

Personas for a better understanding of emerging worker identities in the Swiss Gig Economy

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The platform economy is receiving more and more attention in business publications and scientific research. Starting from an idealistic understanding of the platform economy as a forerunner of an alternative to more traditional forms of organizing work in market and hierarchies, the discourse has changed towards pointing out the exploitation of platform workers by monopolistic platform companies (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2018). To come up with a better understanding of the changes that are happening through platform-based work assignments, it is important to come up with a precise definition. There have been several definitions of platform workers, which sometimes blur the line between work and non-work activities. For this contribution platform-based work activities are differentiated from non-work related activities such as renting flats (e.g. airbnb, etc.), selling goods (e.g. Folksy), etc. (cf. Huws, Spencer, Surdal, & Holts, 2017). Furthermore, a differentiation between two models of platform based work is proposed: location-independent work that can be effected digitally – so called crowd work – and work that is effected on-site at the customer or in public spaces. The later is called gig work in the sense of the gig of a rock band that physically performs in a concert venue. Furthermore, the gig outlines the short term duration of the activities involved. This dimension of short term duration of the tasks applies more or less to both forms of platform-based work.

Quantitative research on the prevalence of platform workers show some puzzling results regarding the distribution of different aspects of workers across the globe (Berg, 2016). Especially in Europe the hypothesis of the precarious platform worker seems only to be a part of the truth (Huws et al., 2017). In the Alpine countries Austria, Italy and Switzerland a high occurrence of platform work was assessed. Platform work is booming in big cities, but also in more rural fields, in which national boundaries are crossed (e.g. on the border between Italy and Switzerland). One hypothesis is that the occurrence can be explained by migration or seasonal workers, which tend to cross borders. On the other side some results from the mentioned study (Huws et al., 2017) show that a great extent of platform workers is using it as a side income. In this case highly digitized people are using different forms of platform-based and other forms of income sources. So far – to our knowledge - no qualitative study has been investigating in depth who those platform workers are, how they identify with the new work form, what their social networking practices and their needs and motivations are to perform such kind of work activities.

The present applied research project studied gig workers at the biggest platform company in Switzerland (around 180'000 users inscribed). To assess worker personas data were analyzed from indepth interviews including the inquiry of worker biographies, their work related social network structures (cf. Herz, Peters, & Truschkat, 2014), as well as their identification with the new work form. 18 interviews of approx. 1.5 hours were realized. From the interviews worker skeletons were developed, which were then communicatively validated and further developed into worker personas in a workshop with involved platform workers (cf. Jacobs, Dreesen, & Pierson, 2008 for a similar procedure). The developed personas were then classified according to the stability of the work form as well as to social network structures and practices.

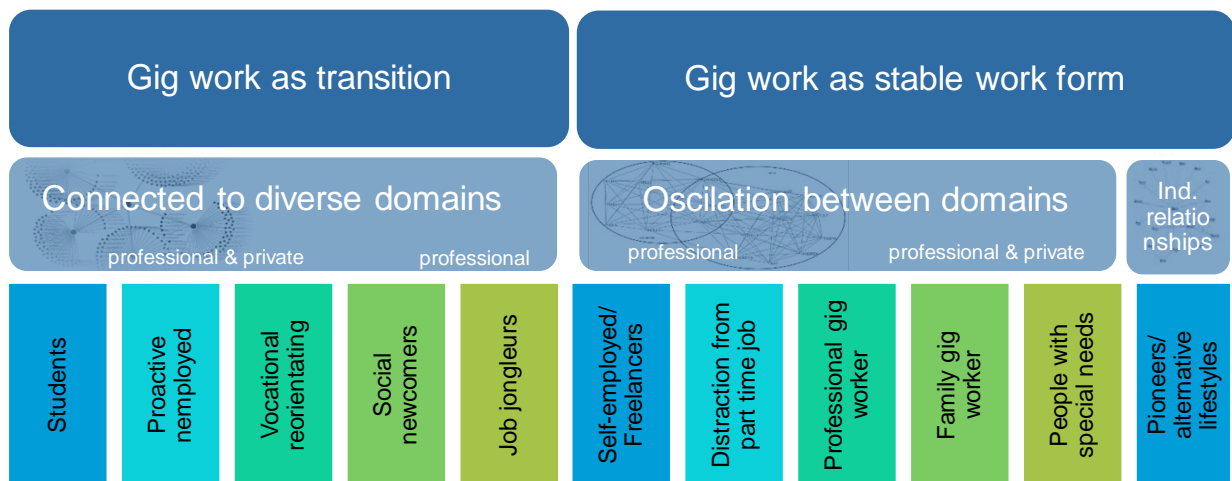


Figure 1: Classification of platform worker personas

The results show that platform workers can be differentiated according to the continuity in the perception of the work form. Gig workers seeing the work form as a transition phase in their vocational development can be distinguished from workers who have developed a mid- till long-term perspective in doing gig work (see fig. 1). The development of stable perceptions is related to oscillations between two or more network domains (work or private), which become central to respective worker identities. More stable worker identities include people who switch between different professional income modes (part time jobs, self-employed freelancers), and workers who see an opportunity to align work with private domains (e.g. family workers). Whereas workers in effective transition phases have reported network structures that involve an opening up towards different private as well as professional communities. For example, newly arriving migrant workers were identified, who were using platform work as an opportunity to enter the Swiss job market (social newcomers). The classification of personas can be interpreted as a model of individual career paths in a highly volatile, new job environment, where new worker identities emerge. From a practical business perspective, the results can be used to specifically target respective user groups, build worker communities for exchange and creation of shared worker identities as well as to enable a better cultural match between workers and employers.

Literature

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