

Platform Promises VS. Lived Experiences: A Case Study of Gig Work in India using Youtube Evidence

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Abstract

Through connecting demand for idle capacities such as labour, assets, and time with each other, platforms have improved the efficiency of underutilized resources and changed traditional economic structures, while providing flexible employment in developing economies, such as India.¹ Therefore, platform-based work has become an important source of economic participation by allowing individuals to produce income-generating activities and have a lower barrier than other forms of job creation. Digital platforms including Urban Company, Blinkit, Instamart, etc., have become known as enablers of livelihood generation for all individuals by actively promoting the opportunities to earn an income using their services through advertising and outreach. As a result, through using their services, individuals with technical and vocational skills, such as hairdressers, repair technicians for appliances, and those in other low to medium skilled positions, are able to develop a broader client base and make more money than before.

Although many of these claims are true; however, they do not tell the full story with regard to what it is like to work on the ground. The promise of earning more money via digital platforms only creates many of the same rigidities that the traditional economy created, including algorithmic management, performance pressure, job insecurity and lack social protections - which have been widely reported by workers via YouTube and other online media. These personal experiences provide an alternate viewpoint than that which is offered by promotion material.

Media plays an important role in connecting global ambitions with local experiences. A case study approach is taken to study Urban Company partners, through the use of YouTube videos, to demonstrate the realities of life on the ground, and critically compare these lived realities against broader corporate claims and narratives.

1 Parker, Geoffrey C., et al. *PLATFORM REVOLUTION*. 103.44.149.34/elib/assets/buku/Platform_revolution.pdf.

INTRODUCTION

The period of globalization and digitalization has created an environment of constant change with frequent unpredictability. The evolution of economic structures, communication systems, and social norms is occurring at a much faster rate than ever before. One of the major shifts that has taken place is with

the changing nature of work itself. Work is being transformed through the expansion of digital media and online platforms that extend their influence over time, so the way people work is changing from analogue to digital.

Digital platforms are not only changing how work is being done but creating new types of jobs whole scale. Opportunities for freelance work, working from home, working on-demand or by “gigs,” and content production now exist for individuals in a way that they did not exist before.¹ This means that today’s workforce will continue to be more adaptable, driven by technology, and connected globally as reflected by the ever-evolving nature of the digital economy.

The introduction of digital platforms has drastically changed the way that organizations hire and deliver services. Organizations like Ola, Rapido, Urban Company, and Zomato have created technology-enabled platforms that allow service providers to be connected to millions of consumers instantaneously in a real-time fashion. Consumers are able to find workers for hire to meet their own requirements, and delivery of those services has been revolutionized, allowing organizations to change the way employment and access to work have been defined.

Many companies claim that what employees get from their jobs is quite a bit more than what they would otherwise receive. There is much evidence to support that claim. Workers’ average income has grown due in part to the positive effects of these platforms on employment potential.

The concept referred to here is ‘platform work’. There are many positive aspects of providing a flexible work environment for your employees, being able to reach a larger customer base, making more money, and working in less stressful conditions than on a regular job. Based on the previous paragraph, “Platform Work” sounds very good; but upon closer inspection, we find that there are many layers of complexity for “Platform Work” and that, in some

cases, their experiences will likely differ from their expectations.

This research paper investigates the assertions made by Urban Company, a service provider that allows customers to connect with a variety of providers such as those that offer Instahelp, male and female salon services, cleaning solutions, and repair services.² To do so, an examination of the experiences of gig workers who partner with Urban Company will be conducted in terms of how the workers experience problems and complications while collaborating with Urban Company. All of the information for this research paper has been compiled through Youtube (Social Media).

Objectives of the study

This objective looks at the authentic experiences of gig workers to compare to what companies are saying about gig and/or platform-based employment. While the analysis is limited to one company and, therefore, this is an obvious limitation, this does provide some objective insight into gig work as it is exploding in India.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design using the case study method. The case study approach is suitable as it enabled an in-depth examination of a specific platform based gig economy model and allowed for comparison between institutional claims and ground- level realities.

‘Urban Company’ is taken as a representative platform in India’s gig economy due to its wide service portfolio, large worker base and public claims regarding worker empowerment and income generation. The secondary data has been used taken from company website and official claims of the company, Youtube videos (worker testimonials, interviews, media coverage), reports, articles and existing literature of gig economy.

About the Company

Urban Company began its journey in 2014 with a simple yet powerful idea, 3 friends, a few cups of

1 Banerjee, Shrabastee, et al. “Digital Platforms 2.0: Learnings, Opportunities, and Challenges.” *Electronic Copy*, www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/ssrn-4850078_b5fff0cc-e0c1-455e-ad5f-bb11e8d17cdd.pdf.

2 <https://partner.urbancompany.com/>



coffee, and a vision to create a lead-generation marketplace (then called UrbanClap).

The company started as a small venture but quickly gained pace, and by 2017 it fully committed to its “full stack model”, expanding into areas like salon and spa treatments, appliance repair and skilled trades like plumbing and electrical work. In 2018, it further expanded its operation overseas in markets like Dubai and Abu Dhabi, followed by Singapore in 2020, where the company signals its global ambitions very clearly. In the same year, the brand reintroduced itself as ‘Urban Company’ reflecting more encompassing vision for the future. After the Covid year, the company in 2022 has been awarded as ‘Covid-led Business Transformation’ award highlighting its adaptability and resilience. The company continued its innovations in 2023 and launched native purifiers, moving into product offerings and by 2024, its scaled new heights with impactful partnerships like the one with NITI Aayog to support women entrepreneurs. The company has shown constant evolution, big bold decisions and a solid focus on empowering both customers and service professionals.³

In a podcast, titled “Figuring Out”, with Raj Shamani, Varun Khaitan, the Chief Operating Officer of urban company, spoke about different benefits that professionals experienced after joining the platform. In particular, he said that their income increased manifold or almost doubled in many cases, especially in cleaning and salon services. Varun Khaitan further said that if one does one job every day, on an average, they make about Rs. 23000 – Rs.25000 per month. If they do more jobs, the average income increases to about Rs. 35000 – Rs. 43000 per month, depending on the volume of work done.⁴

According to the findings reported in the Earnings Index by Urban company, the platform has played a significant role in enabling the professional to meet their middle-class aspirations by empowering them to make sustainable income. As per the report, the professionals who do more than 30 services

per month on an average earn about ₹33,469 per month as their net income. It implies that the regular engagement of the professionals with the platform can enable them to earn a stable income and improve their living standards. Moreover, the data shows that the top 20 percent of professionals on the platform earn an average monthly net income of ₹42,792. It suggests that with increased productivity and positive feedback from customers, the professionals can further increase their income manifold. In addition, the report also highlights a 36.65 percent female earning premium. It implies that the female professionals joined on the platform earn higher income per hour than their male counterparts. It suggests that the platform has reduced the gender pay gap to a great extent and adheres to the principle of paying equal income for equal work.

Therefore, the data suggests that engaging with the digital platform can help in empowering the professionals to improve their financial status and living standards. It further implies that such platforms can play a significant role in enhancing financial inclusion and inclusion in general, especially for skilled professionals.

Urban Company focuses on a work model that provides both flexibility and social security. This way, professionals can enjoy the ability to set their own hours while maintaining a certain level of welfare and safety. The former is evident from the ability to decide when and how much to work, removing the need for a fixed, company-mandated schedule. Flexibility is good, but it is also important to have security in terms of welfare. It is achieved by providing partners with opportunities for extra income, regardless of their activity level on the platform. The customer-centric approach complements the strategy as Urban Company understands that serving its clients is the best way to ensure the satisfaction of the service providers. It is notable that both client satisfaction and welfare of partners are viewed as two separates but closely-related goals in the company’s strategic planning. Urban Company strategy has created a win-win situation for both clients and service providers. On the one hand, service providers experience higher flexibility and satisfaction, while on the other hand,

³ <https://careers.urbancompany.com/#perkDivid>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SMEQZojl8H0&t=4066s>

the company achieves superior performance, enhanced by its strategy. As such, Urban Company has been able to reconfigure some of the key challenges of gig-economy jobs.

Urban Company has rolled out a welfare scheme that ensures financial security and social protection for the company's service professionals. The company offers extensive benefits to all its professionals. All the active professionals on the platform are covered by ₹6,00,000 life insurance. This benefit ensures that every worker's family is financially stable even after the worker's demise. Likewise, Urban Company offers disability cover worth ₹6,00,000 to its professionals. Disability benefits help the insured workers to meet their financial needs when they are physically unable to work. Hospitalisation cover, including a daily hospitalisation allowance and outpatient department (OPD) benefit, shields the workers from bearing the huge expenses of unexpected medical bills. Additionally, Urban Company gives health insurance benefits to all active professionals. It covers a significant amount of hospitalisation expenses incurred by the workers, helping them avoid high out-of-pocket expenses. Urban Company's welfare package benefits the company's professionals by giving them financial stability, medical security, and social protection. It ensures that the workers receive social benefits despite choosing to be independent workers. By offering such benefits, Urban Company improves the well-being of its workers in addition to providing an attractive economic opportunity. As a result, the company can increase its workers' satisfaction, retention, and attract more workers to join the platform.

Urban Company prioritizes the long-term development of its service partners through such factors as skill improvement, career growth, and financial inclusion. The company offers numerous benefits to its professional partners, including discounts, access to training programs, and opportunities to advance their careers. First, the company provides free training and certification courses so that individuals can acquire new skills and improve their service delivery without any monetary burden. The workers can become more competitive by gaining new expertise and better

serving their clients, which, in turn, benefits the company by securing higher revenues through increased satisfaction. Additionally, the company allows its professional partners to access high-end tools and equipment at significantly low prices. The benefit of equipping the workers with top-quality tools is immeasurable, considering that it helps improve service delivery while ensuring that the professionals adhere to the company's standards. Next, another advantage that Urban Company offers to its professional partners is financial inclusion. It allows the workers to access formal credit and advance their careers, which, in turn, benefits the company by securing a steady stream of income. Overall, the strategies that Urban Company implements to ensure the development of its professional partners beyond linking them to clients are pertinent to human capital development. Consequently, it empowers its workers, which benefits the company by enabling them to gain skills, improve their careers, and transform their jobs into sustainable professions.

The platform-based employment has numerous advantages on the personal front as it offers financial security and empowers people economically. The stories of the service professionals at Urban Company showcase the impact of digital labor platforms in enabling economic empowerment, providing skilling and training opportunities, ensuring financial stability, and promoting social causes such as gender equality. The first story is about Hukm Thapa⁵, who was able to improve his family's financial stability by becoming the breadwinner. He was able to achieve this by joining the digital platform and registering as a service provider. His family's improved financial status was facilitated by the increased income that he earned by providing services through the Urban Company. The second story is about Preeti Dua⁶, who joined Urban Company to gain relevant skills and training to become a certified professional. Her initial lack of skills and expertise did not hinder her from becoming

5 <https://ucblogger.medium.com/from-struggle-to-success-seven-female-partners-who-turned-their-lives-around-at-urban-company-446311e8c565>

6 Ibid



a trained and certified professional with the help of the company. The third story is about Bhavya Sharma⁷, the first-ever female RO (Reverse Osmosis) mechanic at Urban Company. She showcases her gratitude towards the company for giving her an opportunity to build a better future financially while breaking the conventional norms and stereotypes of a male-dominated profession. These stories signify the magnitude of the impact of the gig economy on the personal front by promoting financial stability, skilling and training, gender equality, and family welfare. The three stories also exhibit how the digital labor platform helps create numerous employment opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds and empowers them economically while providing essential welfare benefits.

Examining Worker Testimonials: Gaps Between Expectations and Reality

While the companies developing digital labour platforms promote their benefits and opportunities, worker testimonies and their experiences with the given type of employment reflect mixed and negative views regarding such services. Based on the testimonials and news reports, most of those who decided to join online employment services were initially enthusiastic about their opportunities. However, with time, the emerging advantages were outweighed by disadvantages, leading to frustration, disappointment, and even loss of trust in such organisations.⁸ Such outcomes were mainly reported due to the loss of flexibility and decreased income, together with increased expenses and competition, dynamic work conditions imposed by the algorithm, and the organisation's unpredictable decisions. These aspects significantly impact the quality of workers' lives by contributing to instability in terms of income, decreasing the possibility of social security, and undermining the employees' sense of control in the given environment. Combined together, these circumstances generate distress in workers, which may also lead to a decrease in motivation and productivity. By creating such

conditions, online employment services fail to ensure equal opportunities for the majority of workers who depend on the given platforms, while also undermining their social and financial well-being. Therefore, the need for state regulation, fair cooperation policy, and social security is crucial to ensure that platform-based employment services operate in an ethical and socially responsible manner.

Worker testimonials indicate that the income on offer from digital labour platforms may not always be as advertised on the sites. According to the complainant, an Urban Company beautician named Nidhi Chander⁹, the company's commission and other deductions significantly cut into one's income. The respondent stated that she was only making about ₹20,000 monthly after deductions, down from the expected ₹55,000. Her income had decreased by over 60%, and she attributed this to the 30% commission and other charges the company levies on its workers. The respondent's experience highlights the issue of the discrepancy between promised and realised income. The testimonies show that while the sites advertise good income prospects, one has to consider commissions, incentives, demand for one's services, and other factors when calculating net income. The experience also serves as a reminder that the promised income figures usually refer to gross income, not net profit. While the complainant's experience is an outlier, it is still a problem, and more research is needed to determine if it is a widespread issue affecting the gig economy workers in general.

Worker testimonials showed that the flexibility promised by the on-demand economy was not always present. Several workers stated that due to the company's rules, there were limitations and restrictions to taking up work at the worker's own time. Others claimed to be tied to the platform in terms of incentives and working hours. Another issue raised by workers was the system's control over scheduling, including the ability to cancel trips without penalty. Testimonies also showed that incentives and rewards only pushed workers to do more rather than allow them to work on their own

7 Ibid

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qey8ma9bRsk>

9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0jsLLb7rVQ>

terms. Several problems were identified from worker testimonials about the flexibility of getting on and off the platform.

The first flexibility issue concerned the company's requirements to stay online for a certain amount of time to be eligible for incentives or enough order surfacing. By doing so, the company has placed constraints on how much time the worker should spend on the platform. Instead of giving the worker flexibility in choosing when to work, the organization has imposed its rules and expectations over the worker. Another flexibility problem was the ability of workers to take a break whenever they needed. Several workers reported that taking a break, especially on weekends or holidays, could trigger penalties and loss of incentives. Others said that taking a break meant missing out on extra rewards, which in turn affected their willingness to take a break. A third issue raised was that the platform controls over scheduling, including cancelling trips without penalty, is a problem for workers. This feature enables the organization to dictate when and where the worker should provide services, constraining the worker's freedom. According to the workers, the platform's deactivation system and low job acceptance rate discourage workers from taking up the platform's work due to the risk of deactivation. This strategy could pose a danger to the workers who depend on the platform for income, thus limiting worker flexibility based on occupation. It was concluded from the research that flexibility in the on-demand economy requires transparency, a grievance policy, and a stable system of worker protections that safeguard both the business's interests and the workers' rights, considering the incentives offered.

Comparative analysis

The promotional narrative presented by Urban Company emphasizes the advantages of platform-based employment, portraying gig work as a model that offers flexibility, autonomy, and entrepreneurial freedom. According to the platform, workers have the liberty to choose their working hours, take leave whenever required, and operate as independent professionals with control over their work schedules. These claims position gig work as an

attractive alternative to conventional employment by highlighting worker autonomy and flexibility.¹⁰

Worker testimonials, however, differ greatly from what the platform states it is doing for the service professionals. There is a huge disconnect here between what the platform advertises must happen (a lot of support and promotion) and what actually happens regarding service professionals.

While professionals are officially free to choose when they will work, they are compelled by testimonial evidence that they must remain logged onto the platform during "busy" (or time windows made necessary to maintain eligibility for bonuses) in order to get enough work and maintain their ability to receive work. Also, while professionals are encouraged to take vacation when it is appropriate for them, many respondents claim that missing a weekend or occurrence during "busy" times results in monetary penalties, fewer opportunities for bonuses, and a significantly reduced number of future work opportunities. Last, although the concept of being your own boss is central to their motivation, professionals' income and their continuing access the platforms are largely driven by algorithmic management based on how much work you get, customer ratings, accept/decline rates, and so on. In short, even though they are classified as independent contractors, professionals have limited control over their professional lives.

The comparison also shows that both sides tell the truth, although it seems that truth is partially obscured. Although Urban Company's actions have genuinely resulted in some job opportunities, increased income, and access to training programs and welfare for many of its workers, its employees' testimonies show that the picture is not entirely positive. Some workers report lower pay, an overwhelming presence of algorithms in every aspect of work, unstable employment, and lack of control over their working conditions, and a lack of overall empowerment. Thus, while the company

¹⁰ https://www.urbancompany.com/blog/highlights-from-the-very-first-urban-company-partner-awards?srsId=AfmBOoqfDHmoePdmfRKwG5R-q6knR-VGYc3HSyeEMaIPSGtw_IXom9c_



emphasizes the opportunities provided, workers' experiences demonstrate the challenges that arise from these opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The given article presents evidence supporting both sides of the debate on the nature of work and opportunities provided by corporate platforms. Although such projects as Urban Company create opportunities for employment and generate income for millions of people, the presented evidence shows that the offered working opportunities are far from being ideal due to the loss of certain personal freedoms. Consequently, the given situation cannot be regarded as either fully good or entirely bad. Thus, it can be concluded that platform-based employment can provide people with numerous opportunities; however, as the presented arguments suggest, such work forms should not be regarded as ideal due to the lack of certain guarantees and opportunities in comparison with traditional employment models.

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