

The Great Gig Reset?

With courts across Europe ruling that gig workers should be classified as workers rather than self-employed, Jamie Woodcock, senior lecturer, people and organisations at The Open University Business School, discusses the precarious nature of gig working, how this model affects the future of work and whether gig can ever be good



THE GREAT WORK RESET

The great gig reset

Jamie Woodcock, senior lecturer, people and organisations, The Open University Business School

 The People Space
Future Fit HR Fast

 The Open University
BUSINESS SCHOOL

A portrait of Jamie Woodcock, a man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a dark jacket over a grey t-shirt, is positioned on the right side of the graphic.

Transcription

So when I think about gig work and how we might define what gig work is, I think there is an important distinction to make within gig work. So broadly speaking gig work is any kind of work that is arranged over a short space of time. So this is where the term gig comes from. So that you might work one job for a little bit, then another one, maybe more than one at once. And this kind of work has happened for a very long time. Lots of people have worked in this way. In fact it

comes from musicians' work. So this is something that's lasted for quite a long time within the gig economy.

I think it's also worth thinking about platform work. So this is work that is organised through a platform. So delivering food or taking passengers from one place to another. And in many ways this is the new of the gig economy that people are no longer just signing up for a short-term gig but finding work and having it mediated through a smartphone and other kinds of digital technology.

What's it like to work in the gig economy?

So I've spoken to people that work in the gig economy and particularly people that do platform work over the last five or six years in the UK, in India, in South Africa, in North America. And I think there is an overriding experience in the gig economy of people who are looking for more flexible kinds of work. So people who want to fit their work around other commitments or they either don't want to or can't access traditional forms of work.

But the problem with this is that although people are looking for flexibility, what they often find in the gig economy is precarious work. So often when I speak to drivers in the UK they say you can drive whenever you want, but of course you have to drive Friday night and Saturday night because if you don't you're not able to make enough money to make it worthwhile.

So there's this kind of promise of flexibility for lots of people which I think is an important thing that people are looking for, but it often comes at trading away traditional employment rights, stability and often access to things like holiday pay, sick pay and so on.

Where does gig work fit into the future of work?

So the future of work has become a hot topic both in academia and more widely. And I think one of the difficulties with thinking about the future of work is it sounds like it's some kind of horizon in the future that we're working towards. And when we get there robots will take over loads of jobs or everything will change in this kind of moment of the future of work. And I think it's actually much more helpful to think about how changes in the here and now are shaping the kinds of future of work that we might get.

And that's why I think Uber driving or delivering food for Deliveroo is so important because these are not the majority of workers in the UK. There are a huge number of them. Something in the region of 40,000, 50,000 Uber drivers

just in London. In the scope of the whole country that's a small number of workers, but what happens with the use of technology in that work? Whether those workers get the flexibility they want, or whether they end up with more precarious and difficult working conditions? So if the Uber model becomes successful in a way that has negative outcomes for many workers, you can see how in other kinds of work this model will begin to be applied. So the founder of Uber now runs a temporary staffing agency. So trying to apply the Uber model to security guards, to people working in bars and so on.

And I think we need to ask the question of if we want greater flexibility at what cost does that come? Because if we don't have these discussions now the current model where I think many workers are missing out on employment rights and are missing out on the stability that many people have enjoyed in work for many years, that if we don't do something about it now that model will spread out to the rest of the economy. And it's very difficult to change things after that's happened.

How could the platform economy affect other sectors?

I think one of the biggest growth areas for the gig economy and for thinking about where platforms might go next is care work. Some of the largest platforms in the world like Care.com already provides private care through this kind of platform model. And I think transport makes up a kind of large chunk of work in many countries, but care work is really the biggest growing sector of employment, particularly with aging populations. And I think there's a question of many people have accepted the idea that your taxi might have a precarious worker driving it, that your pizza delivery might have a precarious worker delivering it, but I think the question of care work is one where I think many people would be less comfortable with the idea that a different person is coming in every day to provide care. That care worker might not be able to take time off if they're sick. And so I think, in a way, the growth of the gig economy into other sectors shows us some of the problems with the existing model.

One of the major problems in the platform economy, and in the gig economy more widely, is that workers have very little say over their work. If conditions or terms change they just have to accept them. And I think this is one of the reasons why both in the UK and globally we've seen widespread protests, unofficial strike action, a kind of resurgence of worker organising because many of these workers are not able to participate in conversations around their work that many of us would expect or have experienced in other kinds of employment. And so I think that kind of discussion and listening to the voices of people at work isn't just about motivating people or ensuring the success of the

business, it's also the right thing to do. Because if we think about the future of work and these kinds of bigger dynamics, if we're not having conversations in society about what kind of future of work do we want we risk greatly polarizing society, disenfranchising a large number of people and people who don't get a say at work, don't think, okay, I'm just not going to have a say in anything. They try to find other ways to have a say other ways to participate. And I think we should encourage this across society because that's how we'll get a future of work that actually works for everybody.

Can we get to 'gig is good'?

There is a lot of research so far that shows negative outcomes in the gig economy. The story that I tell about Uber drivers or about Deliveroo couriers is a story that has been told by other researchers in the popular press about the risks and the damage of the gig economy in lots of ways.

But one of the things I'm always very keen to do is not to tell a story of gig workers as victims, of people who are in precarious jobs, who are trapped, who can't have a say over their work. There are positive experiences in the gig economy. And I think particularly for many workers who are searching for forms of flexibility, what they find in the gig economy, whether they find that bargain to be more complicated when they get there, is an indictment I think in many ways of more traditional forms of work, that people aren't able to find employment that fits around their life, that fits around family commitments or studying, or whatever it might be. And so I think we really have to draw attention to the potential of more flexible work, and I've spoken to Uber drivers in South Africa who are able to access work and have never had formal employment before and are entering into a more formal form of work, or drivers in India who are able to gain access to work that they might not have been able to otherwise.

But I think the reality is that when people find that work, that balance isn't working for them. And I think this is a question about employment status. I think in many ways I think what we have to look at is people are searching for something at work. And we need to think about how we can deliver that for people, because if you have a workforce of people who are feeling precarious, can't take holiday or sick pay when they're ill, that has longer term impacts. And I think that's the question we need to ask ourselves. It's not just about the individual Uber driver, it's not just about the individual care worker. It's about how as a society we can think through the bargain of work.

But I also think it's about having a political debate too. About whether employment law works in the way it does now, whether the tax system works for

supporting people, whether labour market enforcement is working in the right way and seeing that that kind of collective discussion and voice is what drives forward work. So it's not just the responsibility of the employer. It's not just the responsibility of the state, but that workers should have an active say in shaping work in ways that delivers for them too. And that's really how we'll get to the future of work that delivers on the potential promises that we can see right now.

[Dr Jamie Woodcock](#) is senior lecturer, people and organisations at The Open University Business School and involved in the [Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures \(REEF\)](#) academic centre of excellence in The Open University Business School. He is the author of *The Gig Economy* (Polity, 2019) and his research focuses on labour, work, the gig economy, platforms, resistance, organising, and videogames. This interview is part of the [Great Work Reset](#) series created by The People Space in partnership with The Open University Business School