly more on studies. - Cleaner, London

Other platform features - algorithm-driven surge pricing for example - also lend themselves to living in the moment. Workers spoke of a false flexibility, where people who chose to turn down shifts or not engage during peak hours are penalised.

Their advertising was work whenever you want, and I was so happy... but if you miss a Wednesday next week that Wednesday's not there, so they basically force you to work the hours that they want. - Rider, London

And rigid ratings systems often focus on short-term metrics such as delivery speed, which can decay quickly if workers don't maintain them or take time off:

Going on holiday could affect your statistics, you're only as good as your last month. If you took more than a few weeks off you'd find it hard to then book on good shifts

- Courier, Milton Keynes

²⁰ Pew Research Centre (2016) *Research in the Crowdsourcing Age, a Case Study*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2016/07/11/research-in-the-crowdsourcing-age-a-case-study/>

Some workers described an alternative future where they could define the feedback that's most helpful to them, focusing on transferable skills that they could use to take the next step up their career ladder or progress within digital gig work itself.

I would like some constructive criticism, some training, that could get me to the next level of gig work. I feel like there's a hierarchy within [gig work] and if there is training to be had to get pay higher well - please tell me what I need to do! - Cleaner, London

Those at the bottom end of the gig economy are trapped. Their dreams do not vanish but the lack of financial security and dignity of their work often means they remain a fantasy.

Achieving aspirations with the National Retraining Scheme

One-size-fits-all approaches to training and development don't work for all gig workers.²¹ Those who are working gigs through necessity and not choice have little time, money and headspace. They need tailored advice and guidance to meet their goals.

The National Retraining Scheme²² has been set up to address the expected impacts of automation on the economy. But gig economy workers are already bearing the brunt of technological disruption and need help now. **We recommend adapting the government's National Retraining Scheme to provide the holistic support that gig workers need.**

Services could include micro-learning²³ and mentoring courses, that can be used flexibly around the variable working schedules of gig workers. The scheme should also incorporate financial and mental health support and offer ways for workers to be able to demonstrate and get recognised for the many transferable skills they develop through their gigs.



²¹ Apolitical (2018) *Training for the gig economy—does France have the answer?* https://apolitical.co/solution_article/training-gig-economy-france-answer/

²² Department for Education (2019) *Policy paper: National retraining scheme*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-retraining-scheme/national-retraining-scheme>

²³ EdApp. <https://www.edapp.com/microlearning/>

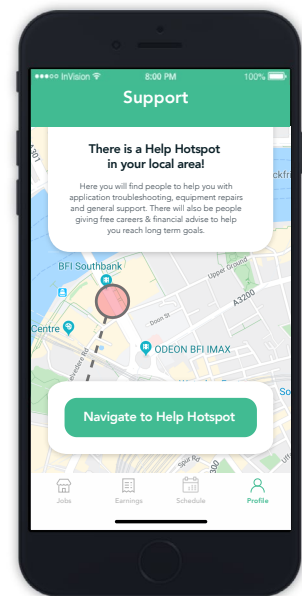
Meeting workers where they are: Imagining a Help Hotspot

Not all tech problems need tech solutions. The workers on our fictional avocado delivery platform, AvocaGo, should be able to use their gig work as a stepping stone to their future.

We designed a Help Hotspot (fig 5), providing a broad range of drop-in support for people in locations and times that fit into gig workers' daily lives - when demand is high, where products are picked up, or where workers congregate between gigs.

Meeting workers within the context of their routines, the Help Hotspot offers support that's both specific to workers' gigs - troubleshooting for navigating apps or equipment repairs, for example - as well as providing help to create a pathway to the longer-term career opportunities the workers we spoke to are keen to develop. Workers will also be able to arrange a time to continue their conversations at a later date, if they can't afford to devote too much time during the drop-in session.

Fig 5 - Prototype platform showing a Help Hotspot



Conclusion

In this report we have set out our three pillars of better work: financial security, dignity and dreams.

Platforms' desire for unchecked growth and a passive regulatory environment mean while others benefit from the innovation of the gig economy, some workers are bearing the brunt: living on the breadline, being treated as a data point and with no options or time to move out of their situation.

This is neither fair nor sustainable. It risks creating an underclass adrift from the opportunities others enjoy.

There has been welcome policy debate around the future of work but ideas are not being implemented at the scale and with the urgency required. Meanwhile, platforms' initiatives often lack ambition or are not based on workers' needs.

Our recommendations take a broad approach to drive change, with government, businesses and consumers all able to contribute to creating a fairer future. We ask for a Minimum Gig Wage that takes account of the costs that gig workers bear, a voice for workers in the design of the platforms they work for and a rethinking of the National Retraining Scheme to meet the needs of people in the gig economy.

Alongside these, our fictional app AvocaGo brings to life tangible ways to address relatively simple needs.

These are practical solutions that can be implemented immediately. Technology can and should be used responsibly to create a fair, inclusive and sustainable democratic society. In shaping the future of work, policymakers and platforms have a duty to implement these recommendations and make that a reality.

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This research was led by Kapila Perera, Jacob Ohrvik-Stott and James Barclay. The report was written by Kapila Perera, Jacob Ohrvik-Stott and Catherine Miller, and designed by James Barclay. Illustrations are by Elin Matilda Anderson.

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