

## Gainful gigging

Employment services for  
the platform economy

Ben Dobson

July 2017

#reformwelfare

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Introduction

Recent advancements in technology have paved the way for new employment practices. Growth in digital access and literacy, and the emergence of online labour platforms, have made it much easier and cheaper for individuals to negotiate short-term employment agreements. This has encouraged a growing number of people in an increasingly diverse range of sectors to take up flexible freelance projects or ‘gigs’ via online platforms.

The efficiency of such platforms has seen them expand rapidly in recent years. This has not been universally well received. Gig workers, unions, employment tribunals and politicians have all expressed concerns over the conditions platform freelancers enjoy, including the pay they receive and whether they are legitimately self-employed.<sup>1</sup> It has also been suggested that the expansion of more informal forms of work will dent tax receipts.<sup>2</sup> Though gig platforms are a recent development, these contentious elements of freelance work are nothing new. Nevertheless, the digitisation of freelance work has helped raise ministerial and public awareness of these issues, leading the Prime Minister to commission a recent review into modern employment practices.<sup>3</sup>

The hostility towards labour platforms is not surprising. Historically, new models of work have rarely emerged without initial difficulties and opposition. Importantly, this invariably leads to refinement: Luddite protests sparked the beginning of the Trade Union movement; they did not halt the Industrial Revolution. It is essential, therefore, that as well as ironing out short-term problems with worker conditions and the tax base that the gig economy presents, that the Government also looks ahead to the opportunities it will provide.

This paper does just this. It identifies flexibility as a crucial feature of gig work that makes its growth a huge opportunity. People with complex work barriers such as health conditions or caring responsibilities may have some work capacity, but find prevailing employment practices too inflexible. The growth of highly flexible gig work presents a valuable opportunity for such people to access the physical, mental and financial benefits appropriate work offers, where they might otherwise be excluded from the labour market completely. Employment services can play a key role in helping people make the most of this opportunity. This paper offers recommendations for how they should be improved.

1 Zlata Rodionova, “UberEats Couriers to Strike in London over Pay Dispute”, *Independent*, 25 August 2016; Hilary Osborne and Sean Farrell, “Deliveroo Workers Strike Again over New Pay Structure”, *The Guardian*, 15 August 2016; Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, *Employment Tribunals between: Mr Y Aslam, Mr J Farrar & Others And; Uber B.V., Uber London Ltd, Uber Britannia LTD*, 2016; Frank Field and Andrew Forsey, *Wild West Workplace: Self-Employment in Britain’s “Gig Economy”*, 2016.  
2 For example, see: Howard Reed, *The Impact of Increased Self-Employment and Insecure Work on the Public Finances* (Trades Union Congress, 2017).  
3 Matthew Taylor et al., *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*, 2017.

1  
The opportunity

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1.1 The changing labour market

The UK labour market has been unexpectedly resilient since the financial crisis. A so-called “jobs miracle”<sup>4</sup> saw employment fall only 3 percentage points to a low of 70.0 per cent in 2011.<sup>5</sup> At 74.6 per cent, the current rate is the joint highest since comparable records began.<sup>6</sup>

However, whilst the headline employment rate has remained relatively stable, the labour market has experienced some significant compositional changes. There are almost one million more self-employed workers than in 2007, now accounting for 15 rather than 13 per cent of the workforce.<sup>7</sup> The proportion of these working part time has risen by 13 per cent over the same period.<sup>8</sup> In 2016, agency, casual, seasonal staff and employees on zero-hours contracts made up nearly 5 per cent of the total workforce – 2 percentage points more than a decade earlier.<sup>9</sup>

The emergence of the ‘gig’ economy has contributed to these trends.<sup>10</sup> This form of employment is only loosely defined. Variouslly described as the ‘gig’, ‘sharing’, ‘on-demand’, ‘platform’ or ‘collaborative economy’, there is debate, for example, around whether non-financial transactions are included.<sup>11</sup> However, different interpretations agree that the gig economy refers, at least in part, to paid freelance work facilitated by online platforms or apps. This is the definition that will be adopted in this report.

The gig economy has received significant criticism<sup>12</sup> following recent protests and inquiries which have called into question the conditions workers experience and the extent to which they can legitimately be deemed self-employed.<sup>13</sup> For example, riders for the food-delivery platform Deliveroo have protested about pay arrangements that do not guarantee the National Minimum Wage (NMW).<sup>14</sup> Last October, an employment tribunal ruled that two of the ride-hailing platform Uber’s drivers should be categorised as workers, rather than independent contractors, because they lack full control over certain aspects of their work, such as the fare they charge and the particular trips they make.<sup>15</sup>

The Government is rightly taking these concerns seriously. In October 2016, the Prime Minister commissioned Matthew Taylor to look at if and how existing employment practices need to change to ensure all work in the emerging labour market provides “opportunity, fairness and dignity”.<sup>16</sup>

Whilst the emergence of the online gig economy has helped increase ministerial and public interest in these issues, it is worth noting that they are neither new nor unique to online labour platforms. For example, charges of bogus self-employment could equally be made against traditional minicab companies, whose drivers are not hailed using an app, but are still typically independent contractors with similar work constraints as those faced by Uber drivers. Similarly, a Court of Appeal recently ruled that Pimlico Plumbers, whose business is not app-based, exercised sufficient control over a plumber for them to be classified as a worker rather than a self-employed contractor.<sup>17</sup> Concerns regarding tax

4 The Conservative Party, “David Cameron Speech on the Jobs Miracle”, Speech, (17 April 2015).  
5 Office for National Statistics, “UK Labour Market: March 2017”, Statistical bulletin, (15 March 2017).  
6 Ibid.  
7 Office for National Statistics, *Employees and Self-Employed by Industry*, 2017.  
8 Office for National Statistics, *Trends in Self-Employment in the UK: 2001 to 2015*, 2016.  
9 Reed, *The Impact of Increased Self-Employment and Insecure Work on the Public Finances*.  
10 Office for National Statistics, “The Feasibility of Measuring the Sharing Economy”, 5 April 2016.  
11 Office for National Statistics, “The Feasibility of Measuring the Sharing Economy: Progress Update”, 12 October 2016.  
12 Ben Dobson, “Getting to Grips with the Gig Economy”, *The Reformer Blog*, 12 October 2016.  
13 For example, see: Reed, *The Impact of Increased Self-Employment and Insecure Work on the Public Finances*.  
14 Osborne and Farrell, “Deliveroo Workers Strike Again over New Pay Structure.”  
15 Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, *Employment Tribunals between: Mr Y Aslam, Mr J Farrar & Others And; Uber B.V., Uber London Ltd, Uber Britannia LTD*; Osborne and Farrell, “Deliveroo Workers Strike Again over New Pay Structure.”  
16 GOV.UK, “Taylor Review on Modern Employment Practices Launches.”  
17 Royal Courts of Justice, *Case No: A2/2015/0196 Between: (1) Pimlico Plumbers Limited (2) Charlie Mullins And Gary Smith*, 2017; Cara McGoogan, “Pimlico Plumber Worker Should Be Paid Sick Pay, Court Rules in Landmark Gig Economy Case”, *The Telegraph*, 10 February 2017.

avoidance<sup>18</sup> and the lower rate of National Insurance accrued from the self-employed<sup>19</sup> are also no less applicable to traditional independent freelancing.

The similarities between online labour platforms and older forms of independent contracting are important. When considering workers’ rights, they highlight the need to address old as well as new employment practices. They also demonstrate that the benefits that have always attracted people to independent contractor work – whether legitimately defined or not – are likely to apply equally to workers in the gig economy, making it a valuable opportunity for some workers. As the Taylor review notes, “platform based working offers welcome opportunities for genuine two way flexibility and can provide opportunities for those who may not be able to work in more conventional ways”<sup>20</sup>

Understanding the gig economy’s size, growth and the types of work accessible, as well as the features attracting current workers, will help evaluate the scale of the opportunity and identify which groups are best placed to benefit.

1.2 Expansion trends

1.2.1 Size

Standard labour market statistics are poorly placed to accurately measure the size or growth of the gig economy,<sup>21</sup> but the consensus is that it currently only accounts for a relatively small portion of the UK labour market.<sup>22</sup> For example, a recent survey by the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) found only 2 per cent of workers have used online platforms to provide services.<sup>23</sup>

However, a number of industry-sizing exercises have found rapid growth in the gig economy in recent years. PwC, for example, estimates that total platform revenues across Europe have increased from around €1bn in 2013 to €3.6bn in 2015 – an average annual growth rate of 130 per cent.<sup>24</sup> They also suggest that the UK has “led the way” in expanding the platform economy, founding over 50 organisations.<sup>25</sup> YouGov polling of 614 British businesses also found that 29 per cent believe it is likely that digital platforms will become more important for their business by 2021.<sup>26</sup>

A more sophisticated tool for measuring trends in the gig economy – the Online Labour Index (OLI) – records the number of projects and tasks that are posted on different platforms in real time.<sup>27</sup> Early data are consistent with a global annual growth rate of around 18 per cent, with the UK accounting for the second highest number of online projects after the US.<sup>28</sup> Though, at present, it only measures English-language platforms for remotely-deliverable labour (such as software development or data entry), this nevertheless provides a useful indicator of the speed at which aspects of the gig economy are growing.

18 For example, see: Vanessa Houlder, “UK Taxman Warned over the ‘Gig Economy’ Revenue Gap”, *Financial Times*, 2 December 2016.  
19 For example, see: House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, *Self-Employment and the Gig Economy: Thirteenth Report of Session 2016-17*, HC 847 (London: The Stationery Office, 2017).  
20 Taylor et al., *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*, 9.  
21 For an outline of why, see: Diane Coyle, *The Sharing Economy in the UK* (Sharing Economy UK, 2016).  
22 For example, see: European Commission, *The Use of Collaborative Platforms: Report*, 2016; Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *To Gig or Not to Gig? Stories from the Modern Economy*, 2017; Ipsos MORI, *ING International Survey: What’s Mine Is Yours - for a Price. Rapid Growth Tipped for the Sharing Economy* (ING, 2015); James Manyika et al., *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016).  
23 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *To Gig or Not to Gig? Stories from the Modern Economy*.  
24 Robert Vaughan and Raphael Daverio, *Assessing the Size and Presence of the Collaborative Economy in Europe* (PwC UK, 2016).  
25 Ibid., 8.  
26 Recruitment and Employment Confederation, *Gig Economy: The Uberisation of Work*, 2016.  
27 University of Oxford, “The iLabour Project: Investigating the Construction of Labour Markets, Institutions and Movements on the Internet”, 2016.  
28 Otto Kassi and Vili Lehdonvirta, *Online Labour Index: Measuring the Online Gig Economy for Policy and Research* (Oxford Internet Institute, 2016).

1.2.2 Sectors

To date, the gig economy has been dominated by platforms for accommodation, transport and collaborative finance. PwC estimates that in 2015 these sectors accounted for around 90 per cent of the total transaction value of the European platform economy, with the UK showing particular strength in finance.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, a significant number of online platforms have emerged in other sectors, with, for example, PwC also identifying 16 platforms for ‘on-demand household chores’ that were established in the UK.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the gig economy is expanding into new areas. SuperCarers and HomeTouch are online platforms launched in 2014 and 2015 which match social-care customers with domiciliary carers.<sup>31</sup> Like other gig platforms, they provide users with a list of vetted and reviewed workers that they can contact and negotiate with directly, whilst carers are free to only accept work that fits with their other commitments.<sup>32</sup> Since 2015, at least 10 similar platforms have emerged for matching schools and supply teachers.<sup>33</sup> In healthcare, Network Locum offers NHS Trusts and GP practices an online platform for managing sessional bookings.<sup>34</sup> From 2016, NHS Professionals, who manage ‘banks’ of supply staff for certain NHS Trusts, has also offered a similar app for hospitals and staff to arrange temporary work.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst gig workers are currently few in number and appear to work in a relatively narrow range of sectors, recent developments suggest that a significant number of people from a much broader range of career paths will soon be able to participate.

1.3 Flexible work

Most gig work is highly flexible. Workers are typically ‘hired’ for individual tasks or projects and are able to choose when and for how long they work, affording them a high level of control over their working conditions.

This is a key factor motivating gig workers. In surveys of online freelancers on Upwork (and its predecessor Elance) – platforms for remotely-delivered services including software development, data analysis and graphic design<sup>36</sup> – 70 per cent reported that the ability to have “control over my own schedule” was very important to them, and 70 per cent also said they valued being able to choose the projects they work on and manage their work-life balance.<sup>37</sup> In a survey of Uber drivers, 73 per cent indicated that they would not replace their present work if offered an employee position, with 87 per cent citing the value they place on being their own boss as a reason.<sup>38</sup> A CIPD survey found 60 per cent of UK gig workers were satisfied with the flexibility they have to decide their working hours, compared with only 43 per cent of non-gig workers.<sup>39</sup>

Whilst independent contractor work has always offered greater flexibility than permanent positions, technology has accelerated the level of job control the self-employed can now enjoy. This is because online platforms have streamlined the pairing process between worker and client, reducing the need for workers to operate in a particular place or for a certain length of time. For example, a minicab driver for a traditional taxi company may be able to decide the days and hours they wish to work. However, because the pairing process between driver and passenger is commonly managed in person at a rank, drivers

29 Vaughan and Daverio, *Assessing the Size and Presence of the Collaborative Economy in Europe*.  
30 Ibid.  
31 “HomeTouch”, Web Page, (2017); “SuperCarers”, Web Page, (2017).  
32 Ibid.  
33 For example, see: “TeacherIn”, Web Page, (2017); “Supply Clouds”, Web Page, (2017); “TeachersRegister”, Web Page, (2017); “ClassCover”, Web Page, (2017); “The Supply Register”, Web Page, (2017); “SickCover”, Web Page, (2017); “Teacherise”, Web Page, (2017).  
34 “Network Locum”, Web Page, (2017).  
35 “NHS Professionals”, Web Page, (2017); NHS Professionals, “Welcome to My:Bank”, Web Page, (2017).  
36 “Upwork”, Web Page, (2017).  
37 Siou Chew Kuek et al., *The Global Opportunity in Online Outsourcing* (World Bank Group, 2015).  
38 Uber, “In the Driver’s Seat: A Closer Look at the Uber Partner Experience”, Web Page, (22 January 2015).  
39 Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *To Gig or Not to Gig? Stories from the Modern Economy*.

still have a place of work they are usually required to attend. By contrast, platforms allow passengers to communicate with nearby drivers directly, placing fewer constraints over the geographical area they work in.

Presence at a taxi rank also helps communicate a driver’s availability. If drivers worked remotely from the rank whilst retaining control over when they started and stopped, it would be difficult for the taxi company to know who was currently available in which area and to deploy drivers efficiently. Drivers would have to manually update the company of their intentions to start and stop working and the area they intend to cover, and the rank staff would have to simultaneously process this information and manage demand. Platforms are programmed to do this automatically based on who is currently logged in to the app, allowing drivers to easily indicate their availability and location, whenever and wherever they choose to work.

Platforms also reduce the time and cost associated with hiring a worker, which makes smaller tasks cost effective to advertise. For example, without an online platform, finding a freelance computer programmer to help build a website might require the use of a ‘middle man’ to provide relevant contacts or to negotiate with various candidates. There is likely to be a base level of time and cost involved in sourcing a worker in this way, even for small projects. This means it is only cost effective to hire a freelancer for relatively large tasks, which restricts potential freelancers to longer projects.

As most platforms provide a large bank of freelancers that can be contacted directly for free, the time and cost involved in hiring someone is lower.<sup>40</sup> This means that smaller tasks become cost effective to advertise. Micro-purchase, for example, is a platform used by the US Government which allows programmers to bid for tasks as small as writing individual lines of code.<sup>41</sup> This means workers can choose only to commit to short projects, increasing the flexibility they enjoy.

The limited constraints gig work places on workers makes it easier than other employment arrangements to balance with other commitments. As the platform economy grows and expands into new sectors, a significant portion of the workforce will be able to participate. However, for those who most need flexible conditions, the emergence of the gig economy is especially important.

40 For example, online platforms are reducing the cost of hiring care workers or teachers when compared with agencies. See: Jamie Wilson, “The HomeTouch Pay Report at 100,000 Hours”, Web Page, (7 November 2016); “Teacherise”.  
41 18F Micro-purchase, “Insights”, Web Page, (2016); Alexander Hitchcock, Kate Laycock, and Emilie Sundorph, *Work in Progress: Towards a Leaner, Smarter Public-Sector Workforce* (Reform, 2017).



# 2

## Prospective gig workers

This new and growing section of the labour market presents a significant opportunity to workers seeking flexibility. This chapter considers which members of the society need such conditions, and who therefore stand to benefit most from the platform economy.

Evidence suggests that there is not a typical profile fitting most gig workers. A survey from the University of Hertfordshire, for example, found that whilst gig workers are younger and less well off than the average worker, they by no means exclusively fit this categorisation, with people aged 55-75 accounting for 16 per cent of gig workers, and nearly 30 per cent earning £35,000 or more annually.<sup>42</sup> This illustrates the highly diverse demography of workers who could benefit as the gig economy expands.

For most workers, the comparative financial security of a permanent employee position should remain the aspiration, with gig work offering an easy way to top-up earnings if needed. Indeed, three-quarters of current gig workers do not cite platforms as their main source of income.<sup>43</sup> The efficient technology underpinning labour platforms will make balancing an additional income simpler and open to a wider range of workers than is currently the case. Some gig platforms also offer higher pay in comparison with traditional agencies. HomeTouch carers, for example, are paid on average 67 per cent more than agency equivalents, meaning supplementing earnings may require working fewer hours.<sup>44</sup> This could have a profound impact on the wellbeing of millions of people.

For others, however, a permanent employee position will be insufficiently flexible. For people who are able to complete some work, but cannot commit to the regularity most employee positions require, highly flexible work could present the only feasible route into the labour market. These groups highlight even more acutely the benefit of employment services facilitating gig work where suitable.

Older working-age people are a useful example. This group faces significant work barriers. Around half of all 50-64 year olds manage at least one long-term health condition and a quarter are disabled.<sup>45</sup> A fifth have informal caring responsibilities for a sick, disabled or elderly person.<sup>46</sup> Of these, 18 per cent spend 20 or more hours per week caregiving.<sup>47</sup>

The barriers many older workers face could help explain the high premium they place on flexible working conditions. Nearly half of currently employed respondents told the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that more flexible hours would encourage them to work for longer before retiring.<sup>48</sup> The International Longevity Centre found that 15 per cent of those in employment aged 55-59 would take shorter hours, even if it meant less pay.<sup>49</sup> A 2015 analysis of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing found that job control was associated with decreased likelihood of labour market exit amongst 50-61 year old workers.<sup>50</sup> International evidence also shows a positive correlation between the availability of part-time work and labour-market participation in later life.<sup>51</sup>

Health conditions and caring responsibilities also drive comparatively high levels of economic inactivity in older people. Only around 14 per cent of 25-49 year olds are economically inactive, compared with 27 per cent of people aged 50-64.<sup>52</sup> Whilst early retirement is a factor, fewer than 30 per cent of unemployed or inactive 50-64 year olds cite retirement as the reason for them not working, with over 1.5 million inactive owing to

<sup>42</sup> Ursula Huws and Simon Joyce, *Size of the UK's "Gig Economy" Revealed for the First Time* (University of Hertfordshire, 2016); Office for National Statistics, *Employment, Unemployment and Economic Inactivity by Age Group (seasonally Adjusted)*, 2017; Office for National Statistics, *Household Disposable Income and Inequality in the UK: Financial Year Ending 2016*, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, *To Gig or Not to Gig? Stories from the Modern Economy*.

<sup>44</sup> Wilson, "The HomeTouch Pay Report at 100,000 Hours."

<sup>45</sup> Department for Work and Pensions, *Fuller Working Lives: Evidence Base 2017*, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Leanne Dew and Caroline Smith, *Attitudes to Working in Later Life: British Social Attitudes 2015* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2016).

<sup>49</sup> ILC-UK, *The Missing Million*, 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Tania Hints et al., "Higher Effort-Reward Imbalance and Lower Job Control Predict Exit from the Labour Market at the Age of 61 Years or Younger: Evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing", *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 69, no. 6 (2015).

<sup>51</sup> Manyika et al., *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy*.

<sup>52</sup> Office for National Statistics, *Employment, Unemployment and Economic Inactivity by Age Group (seasonally Adjusted)*.

ill health or caregiving.<sup>53</sup> As gig work is more flexible than most other forms of employment, it could help reduce economic inactivity in later life by allowing people to more easily find opportunities appropriate for their health capacity, and to balance work with other commitments.

The prevalence of economic inactivity, ill health and caregiving, as well as the demonstrable preference many have for flexible working conditions, make older workers a useful case study, but younger people with similar barriers could equally benefit from the gig economy. For example, in a survey of Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) claimants in the Work-Related Activity Group (WRAG) (more than half of whom are under 50), many indicated that “flexible work, working from home [and] working less than 16 hours per week” would help them sustain employment. A review of the Work Capability Assessment for sickness benefits also found half of those deemed ‘fit for work’ require flexible work hours.<sup>54</sup> Growth in the gig economy might help such people overcome inflexibilities in the existing labour market, offering a valuable source of income to the nearly 3.5 million disabled people who are currently out of work.<sup>55</sup>

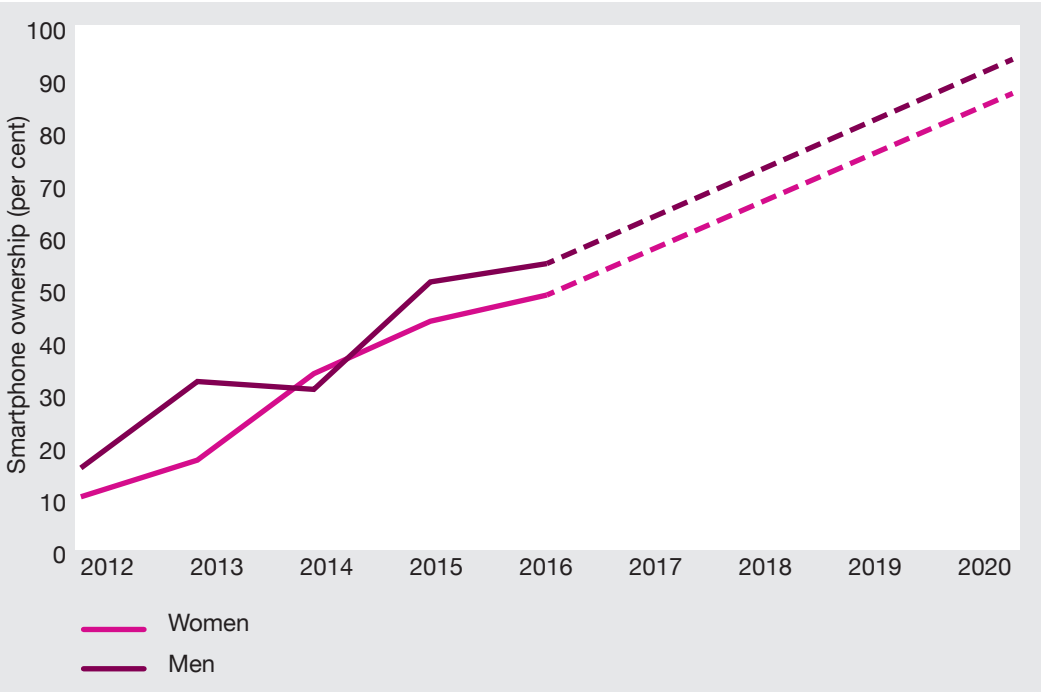
The examples of older and disabled people are still far from exhaustive. The expansion of online labour platforms is likely to widen employment opportunities for many with work barriers. Lone-parent families (of which there are nearly 3 million)<sup>56</sup> and second earners in families with children, for example, are also likely to benefit from highly flexible work. Freelance projects may also allow ex-offenders to gain valuable work experience, without which an employer may be reluctant to offer a permanent position.<sup>57</sup> The gig economy will also make it easier for those without complex work barriers to increase their earnings. However, these examples underscore the particular opportunity that the gig economy offers to millions of people who might otherwise be excluded from the labour market entirely.

There is some evidence to suggest that some of these groups are already benefitting. A survey of gig workers in Europe and the US notes a particular compatibility between platform work and “retirees, the disabled and caregivers”, with, for example, 17 per cent of their total sample reporting caring responsibilities for an elderly dependent.<sup>58</sup>

Importantly, digital exclusion, which disproportionately impacts older and disabled people, is rapidly declining as a barrier, allowing wider access to online labour platforms.<sup>59</sup> For example, the estimated proportion of over 55 year olds who, at any one time, had not used the internet in the last three months fell from 80 per cent in 2002 to around 40 per cent a decade later.<sup>60</sup> It is estimated that this will fall below 15 per cent by 2030.<sup>61</sup> Data on internet access for disabled people over time is poor, but Office for National Statistics data suggest that, between 2013 and 2014 alone, the proportion of disabled people who had ever used the internet rose by nearly 3 percentage points to just under 70 per cent, and that in 2016, nearly half of disabled people had used a mobile phone to access the internet within the last three months.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, smartphone ownership trends for older working-age people from lower-income backgrounds suggest ownership will reach nearly 90 per cent by 2020, enabling many more older people to use mobile apps to source gig work.

53 Department for Work and Pensions, *Fuller Working Lives: Evidence Base 2017*, 17.  
54 Department for Work and Pensions, *Evidence Based Review of the Work Capability Assessment*, 2013, 37.  
55 Office for National Statistics, *Labour Market Status of Disabled People*, 2017.  
56 Office for National Statistics, *Families and Households in the UK: 2016*, 2016.  
57 The work barriers a criminal record presents are demonstrated by the separate Work Programme payment group for prison leavers. For further evidence, see: Amanda Agan and Sonja Starr, *Ban the Box, Criminal Records, and Statistical Discrimination: A Field Experiment* (University of Michigan, 2016).  
58 Manyika et al., *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy*, 13.  
59 Office for National Statistics, “Internet Users in the UK: 2016”, Web Page, (20 May 2016); Ipsos MORI and Go ON UK, *Basic Digital Skills: UK Report 2015*, 2015; Ipsos MORI, *Tech Tracker: Quarterly Release*.  
60 Marcus Green and Phil Rossall, *Digital Inclusion Evidence Review* (Age UK, 2013), 26.  
61 *Ibid.*, 27.  
62 Office for National Statistics, “Internet Access - Households and Individuals 2016”, Web Page, (4 August 2016); Office for National Statistics, *Internet Access Quarterly Update: Q1 2014*, 2014.

Figure 1: Growth in smartphone ownership amongst C2 and DE 55-64 year olds



Source: Ipsos MORI, *Tech Tracker: Quarterly Release Q4 2016*, 2016. Reform calculations.

Combined with the growth trends outlined, this suggests that many of those who stand to benefit most may soon participate in gig work without government intervention. Nevertheless, the Government can play an important role in supporting the use of platforms. This presents an excellent opportunity to be pre-emptive rather than reactive; to determine now how employment services can support gig work, and to implement policy before the gig economy fully matures.



# 3

## Employment services

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In recent years, employment services have been increasingly focused on many of those who would most benefit from growth in flexible work. For example, the Work Programme – the largest outsourced employment programme – is predominately for long-term ESA claimants or Jobseeker’s Allowance (JSA) claimants with more complex barriers.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Work Choice is a specialist outsourced programme for disabled people.<sup>64</sup> In Jobcentre Plus (JCP), specialist Work Coaches for disabled and older people have been introduced.<sup>65</sup> However, the current service offering is poorly placed to help participants find work in the gig economy. This chapter offers three ways in which it could be improved.

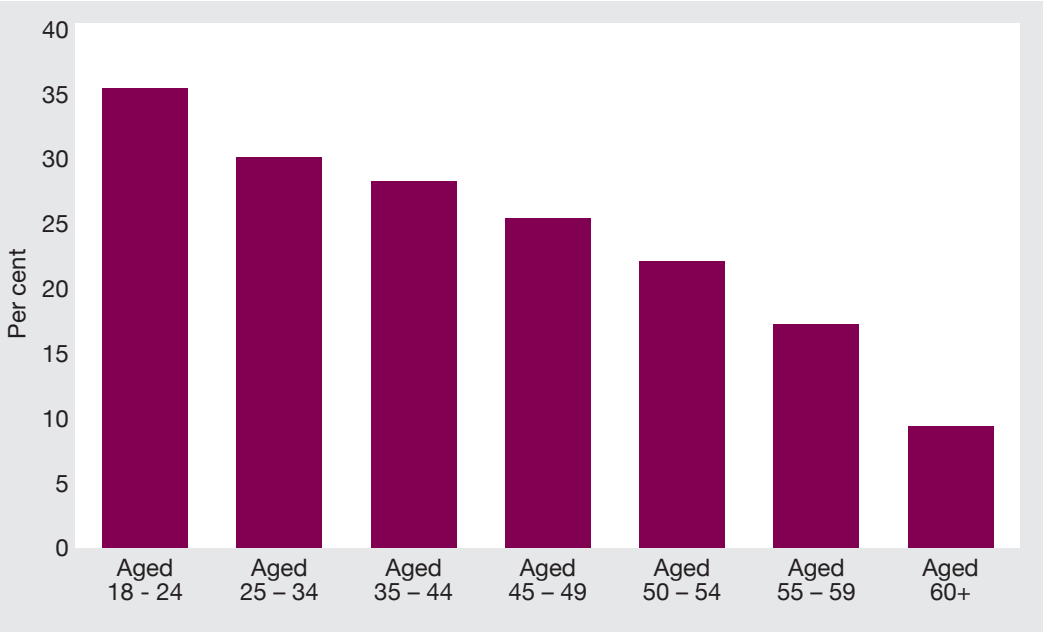
### 3.1 Flexible employment programmes

The major outsourced employment programmes – Work Programme and Work Choice – are the primary employment support mechanisms for many long-term out-of-work benefits claimants. Performance for many of those who would most benefit from the gig economy is comparatively poor. For example, claimants of ESA have achieved a significantly lower job outcome rate than claimants of JSA on the Work Programme. Across the whole programme, an average of 11 per cent of claimants in the four ESA payment groups achieved a job outcome (measured as 13 weeks in sustained work) in comparison with an average of 30 per cent for claimants in the five JSA groups.<sup>66</sup> Work Choice, the specialist employment programme for disabled people with the most complex work barriers, has performed slightly better, with 15 per cent of ESA participants achieving a sustained unsupported job outcome (measured as unsupported work lasting at least six months) across the programme.<sup>67</sup> However, neither have significantly reduced the ESA caseload, with only around 1 per cent of the WRAG (those deemed comparatively able to work) flowing off the benefit each month.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, only 18 per cent of Work Programme attachments have been over age 50, despite this group accounting, on average, for 36 per cent of the combined JSA, ESA and IB caseload since the programme began.<sup>69</sup> Job outcome rates also decline sharply with age.

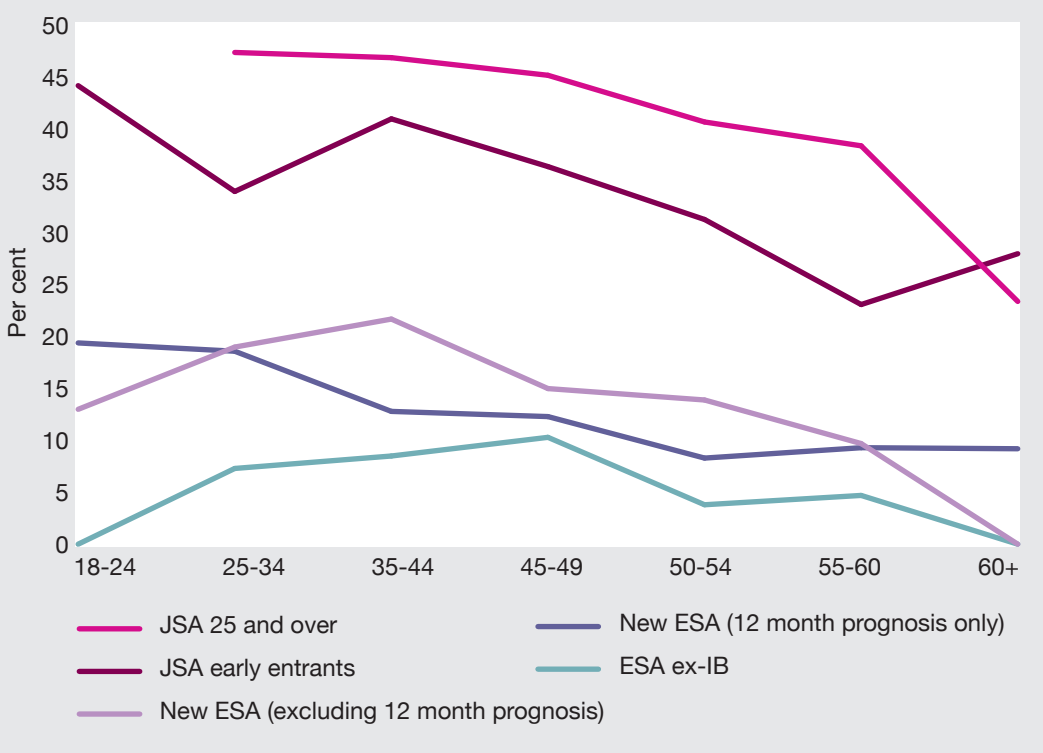
63 Department for Work and Pensions and The European Social Fund, *The Work Programme*, 2012.  
64 GOV.UK, “Work Choice”, Web Page, (28 December 2016).  
65 Department for Work and Pensions, *Evaluation of the Work Choice Specialist Disability Employment Programme*, 2013; Department for Work and Pensions, *Fuller Working Lives: A Partnership Approach*, 2017.  
66 Department for Work and Pensions, *Work Programme Statistical Summary: Data to December 2016*, 2017.  
67 Department for Work and Pensions, *Work Choice: Referrals, Starts and Job Outcomes to December 2016*, 2017.  
68 For example, at the end of November 2015 (latest available data), there were 453,160 WRAG claimants. Between 1 September 2015 and 30 November 2015, 16,100 WRAG claimants flowed off the benefit. This means an average of 1.2 per cent of the WRAG caseload left the benefit each month across the period. Department for Work and Pensions, “Tabulation Tool: Employment and Support Allowance, Data to November 2015”, Web Page, (2017); Office for National Statistics, “Nomis Official Labour Market Statistics: Benefit Claimants - Employment and Support Allowance”, (2017).  
69 Department for Work and Pensions, *Work Programme Statistical Summary: Data to December 2016*; Department for Work and Pensions, “Tabulation Tool”, Web Page, (2017).

**Figure 2: Proportion of attachments achieving at least one sustainment payment across the Work Programme**



Source: Department for Work and Pensions, *Work Programme Statistical Summary: Data to December 2016, 2017*.

**Figure 3: Proportion of June 2014 cohort achieving a job outcome by age and payment group**



Source: Freedom of Information Disclosure, Department for Work and Pensions, 23 March 2017, 2017-36. Payment groups shown are the five largest that include participants over 25.

The barriers that these groups face mean that this is, to some extent, expected. However, designing future programmes so that they better accommodate those who need highly flexible working conditions could deliver better outcomes.

Both programmes use a payment-by-results model, whereby all or part of the funding the provider receives is withheld until a ‘job outcome’ is achieved.<sup>70</sup> Many participants face sanctions if they fail to take steps towards employment that satisfies a job outcome.<sup>71</sup> However, these conditions are not compatible with flexible work patterns. Work Choice participants, for example, are required to seek employment of at least 16 hours per week.<sup>72</sup> For the Work Programme, participants must be earning enough to lift them off out-of-work benefits before a job outcome is registered.<sup>73</sup> As many of those best placed to benefit from gig work require less demanding hours or greater flexibility, providers are unlikely to support them to find work on labour platforms. This prevents many who could do some flexible work from succeeding through employment programmes.

Later this year, Work Choice and the Work Programme are to be replaced by a new Work and Health Programme.<sup>74</sup> The criteria a participant must meet to satisfy a job outcome on this programme are not yet clear. This presents an opportunity to test the impact that relaxed success criteria have on claimants who need high levels of flexibility. The DWP should therefore use the Work and Health Programme to pilot more flexible job-outcome criteria for claimants who are unlikely to be able to consistently achieve a fixed level of hours or earnings.

For pilot group participants, job outcomes could be achieved when the participant earns a specified level of income across a relatively long period, based on the average number of hours and level of earnings they could reasonably be expected to manage, rather than when they find employment for a specified number of hours each week. These targets could require participants to earn less than the Work Programme currently demands, so that those who are unable to work sufficient hours to take them off benefits could still receive support to work as much as they can. This would allow them to vary the amount of hours worked in a given week, making it easier to balance work with fluctuating health conditions or other demands that make committing to a regular schedule difficult. It would also incentivise providers to help suitable participants find more flexible opportunities (including work on online labour platforms) as the need for the claimant’s employment to provide a consistent level of hours or income would be lessened. This could include, for example, helping participants to establish profiles on labour platforms, increasing their familiarity with mobile apps or supporting them to obtain accreditation.

**Recommendation 1**

The Work and Health Programme should pilot the use of job outcome criteria that are more conducive to flexible forms of work for claimants who are unlikely to consistently achieve a fixed level of hours or earnings.

70 Department for Work and Pensions, *Evaluation of the Work Choice Specialist Disability Employment Programme*; Pippa Lane et al., *Work Programme Evaluation: Procurement, Supply Chains and Implementation of the Commissioning Model* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2013).  
71 Department for Work and Pensions, “Jobseeker’s Allowance Sanctions: How to Keep Your Benefit Payment”, Web Page, (9 December 2016); Department for Work and Pensions, “Employment and Support Allowance Sanctions: How to Keep Your Benefit Payment”, Web Page, (9 December 2016).  
72 GOV.UK, “Work Choice.”  
73 European Social Fund, *Work Programme Provider Guidance: Chapter 15 - Standard Definitions for the Work Programme*, 2014.  
74 Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health, *Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper*, 2016.

3.2 Jobcentre Plus

Designing the Work and Health Programme so that it supports suitable participants to find more flexible work could significantly improve its success rate in comparison with legacy programmes. However, the new programme will be smaller than those it is replacing, with only £120 million in funding per year in comparison with over £500 million for the Work Programme alone.<sup>75</sup> This means more claimants will be reliant on other aspects of the employment support offer, the main aspect of which is JCP.<sup>76</sup>

JCP provides claimants with resources and support to search for jobs such as access to computers and help with using the Universal Jobmatch (UJ) online vacancy board.<sup>77</sup> It also offers financial support and advice for eligible claimants wanting to start a business through the New Enterprise Allowance.<sup>78</sup> For many claimants, contact with JCP forms part of their claimant commitment, which lists the steps they agree to take towards employment – where non-compliance can result in benefit sanctions.<sup>79</sup>

As with employment programmes, if JCP is to successfully support many claimants with significant work barriers, it is essential that Work Coaches promote flexible work and apply conditionality in a way that is conducive to it.

It is difficult to assess whether the claimant commitment for current JCP users is typically compatible with flexible work. This is because each one is supposed to be tailored to the individual's situation, meaning there is no standardised list of steps or actions applicable to every claimant.<sup>80</sup> JCP also only records the number of people who flow off benefits and so do not capture whether former claimants have moved into employment. This prevents an evaluation of how many people JCP has supported into flexible work.

However, the evidence available suggests that JCP is currently poorly placed to support some of the most suitable workers into the platform economy. For example, claimant interviews and a survey conducted by the DWP found that many older people dislike JCP offices and feel the service offer is ill targeted at their needs.<sup>81</sup> A DWP report on the skills of JCP Work Coaches observed that claimant preferences (including for self-employment) were sometimes ignored.<sup>82</sup> Though JCP does have specialist advisers supporting self-employment, they are primarily intended to support people to establish a business rather than find flexible freelance work.<sup>83</sup>

JCP Work Coaches should therefore be upskilled in supporting claimants to find work on labour platforms. This could improve their familiarity with online platforms and their ability to identify and support suitable claimants. Work Coaches could, for example, be taught about the different platforms available in different sectors, how to use them and the advantages and disadvantages each offer. They could also be trained to gather a richer understanding of a claimant's work capacity, help prospective gig workers improve their digital skills and to flex conditionality requirements around common work-related barriers. This could extend support to many of those for whom gig work is most suitable, helping them balance an income around other commitments and barriers, where existing employment services might have written them off.

75 Department for Work and Pensions, "Work and Health Programme: Prior Information Notice", 28 April 2016; Dar, Aliyah, *Work Programme: Background and Statistics* (House of Commons Library, 2016).  
76 Department for Work and Pensions and Department of Health, *Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper*.  
77 JobCentreGuide, "What Is the JobCentre Plus?", Web Page, (2017); Universal Jobmatch, "Welcome to Universal Jobmatch", Web Page, (2017).  
78 GOV.UK, "New Enterprise Allowance", Web Page, (27 February 2017).  
79 Department for Work and Pensions, "Universal Credit and Your Claimant Commitment", Web Page, (11 April 2016).  
80 Ibid.  
81 Andrea Kirkpatrick, *How Ready Is Jobcentre Plus to Help People in Their 60s Find Work?* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2012); Sarah Jenkins, John Highton, and Elizabeth Lane, *Communicating with Customers of Retirement Age* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010).  
82 Anne Bellis et al., *Identifying Claimants' Needs: Research into the Capability of Jobcentre Plus Advisers* (Department for Work and Pensions, 2011), 30.  
83 GOV.UK, "New Enterprise Allowance: Start Your Own Business Information", Web Page, (21 May 2013).

Recommendation 2

Jobcentre Plus Work Coaches should be upskilled in supporting suitable claimants to find work on online labour platforms where appropriate.

3.3 A task-matching service

Out-of-work benefit claimants are commonly required to use the Government's online job vacancy board, UJ.<sup>84</sup> This allows jobseekers to view available positions, post their CV, create cover letters and be matched with suggested jobs based on their specified preferences.<sup>85</sup> Unlike some employment programmes or JCP support, UJ is also open to those not claiming benefits. This makes it a useful tool for delivering support to those who are otherwise not in contact with employment services.

However, UJ is currently poorly placed to match workers with opportunities in the gig economy, limiting the impact it can have for those who most need flexible work.

Though some platforms are advertised on UJ, such adverts are unlikely to maximise the uptake of tasks on them. This is because it provides only the platform company's brief outline of the type of work typically offered, and so fails to capture the diversity of work that is available. Upwork, for example, describes itself as an "online workplace where savvy businesses and professional freelancers go to work".<sup>86</sup> From this description, many might infer that all, or at least the majority, of the work is relatively high skilled, and therefore not suitable for those who do not identify as a professional. However, the platform also includes a very broad range of tasks that are likely to be accessible to those from lower-skilled backgrounds, including 25 sub-categories of "Administrative Support".<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Handy describes itself a platform for "maid services and house cleaning services", yet, on closer inspection, also offers a wide range of plumbing, electrical and other 'handyman' services.<sup>88</sup> NHS Professionals, which supplies a range of administrative staff, might similarly seem at first to cater only for clinicians.<sup>89</sup>

Unpacking the individual tasks available might alert jobseekers to suitable opportunities on platforms they might otherwise have thought were ill suited.<sup>90</sup> This could be done using software akin to the OLI. As the OLI is programmed to scrape individual jobs from platforms in real time,<sup>91</sup> a similar tool could collate the individual tasks and projects that are currently available on all platforms that choose to advertise on UJ. This would allow UJ to offer a more accurate and specific categorisation of available gig work, rather than just advertising platforms by the type of project it most commonly offers. This would be more efficient for the jobseeker, as they would be able to view available work on a wide range of platforms without having to consult each one individually. A jobseeker looking for laundry tasks, for example, could search on UJ and find all the opportunities that are currently available on various relevant platforms in one place.<sup>92</sup>

The job-suggestion feature on UJ could also be strengthened using machine learning. Similar tools already exist in the recruitment industry. MYA, for example, is a programme that carries out initial screening and offers candidates application updates and job-search advice.<sup>93</sup> It does this through an instant-message application, which asks questions based on the candidate's preferences and employment history, and the requirements for different vacancies. Crucially, when it is asked a question it does not know the answer to,

84 Department for Work and Pensions, "Universal Credit and Your Claimant Commitment."  
85 Universal Jobmatch, "Welcome to Universal Jobmatch."  
86 "Upwork."  
87 Ibid.  
88 "Handy", Web Page, (2017).  
89 "NHS Professionals."  
90 Michele Belot, Philipp Kircher, and Paul Muller, *Providing Advice to Job Seekers at Low Cost: An Experimental Study on On-Line Advice* (Edinburgh School of Economics, 2015).  
91 University of Oxford, "The iLabour Project: Investigating the Construction of Labour Markets, Institutions and Movements on the Internet."  
92 For example, "Handy"; "Laundrapp", Web Page, (2017); "Laundry Republic", Web Page, (2017).  
93 "Mya: Your Team's A.I. Recruiter", Web Page, (2017).

it asks the recruiter and learns the response, allowing it to become increasingly helpful and independent. Wade&Wendy, similarly, learns a candidate’s skills and preferences and uses them to make tailored job suggestions.<sup>94</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that jobseekers who use vacancy sites that make appropriate recommendations are invited to more interviews than those who search using only their own criteria, demonstrating the positive impact improving this mechanism could have.<sup>95</sup>

If UJ combined a similar suggestion feature with a task-scraping tool akin to the OLI, it could notify jobseekers of individual gig projects that become increasingly personalised by learning from the tasks the jobseeker previously completed, and the level of satisfaction they had with them. This could transform UJ from a simple list of vacancies and platform adverts to a sophisticated and highly personalised employment service.

A significant portion of the workforce could benefit from a jobs board that makes suitable online-platform work easier to find. However, owing to their particular need for flexibility, modernising employment services in this way could especially help some of the most vulnerable in society, for whom traditional forms of work may be inaccessible.

Recommendation 3

- > Universal Jobmatch should use a programme for scraping and collating individual tasks from different platforms in real time, allowing jobseekers to efficiently assess the work currently available across multiple platforms.
- > A machine-learning recruitment tool should be used to offer jobseekers more personalised task suggestions based on the previous work Universal Jobmatch paired them with.

94 “Wade&Wendy”, Web Page, (2017).  
95 Belot, Kircher, and Muller, *Providing Advice to Job Seekers at Low Cost: An Experimental Study on On-Line Advice*.

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*Reform*  
5-6 St Matthew Street  
London  
SW1P 2JT

T 020 7799 6699  
[info@reform.uk](mailto:info@reform.uk)  
[www.reform.uk](http://www.reform.uk)

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