



ONLINE WORKING AND LEARNING IN THE CORONAVIRUS ERA

Cedefop evidence reveals opportunities and threats for crowdworkers in the online gig economy

The coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has highlighted the vast opportunities of working and learning digitally. This is one of the reasons why the European Commission, in its [Communication of 27 May 2020](#) ⁽¹⁾ on the next EU budget, reiterated its commitment to ‘help boost competitiveness and technological sovereignty ... [by] ... investing in digital infrastructure and skills’. It also stated that ‘the crisis has (shown) the importance of digital skills, for children, students, teachers, trainers and all of us to communicate and work’.

In these exceptional times, where a large part of the workforce has been obliged to work remotely due to home confinement and social distancing measures, gig or crowd-workers ⁽²⁾ have enjoyed a kind of ‘home field’ advantage: working and interacting digitally has always been their prevailing mode of operation. What can we learn from these online workers who mastered the art of working and learning remotely long before the public health crisis?

ONLINE GIG WORK IN PRE-CORONA TIMES

Based on estimates of the 2018 [Colleem survey](#) commissioned by the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre, 11% of adults across the EU occasionally provide paid services via platforms, while between 1.4 and 2% depend heavily on platform work to earn a living. These numbers may well be on the rise in the coming months and years owing to the lasting impact of the crisis, which has spurred remote digital work arrangements. Recent estimates have suggested that about one third of jobs in EU countries and other advanced economies could be performed re-

motely ⁽³⁾. Quite a few could potentially be taken over by a gig workforce.

FIGURE 1. WHY WORK IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY?



Source: Cedefop CrowdLearn survey.

In better times, many platform workers, mainly higher skilled ones, saw the flexibility and autonomy of online gig work, as opposed to the constraints of office work, as opportunities. Nearly half of all participants in Cedefop’s recent survey of platform workers’ learning practices, skills development and skills matching ⁽⁴⁾ stated that they enjoyed being their own boss and having control over their schedule. 44% were happy to have a second source of income and

⁽³⁾ Boeri, T.; Caiumi, A.; Paccagnella, M. (2020). Mitigating the work-safety trade-off. *Covid economics: vetted and real-time papers*. Issue 2, April 8. CEPR.

Dingel, J.; B. Neiman (2020). *How many jobs can be done at home?* Working paper 26948. NBER.

ILO (2020). Working from home: Estimating the worldwide potential. April policy brief.

⁽⁴⁾ Cedefop’s [CrowdLearn survey](#) is the first in-depth study focusing specifically on how EU crowdworkers develop and adapt their skills, with a view to drawing lessons for EU skills and education policy. It took place between January 2018 and December 2019 in cooperation with the University of Oxford Internet Institute and the Copenhagen Business School. Full report forthcoming. Author’s first analyses can be found in [Cedefop’s Skills Panorama](#).

⁽¹⁾ COM(2020) 442 final.

⁽²⁾ Crowdworkers are defined as individuals using intermediary websites or apps to obtain paid fixed-term projects.

the same proportion was glad they could work from anywhere. More than a third appreciated that their online work allowed them to follow their passion or at least to have a choice over their projects. Only 10% responded that they worked online out of necessity, because they could not find a traditional job.

A 'NEW NORMAL': POST-CORONA GIG WORK

The coronavirus pandemic poses risks to workers' livelihoods, including gig workers. This has largely overshadowed (perceived) benefits of this form of work. As most businesses across Europe are struggling with revenue losses, the overall impact of the crisis on gig workers depends on whether **downscaling efforts by firms, resulting in reduced job opportunities, outweigh the distancing** that is remote workers' main competitive advantage.

Recent evidence has shown that while companies may have cut non-essential freelance activities, such as marketing and sales, **work critical to continued business operations, such as tech support and database management, has been on the rise.**

The pandemic has shown more companies the potential of a digital workforce. As we move out of the crisis towards a new normal, the increased exposure to digital technologies may prompt companies to re-evaluate their traditional offline working methods. They may question the merits of hiring a permanent on-site workforce, possibly favouring a more flexible online workforce, including more contingent gig workers, after seeing the value of digital work in action.

Lower social distancing risk

Cedefop's analysis has highlighted that the coronavirus crisis is likely to leave a significant imprint on labour markets. Conventional means of work and interaction are expected to change markedly in the aftermath of social distancing measures. As summarised in the **Cov19R index**, jobs heavily reliant on physical proximity and contact with other people are likely to continue to encounter some disruption in the medium-term. By contrast, jobs that depend more on digital skills and technologies and have a greater propensity to be done remotely, have allowed companies to mitigate adverse consequences of the crisis on productivity and job loss.

What does this imply for online crowdworkers? For most of them, work is a solitary experience. **Cedefop's CrowdLearn survey** reveals that an overwhelming majority of online service providers work alone to complete their tasks – 62% very frequently and 25% frequently – while only 17% collaborate with others.

83% rarely or never communicate with other platform workers face to face.

Online crowdworkers face a lower Covid-19-induced social distancing risk, compared to workers in the traditional economy. This may become an attractive factor when businesses decide on their staffing needs as they exit the first crisis wave.

Continued precariousness of gig work

If there is a shift to more digital work, policies to shield gig workers against job precariousness and bad working conditions may be needed. It has been argued that gig workers, especially those in delivery services and tech support, have seen their workload rise sharply during the pandemic. Already in the period preceding the Covid-19 crisis, 48% of crowdworkers felt they had to work at very high speed and 54% to tight deadlines, according to CrowdLearn data.

Also, social security safety nets and emergency measures adopted by governments have primarily been geared towards the traditional labour force (employees) and have only partly helped offset the consequences of prolonged economic inactivity or work disruption for the gig workforce.

SKILLS TO THRIVE IN PLATFORM WORK

Cedefop's CrowdLearn study

When work is abundant, crowdworkers have some leverage to adjust their working arrangements and **to choose projects that may complement their skills** ⁽⁵⁾ or provide the best source of income.

In times of turmoil and economic uncertainty, however, people tend to rely on their existing skillsets to survive. Yet, during the pandemic, and especially in the face of a looming recession, skills development and continued learning are the most powerful tools all workers, including crowdworkers, have at their disposal to remain competitive.

Insights into what skills gig workers learn and need in order to be successful in the platform economy give us some clues as to what will be needed to align vocational education and training (VET) provision to emerging labour market needs. In many ways, the gig economy provides the most visible example of the technology-induced transformations taking place in European labour markets: increase in self-employment and contingent work, substitution of line management by customer feedback, increased telework and virtual teamwork, and firms' use of data and algorithms to manage their workers. These trends in the

⁽⁵⁾ 20% of respondents to the CrowdLearn survey answered that their platform work allows them to develop their skills (see Figure 1).

online gig economy are indicative of how a large share of today’s workforce may be learning and working tomorrow.

Developing skills

According to a novel, inductive skills typology developed as part of the project, the most crucial skills for thriving in the online platform economy are technical/core skills, including high-level and specialised digital skills. But crowdworkers also need a unique blend of entrepreneurial, self-branding, communication and organisational skills as well as focused personal dispositions to be successful in the platform business.

Some skills stand out. ‘Obtaining work on a platform’ requires a skillset necessary for successfully navigating the unique environment of platform-based work. This includes mastering platform user interfaces, optimising one’s profile to appear frequently in search results, reading the market to pitch and price one’s services appropriately and other similar specialised skills. ‘Setting up as a freelancer’ refers to the skills necessary for operating as a self-employed person more generally, such as registering as a business and dealing with finances and taxation. ‘Self-regulatory learning skills’ refer to the ability to understand and identify one’s own changing skill requirements, being

proactive in seeking feedback, being self-reflective and capable of changing one’s learning strategies when not working: all these are found to be crucial to success in crowdwork.

To obtain core skills required to complete specific work tasks, crowdworkers tend to rely on just-in-time acquisition of knowledge. Free online video tutorials and websites are among the most important resources, while formal training offered by learning providers is often perceived as too time-consuming and generic.

On the other side of the market, platform companies engage in some initiatives to support gig workers’ skills development. These include referrals or commercial partnerships and joint courses with training providers, facilitation of peer-to-peer courses and creation of digital social spaces for learning. Initiatives also include publishing lists of skills in demand from the platform’s clients and facilitating client feedback on gig workers’ performance.

Cedefop’s CrowdLearn study reveals, however, that platform companies are generally wary of getting directly involved in training, as this could put them at risk of being legally classified as employers. The result is a ‘missing training market’ and potential under-investment in crowdworkers’ skill formation.

FIGURE 2. SKILLS DEVELOPED IN CROWDWORK



Source: Cedefop CrowdLearn survey.

Matching skills

A key value proposition of online labour platforms is their declared ability to match workers' skills to employers' needs. However, Cedefop's CrowdLearn study has identified some hurdles to efficient skills matching in this area.

Skills matching in online platform markets takes place largely via proprietary skills classification systems. Platforms often convey them publicly in the form of lists of most-in-demand skills and client feedback/reputation rankings. But they also use non-transparent matching algorithms which endorse worker placement through automated ranking in their web portals; they regulate entry requirements and screen new freelancers for their skills and experience prior to their entry to the platform.

Qualifications obtained through formal education, the traditional means of signalling and screening workers in labour markets, are considered a weak signal of crowdworker trustworthiness, subordinate to client evaluation or ranking scores. Three out of four gig workers needed neither platform-specific credentials nor skills tests to obtain projects.

The limited inter-platform portability of gig workers' skills and reputation is also of concern. 57% of crowdworkers surveyed by Cedefop believe they cannot switch to another platform without negatively impacting their income. This limits workers' mobility between platforms and also from crowdwork to traditional employment.

SKILLS POLICIES FOR CROWDWORK'S FUTURE

Labour market integration

The CrowdLearn data reveal that online gig work has a potential to foster labour market integration and social inclusion. Women and immigrants are found to develop their skills in crowdwork more frequently than male and native workers. However, many newcomers to crowdwork report difficulties in getting started, lacking a track record based on prior client feedback. To offer them a level playing field, Cedefop's evidence suggests that a system of subsidised 'micro-internships' could be developed, in which platform clients are offered a subsidised rate by crowdworkers who lack previous platform work experience in exchange for formative/developmental feedback on their performance.

The development of a 'pre-rating' skills validation system supported by the online platforms themselves or by a neutral third party is also advocated. This may give newcomers a starting point in terms of reputation based on their educational attainment, prior work experience and skills assessment performance.

Platform work is sometimes advanced as a tool to address youth unemployment. However, successful crowdworkers are typically well educated and possess a high level of digital and technical skills before they engage in platform work. Crowdwork-based action to tackle youth unemployment may lack potency unless young people build the required skills prior to entering online platform work.

Facilitating skills matching

To counteract the limited portability and transparency of crowdworkers' skills, experiences and reputation scores across platforms and job markets, Crowdlearn also favours the adoption of a portable portfolio function acting as a 'digital passport', in the spirit of – or possibly building on – the new [Europass](#). Such a passport, accompanied by the creation of online learning accounts, would allow workers to display, advertise, and transfer their credentials across different contexts. Policy makers, NGOs or trade unions could mediate and work across platforms to encourage crowdworkers to develop and adopt such a portfolio system, aiming at transcending platform-specific confines and enhancing their mobility prospects.

The creation of a public skills validation portal adhering to EU- and international standards of work and learning in the platform economy may also aid the process.

However, to achieve full portability of credentials, significant obstacles to standardisation efforts need to be removed: a perceived lack of a business case for leading platforms; the constantly evolving nature of skills ontologies; platform-specificities and lack of interoperability of technical architectures; and data protection regulations.

Adapting initial and continuing VET

The trends in learning practices adopted by online platform markets point to a pressing need for VET systems to adapt. They need to recognise and validate crowdworkers' mostly informal learning, facilitate portability of their qualifications, and provide adequate quality assurance for the platforms which may become education and training providers.

Successful crowdworkers need to obtain a wide range of skills through formal education and training before they start work in the platform economy. Tailoring and developing new courses, with a greater emphasis on digital and core/technical skills, self-regulating and entrepreneurial mindsets, including learning about the risks and opportunities of online platform work, should be integral to curriculum development, preparing all learners for an expanding online job market.

The role of social partners in encouraging continuing education and training is crucial. Trade unions and platform companies could draw on their existing resources and develop partnerships to extend training opportunities to online freelancers and provide guidance to them and clients.

Meeting crowdworkers' just-in-time learning needs will require VET providers to reconsider their partnerships with non-standard market players. They will also have to adapt their teaching speed, mode and tools - short, specific online courses - to the new realities of the digital job market.