Good gig, bad gig: job quality and new sources of insecurity in the gig economy

Alex J. Wood

@tom_swing
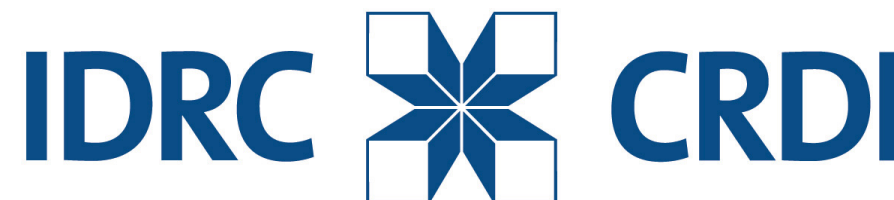
The Gig Economy

- Web-based digital labour platforms (crowdwork - remote gig economy)

- Microwork vs. Online Freelancing

https://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/

Source: Online Labour Index
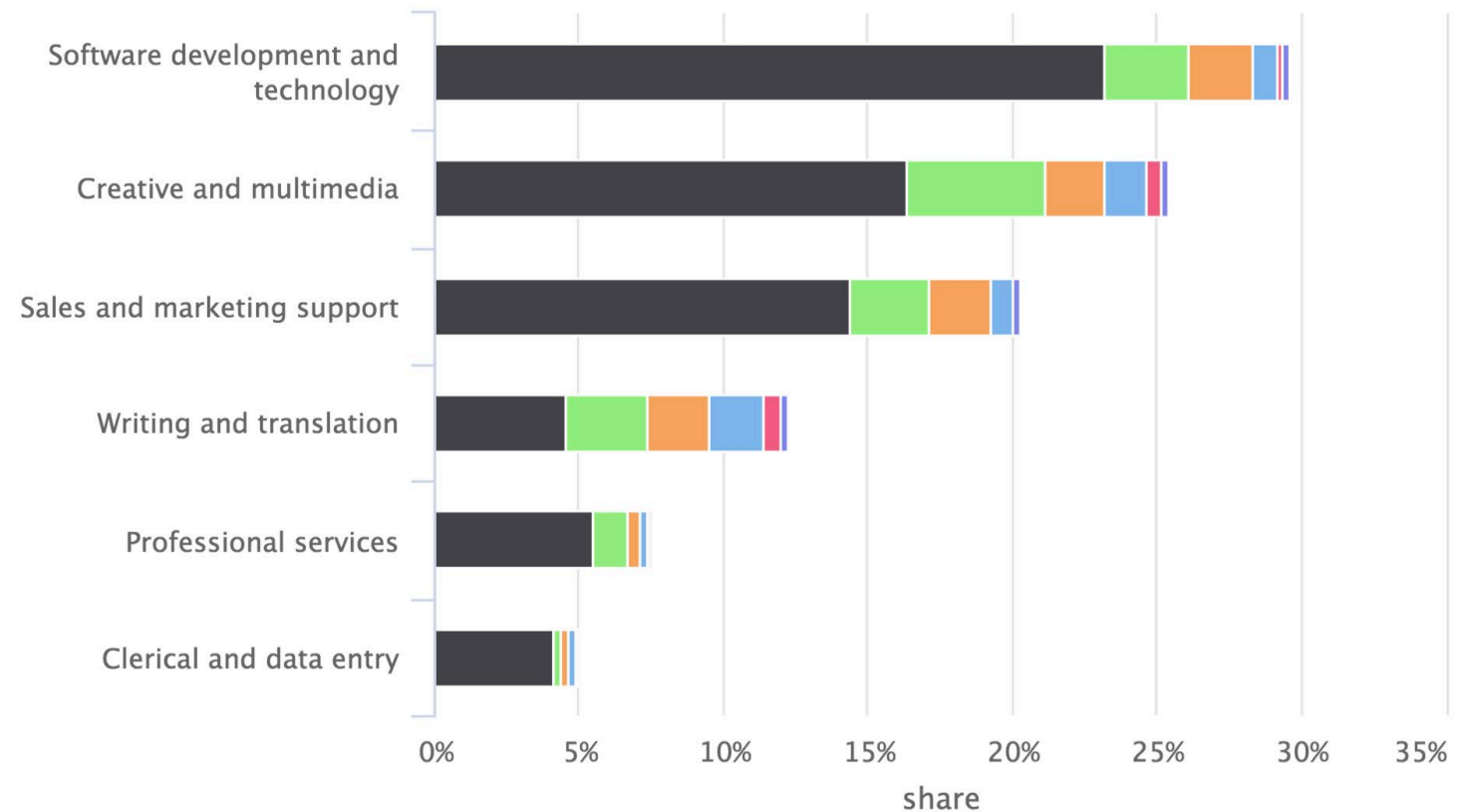
MVPN project – Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, Hjorth

- Face-to-face interviews with <u>107 SEA and SSA</u> online freelancers using <u>two</u> major global web-based digital labour <u>platforms</u>

- *The Philippines; Malaysia; Vietnam; Kenya; Nigeria; and South Africa*

- <u>Survey (N=679)</u> of SEA and SSA workers (similar to a stratified or quota sample)

iLabour project – Wood and Lehdonvirta

- Face-to-face interviews with <u>70 online freelancers UK, US and the Philippines</u>

- Participant observation dozen freelancer meetups and events

- <u>Survey (N=400) </u>European online freelancers

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Autonomy, variety and interesting work

I don't have someone supervising, telling you: "you have not done this, you have not done this," yelling at you.

You have the freedom of choice. Who you want to work with, when you want to work, and how you want to work
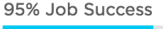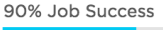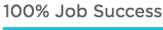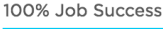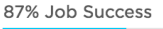
- <u>72%</u> *choose and change order in which tasks are undertaken*

- <u>74%</u> *choose or change their methods of work*

- <u>62%</u> *unforeseen problem solving*

- <u>57%</u> *solving complex problems*

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Algorithmic control

Platform-based rating and reputation systems

<u>Not</u> <u>Taylorist</u> control (intense monitoring & measurement of labour process)

<u>Algorithmic control</u> operates at the end of the labour process

Precarious reputations

- Platform reputations can be <u>unstable,</u> <u>unpredictable</u> and <u>opaque</u>

Suddenly it went down to 94% I had no idea why… When I was 100% I was getting loads of job invites and then when it's 94% it dropped significantly. I was getting maybe fifteen job invites a week, and [then] it drops to, like, two job invites a week.

You have no control over how you're being rated… I got literally screwed by a customer. It was outta line… And it affected my ability to make money. Because It dropped me on the ass… it took like two months for me to get the stuff cleared off [during which I lost a] couple thousand dollars.

Alex J. Wood @tom_swing & Vili Lehdonvirta @ViliLe

06 November 2019

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Algorithmic insecurity

- Cause of constant <u>worry</u>:

There's always that concern that you're gonna have someone come and just like, give you a 2 [out of 5]… My 98% rating now went down to 95% and you don't always know why because there are many factors… and they don't tell you why it dropped.

Be-all and end-all... if you dip below ninety percent, then it would be really hard to recover… it is a worry… you don't know how the algorithm works

- Leads to unpaid labour

Clients 'often deviate from [the agreement]… I felt like I had to go along with what they wanted… as [if I didn't] they'd give me a bad review.

I refunded… probably like 30% to 40% of that flat rate. I refunded it back to him because I just wanted that good rating and I wanted the good feedback. Which was like frustrating… I ended up refunding I think a hundred [dollars]... Just to get that good rating.

Alex J. Wood @tom_swing & Vili Lehdonvirta @ViliLe

06 November 2019

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Global labour competition

- Labour control without proximity to worker

- Oversupply of labour: 54% <u>not enough work available</u> vs. 20%

I'm sure there's a hundred thousand people out there across the world who could do exactly what I do probably for cheaper as well.

Immediately [as] you see an offer being posted… you will see 50 proposals have been submitted.

- <u>No labour protection</u>: 'freelancers', 'independent contractors', 'on-demand', 'fired on the spot'

There's a lot of people out there, if they're not satisfied with you, they are going to try somebody else... This is one of those jobs that you can be replaced

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Income and work intensity

- <u>Important</u> source of income 73%; <u>main occupation</u> 61%

- Potential income sufficient to avoid material hardship, avg. $165 (σ=$209) per week.

- Decent income dependent on multiple clients; leads to work intensity

[If] you have ten clients; then you can breathe. But then with ten clients it means each client has an expectation of a certain workload for you to do… can you satisfy all those ten clients?

- <u>80%</u> *pace of work determined by direct demands from clients*
- <u>54%</u> *work at very high speed*
- <u>60%</u> *work to tight deadlines*
- <u>22%</u> *experienced pain as a result of their work*

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

The flexibility myth

- *Spatial flexibility* but in reality little choice; led to <u>social isolation</u>

- *Temporal flexibility* in reality workers had to meet client demands (job postings, communication, and deadlines)

She would send work anytime she wants, [she] doesn't want to know if you're busy

I can work at my own convenience…. when I want to sleep, I can sleep. Oh, another thing I just remembered, most of the jobs you can get are like from overseas… In [the] USA… it's time you want to sleep so you have to sacrifice… [by] working in the middle of the night.

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Poor working hours

- <u>Unsocial working hours</u> (evenings, nights and weekends)

- 54% *lost sleep at night*; only 28% did not

- Could lead to <u>exhaustion</u>

I find that I'm exhausted… you might find yourself working throughout the night… the biggest challenge when you are working online [is] you can find that you are working for so many hours without rest

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Income inequality: skills and reputation

- Workers doing higher-skilled tasks earned <u>$44 per week more</u> than those doing lower-skilled task

- Even within lower-skilled workers: 10th and 90th percentile income ratio 1:19

- *In-demand workers*: <u>high pay</u>; <u>labour market</u> and <u>income security</u>, and <u>private health insurance</u>

- Workers lacking strong '<u>platform reputation</u>' struggled to '*survive*'

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

Conclusions: clear commonalities despite diverse national contexts and job types

- <u>Autonomy</u> but <u>intense, long, unsocial hours</u> & <u>social isolation</u>

- <u>Algorithmic insecurity</u>

- *Inequality of pay and security*

- High-demand workers: relatively <u>high income</u>, LM and income <u>security</u>

- Low-demand workers: <u>low income</u> and <u>precarity</u>

- SSA: worse job quality: <u>lower pay</u> and greater <u>work intensity</u>

- Women: <u>more routine tasks</u> but <u>less likely to lose sleep</u>

OXFORD
INTERNET
INSTITUTE

UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD