



Research Portfolio

of Engagement of Gig Workers

Part 1: HRM Activities in Gig Economy

1001 words

As the working condition and style have been changed greatly due to the development of information technology. People are provided more ways to perform their tasks and earn incomes other than just sitting in their offices and being a part of their company and working/creating value for it. There are researches show that more people are benefiting from independent works by using digital platforms than before, and willing to choose this as a way of making livings. The main concern of it is that these workers do not have strong bonds (i.e. employment relationship) with the organization, which make the human resource management activities different from traditional ways. The purpose of this portfolio is to discuss the human resource activities in the gig economy, and how they can manage and improve the work engagement of gig workers.

Gig economy

Although there is not a generally agreed definition of the gig economy in the academic field, there are researchers who studied it and tried to capture the key feature of it: it is an expanding phenomenon that workers perform their specific tasks (transporting, cleaning, delivering) by sign a short term contract or work as self-employers through intermedia platform firms like Uber, Helping, Meituan etc. (Aloisi, 2016; Jansen, 2017); the gig economy is also defined as an “emerging labour market” that independent short-term contractors can be gathered on digital platforms

to provide their services and perform their jobs to consumers (Jabagi et al., 2018; Spreitzer et al., 2017); and it also simply defined as “people using apps (also commonly known as platforms) to sell their labour” (Taylor et al., 2017: 23). Common characteristics like independent works, using apps/platforms and short-term tasks etc. can be identified among these definitions, and the ones that have impacts on human resource management (HRM) activities will be discussed as follow:

Features of the gig economy that affect its HRM activities

According to these definitions, “jobs intermediation via digital platforms” is an important characteristic of the gig economy. Although there are works are provided and performed through other intermediaries like temp agencies, due to the digital platforms are the key element that accelerates the growth of the gig economy, this research would focus on the engagement of platform-enabled gig work.

Moreover, the feature of “independent work” or “self-employed” indicates that there is not a traditional employment relationship between workers and the organization or the platform (Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). This also refers as a “market-mediated, open employment relationship”, because the work outcomes are affected by a market mechanism other than administrative regulations (Kalleberg, 2011; Wood et al, 2019).

Human Resource Management (HRM) Activities in intermediary platforms

Providing that one of the purposes of HRM activities in an organization is to maintain the employment relationship (Tsui et al., 1997), without a traditional “closed

employment relationship” to maintain, the role and purpose of HRM in an intermediary platform firm have to develop to adapt to the new situation.

Although there is a lack of traditional closed employment relations in intermediary platform firms, according to Meijerink and Keegan (2019), the HRM responsibility is still high, due to the outcome of each task performed by gig workers affect the reputation of the platform, and this would impact on the long-term development of the firm eventually. Therefore, HRM activities like recruiting, workers’ behaviour management, compensation management need to be altered to serve the operation purpose of the firms.

Recruiting

One of the reasons that gig platforms can grow rapidly is that they have better chances to fulfil both requirements from consumers (parties that need jobs to be done) and workers (people who need jobs) by providing much more information than other forms of intermediary agencies. Although the platform does not employ workers directly, more workforce joining the platform can improve the survivability of the firm. Hence, the admittance threshold in these platforms is low, and to organize the large amount of workers, the platforms transfer some of their responsibilities to algorithms, consumers and workers themselves.

Workforce planning

As a developed HRM activity, workforce planning can assist platforms using their

database to analyse their workforce and have a better plan for matching labour demand and supply is vital to these platforms (Chen, Mislove and Wilson, 2015).

Performance Management

To have better control of the performance of workers, marketing analysis and online rating systems are employed (Benoit et al., 2017; Rosenblat et al., 2017; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016). Being an information provider, intermediary platforms gather different types of information from both workers and consumers, analyse it to match their needs. After a job is done, consumers are invited to rate the service that the worker provided. This rate is related to the worker's platform reputation, which could affect his/her income and future job distribution. The platform using this way to supervise the quality of the task.

Compensation Management

As for the compensation of gig workers, they are paid by tasks. The amount of payment is determined by the platform or consumers (depending on the type of the job) and is normally clearly showed to workers, and they can decide whether to take this job or not. Workers normally get paid right after the job is done. This immediate payment can induce workers' desire behaviour (Lieman, 2018).

Job Design

Another important HRM activity of intermediary platform firms is job design. To

ensure certain autonomy and flexibility for gig workers, the platform also needs to give great consideration to how can they make their tasks easier for workers to access (Kuhn, 2016; Stanford, 2017).

Conclusion

Basing on the HRM activities that have been discussed above, the differences that have been identified are mainly derived from the absence of a closed employment relationship so that the labours that using the platform to perform their works can only be managed indirectly, supervised by consumers and the algorithm. Even though this method can provide advantages like efficiency, flexibility, and fairness among workers in some way, it also brings unenjoyable experiences for some workers which will be discussed in part 2.

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Part 2: Experience of Gig Workers

1183 words

As the service or product providers, even though gig workers are not formally employed, the platform still intend to have a certain control on their work outcomes to attract more consumers. The main way the platform uses to shape gig workers' manner is by algorithmic control (Wood et al, 2019). Even though there is evidence that shows that the algorithm can assist gig workers to achieve a certain level of autonomy and flexibility, the experiences of these workers and their feelings towards gig works and platforms need to be investigated more closely.

The mainstream attitudes towards the emergence of the gig economy are different among countries. The gig economy is getting more critiques in high-income countries than it is in middle- and low-income countries (De Stefano, 2016; World Bank, 2016). As for personal feelings and experiences of working on different gig platforms, they are vary depending on the factors like occupations, whether they have a choice on working style and whether their income from gig work is primary or supplemental etc. (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).

Due to the increase in both demand and supply of gig works and the rapid growth of intermediary platforms, more different service and job types are emerging. They are divided into two equally important categories: local gig works (workers' physical appearance are demanded, e.g. food delivery) and remote gig works (tasks can be

done online, e.g. translation) (Huws et al., 2018; Huws, Spencer and Joyce, 2016). In the early stage of the development of the gig platform, the types of tasks available are limited and do not require high skills, so they were described as “repetitive and unsatisfying” (Parkinson, 2017). Since the users of gig platforms/apps have grown rapidly, the tasks and job design are getting complicated. More highly paid works that require higher skills are available on the platform. Therefore, the working experiences are becoming more diverse and complicated than before.

Drawing findings from qualitative and quantitative researches in different countries, the work experiences of different occupations from existing gig platforms are summarized as following aspects:

Payment and Security

Providing that gig workers are normally not employed by intermediary platform firms, their labour rights like insurance, holidays are not secured. An empirical research was done on workers from Amazon Mechanical Turk and CrowdFlower, platforms of fragmented and deskilled jobs (Lehdonvirta, 2016), found that their payments are considerably low. Because the number of available works is limited and a great portion of these available works are unpaid (Berg, 2016). This research also shows that 40% of its sample do not have “employment-linked social security”.

Another experience shared by gig workers is the pressures from unstable income. As a character of gigs, these uncertainties leave workers in a vulnerable situation,

especially when the gig work is their primary income, the job satisfaction of these people hardly reaches a high level (Myhill, Richards and Sang, 2021; McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).

Other than unstable income, some works have hidden work costs like licensing, equipment maintenance, training and travel costs etc.

Ways of Communication

There are gig workers who feel that they cannot communicate effectively with the intermediary platform (Myhill, Richards and Sang, 2021; Chen, 2020), individually or collectively. There are evidence from both UK (Uber drivers) and China (food delivery riders) that support this point. Workers using platform Apps to communicate and send feedback to these organizations, which is a less interactive communication to compare with people who work in offices. This makes them feel undervalued and can not trust the platform, which incites labour conflict (Chen, 2020).

In addition, not like traditional organizations, labour unions in intermediary platform firms play a much less notable role. Thus, workers do not have a proper way to enhance their bargaining power against the platforms. However, this “lack of participation in decision-making” situation is concerned normal within gig workers (Myhill, Richards and Sang, 2021).

Career opportunities

Although there is evidence that shows that training programs are available in some intermediary platform firms (Taft, 2018), these programs are either informal or outsourced and need to pay by workers themselves (Myhill, Richards and Sang, 2021; Taft, 2018).

Nevertheless, there are participants in the qualitative research of Myhill, Richards and Sang who claim that even without a formal training program, their skills and qualities have been developed from networking and entrepreneurial activities (2021).

The career progressing opportunities are vary considering the settings of different jobs. Hence, many workers' expectations of jobs on gig platforms do not involve "building up long-term career out of it".

Autonomy

Being one of the advantages of gig work, autonomy and having control over their works is one of the reasons that attracts people to choose this working style. Whereas the reality is that the workers do not have entire control over how and when they want to work. Sometimes they receive requests at night or on weekends, and they could be "deactivated" or "suspended" by the platform if they reject orders over a certain amount of times (Myhill et al., 2021). There are also restrictions on how workers should fulfil their works. For instance, sometimes the route a taxi driver takes is suggested by the platform rather than decided by the driver, and the space of negotiation is limited in the process.

The restrictions and lack of proper ways to communicate with the organization/platform, has led to different ways of acts of “resisting digital control mechanisms”, like accepting jobs or tips off-line, registering for more than one app etc (Chen, 2020).

Respect

Considering the nature of a gig platform’s operation, both consumers and workers are users of the platform/app. However, some researches show that there are workers who feel that the needs of consumers are more valued, whereas workers are not treated with enough respect (Myhill, Richards and Sang, 2021). For example, platforms normally represent consumers’ interests whenever there is a conflict between them and a worker (Chen, 2020); if a complaint is filed by a customer, it could cause penalties like fine, cost the worker his income of this task, suspension from the work, or even deactivation from the system.

Moreover, workers feel that the customer-based rating system lack transparency and is over arbitrary which lead to the unfairness of workers being subject to platforms and their consumers.

Advantages

Giving these criticisms expressed by workers, there are still people who respond that they enjoy gig works as their as a “paid hobby”. Simultaneously, some workers claim works are being distributed in a non-discriminated way, which has ensured fairness

from this perspective. Another benefit of using a gig platform is that it can prevent non-payment from customers effectively. And finally platform providing them with wider choice on connecting consumers (wood et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Workers choose to register on a gig platform is because it can provide a large number of work opportunities that can be accessed easier than finding a formal job in traditional ways. However, the disadvantage like unsecured income, lacking bargaining power and respect are making these workers feel undervalued and under different levels of financial risks and anxieties, and it might bring health conditions to them.

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Part 3: ecosystem theory in work engagement management in intermediary platform firm

1005 words

Even though there is still no agreement has achieved in defining employee engagement after 30 years since it was established as a management topic, it still contributes as a core concept in human resource management. Due to the absence of traditional employment relationships between workers and gig platform firms, the term “employee engagement” cannot serve the purpose of this research properly. As this study aims to discuss how an intermediary platform can achieve better engagement from gig workers, the definition of “work engagement” will be discussed.

Work Engagement

This research drawn a summarized definition from the most recent discussion report that CIPD has published in 2021: work/task/job engagement refers to “a psychological state” experienced by workers (CIPD, 2021). This psychological state, according to Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006), including three aspects: vigour towards work, dedication to work and absorption in work activity. This engagement or psychological state is viewed as opposite with the state of “burnout”, emotional consumption that is related to long-term stress (Guest, 2014), which is just the experiences of some gig workers in several pieces of research.

Providing that the job setting and design on gig provide platforms, those workers are

getting paid, performing works and contacting with consumers on a task basis (Mckinsey Global Institute, 2016), helping workers have a better working experience on each task, so that they can be positively engaged with the jobs that provided on the platforms is vital for the long term development strategy of these intermediary platform firms.

Obstacles in achieving gig work engagement

Even though gig platforms have provided workers with a new working option with autonomy and flexibility at a certain level, the weaknesses derived from lacking traditional employment relationships cannot be neglected. The typical means of shaping and managing workers behaviours and outcomes are through algorithmic management techniques (Lee et al, 2015). Although it can achieve certain fairness in work distribution (often based on workers platform reputation), it is still criticized and results resist from workers due to its arbitrary platform-based rating system and lack of proper ways to communicate for workers.

Elements that leads to work engagement

Five elements could help to achieve work engagement: individual psychological states, job design, people management, perceptions of organisational and team factors, and organisational interventions (Bailey et al., 2017; CIPD, 2021).

As the factor “individual psychological states” relates to workers personal quality and is normally evaluated in the hiring stage (CIPD, 2021), a less valued process in

intermediary platform firms due to the numerous workers and low access threshold nature. This factor is less relevant to gig workers. The other four will be discussed to find out how work engagement can be improved by employing an ecosystem theory.

Ecosystem theory

Like in biology, an ecosystem in business also refers to interacting factors that depend and have influences on each other's activities (Jacobides, Cennamo and Gawer, 2018). Considering this theory has provided a different and comprehensive viewpoint, it has been employed to explain phenomenons in fields like financial service, strategy and management (Deloitte, 2015), and it might be adopted wider into performance analysis in different industries (Teece, 2014).

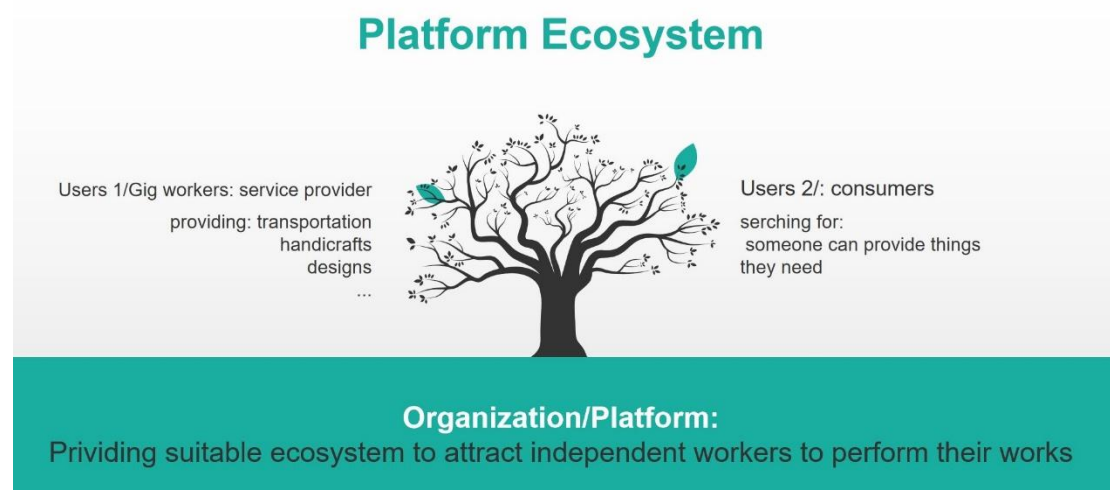


Figure 1: Platform Ecosystem

For a better-focused application, three main streams in the research of ecosystem theory are recognized: business ecosystem, innovation ecosystem and platform

ecosystem (Jacobides, Cennamo and Gawer, 2018). The theory of the platform ecosystem is more relevant to analyse and resolve the engagement issues of gig workers. Providing that the interaction and mechanism within this ecosystem are described as a “semi-regulated marketplace” or “multisided market” that platform’s sponsors assist providers (workers) to create value and attract consumers (Ceccagnoli et al., 2012; Cennamo and Santaló, 2013; Wareham, Fox and Cano Giner, 2014). The governance of platform ecosystems needs to balance the interests of each party and control the core technology. When it fails it would raise major problems according to Baldwin (2012).

Work engagement from a platform ecosystem perspective

As has been mentioned above that work engagement can be improved from four aspects in an intermediary platform: job design, people management, perceptions of organisational and team factors, and organisational interventions. Following the notion of balancing the interests among platform sponsors, workers and consumers by developing its management and algorithm, this research suggests the following:

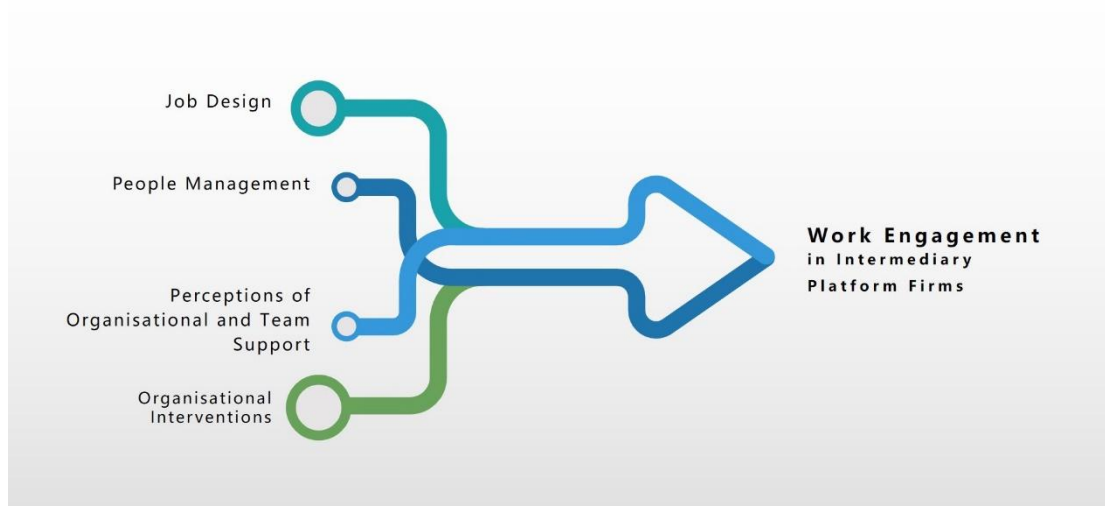


Figure 2: Work engagement from a platform ecosystem perspective

First, as it has been proved that a well balancing between job supply and demand can improve work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007), the appraisal system in algorithm can be developed more delicate to ensure fairness in work assessment and attract more workers. For example, platforms can add more factors in determining the rewards to workers, other than just using negative reinforcement like penalty after a bad rating from a consumer.

Secondly, other than creating more job demand, the platform also needs to consider enhancing supervisor support and feedback. Platforms can create positions like line managers in each different type of occupation. This is someone workers can interactively communicate with. They can listen to workers' needs, provide feedback and sometimes emotional support.

Moreover, due to workers perception of being valued and cared for by the platform can help them engage with their job better (Rich, Lepine and Crawford, 2010). Trade

unions in intermediary platform firms need to activate their function as support of workers' interest to remind the platform to balance the workforce and consumers, other than just represent consumers rights.

Finally, CIPD's report suggests that organizational interventions like training and development programmes have positive influences on work engagement (2021). Although gig platforms do not have training programmes or outsource them is because that the jobs they provide are varied in kind, and a large number of available works are deskilled. However, as these intermediary platforms are exploring the high skilled job market, providing training and developing programmes can benefit both workers and the platforms themselves from a long-term development perspective. Having training opportunities can make workers feel they are making progress in their careers, and try to develop it into a formal profession, which makes them are more attached to the platform.

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