

Global Essay Competition 2026

Title: Centring Coordination, Not Coercion: How to Unlock True Flexibility for Platform Workers by Replacing Punitive Pricing with Transparent, Consultative, and Redistributive Allocation

Essay:

Introduction

As the global gig digital economy continues to grow, with over 500 Internet-enabled platforms (World Bank Group, 2023) and 33% of workers engaging in gig activities (Hayes et al., 2019, p. 87), how can we ensure that this shift benefits all? How should our digital societies and economies adapt to the demographic wave of ageing populations, especially for visible, app-based, location-dependent, and on-demand gig work like food delivery and ride-hailing services? This essay evaluates the promise and pitfalls of algorithmic technologies allocating gigs on digital labour platforms. I argue that while the disruptive technology employed—dynamic pricing—was initially intended to reduce economic inefficiencies, its ‘just-in-time’ distribution and determination of prices without room for negotiation has also exacerbated the income insecurity of workers, even undervaluing the work of older or more experienced individuals on these platforms.

Our couriers and private-hire drivers deserve better. The mission to bring about fair work necessitates the fair use of technology. Against algorithmically assigned and non-consultative prices based on worker supply and performance rankings, I propose a shift towards worker-driven dynamic pricing rooted in clear and collectivised information provision and distributive choices, where workers have an instantaneous say in setting fair prices, requesting for redeployment, and shared earnings through tag-teaming. Here, platform work culture interdependencies are rewarded over individual optimisation. True flexibility is only possible when we weave equity, community, and social security into our future of work.

The promising potential of platform-mediated dynamic pricing

Flexibility is the key word fuelling platform work’s popularity. Especially in a climate where formal low-wage employment cannot guarantee a living wage, technologically mediated work requiring minimal skills or credentials will remain attractive to workers seeking scheduling flexibility and quick payouts. Platform work allows individuals to choose when and how often to work, accommodating their care responsibilities, work-limiting health conditions, and other needs (World Economic Forum, 2020). It also benefits firms hiring gig workers, who can adjust their workforce and minimise firm-financed social protection entitlements to employees as demand conditions fluctuate, reducing labour costs (De Stefano, 2016; Friedman, 2014).

Platform algorithmic technologies also promised the magic of immediacy and thus efficiency in the labour matching process by capturing and utilising data on preferences of the worker and service user (World Economic Forum, 2020). For instance, through features like Uber’s Surge or Lyft’s PrimeTime, dynamic pricing in ride-hailing meant algorithmically adjusted prices in real-time to smooth out driver supply and rider demand, offering higher prices when the density of free drivers in the vicinity is not high, hence reducing the estimated times of arrival (ETAs) (Freund & van Ryzin, 2025). Gone were the days of protracted pickup delays: This technological intervention in matching and determining prices was seen to revolutionize the logistics of these on-demand services.

The pitfalls when algorithms assign the final prices

On the flip side, such ‘dynamic pricing’ can be punitive, as it rewards workers who submit to being available during peak times, while those with limited or inconsistent availabilities due to caregiving

obligations for example, are penalised. Workers report that those with higher ratings on platform apps like UberEATS and Deliveroo are given preferential treatment, receiving more orders than others (Veen et al., 2020, p. 398). Workers' app usage frequency or responsiveness may be tracked, interpreted, and wielded against them by algorithms that may deprioritise some workers in favour of allocating work to reliable or more machine-like workers, which curtails the aggregate earnings potential of some workers.

Further, dynamic pricing interacts with other disciplinary performance management mechanisms that constrains the worker's free will to command fair prices for their labour. The irregular "hit frequencies" of per-ride gigs and payment leads to unpredictability, long wait-times, and uncertainty about the repercussions of them rejecting an ill-timed offer (van Doorn, 2020, pp. 4-5). Through metrics like maintaining high gig acceptance rates, the fear of potential account suspension or deactivation may force workers to accept unprofitable and inconvenient gigs, thus compromising their autonomy (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Although the European Parliament (2024) has voted to pass rules to prevent algorithms from automatically dismissing platform workers, this rule that mandates human oversight before any termination does not challenge the metrics used by the platform to define 'poor' performance and justify grounds for 'legitimate' dismissal.

Accentuated demographic vulnerabilities for older and ageing platform workers

Low-skilled workers were once able to benefit from rising manufacturing productivity, wages, and technological advancements, but are today largely in low-value service sectors with limited productivity growth and subject to poverty wages (Bonoli, 2005, p. 434). Digital platform labour, with no clear cause for raising remuneration outside the need to balance labour supply and ride/delivery demand, runs into a similar pattern of stagnant earnings and stalled progression.

While the barrier to entry for platform work is not high and can be useful for older workers or retirees seeking additional income, the nature of platform work can cause the earnings potential of experienced workers to plateau or even decline over time. Using Uber ride-hailing data, Cook et al. (2019) finds that in contrast to increasing age-earnings profiles observed in standard employment, age and experience are not valued under gig platform labour remuneration models: earnings do not vary with age for those aged 20 to 40, even decreasing with age after 40 (p. 373). With every gig completed, there is no clear trajectory for advancement. Algorithmically derived fares may vary within a band of range but largely remains at the same level regardless of an individual's loyalty to the platform, familiarity with the processes, or productivity, which not only undermines long-term retirement savings accumulations for younger workers dependent on digital labour platforms, but also disadvantages older workers when algorithms calculate and assign lower compensation.

Proposed changes

(A) Prioritise agency in data use, providing transparent and timely information transmission.

Platform workers want to understand how algorithmic technologies function and make decisions on order allocation, frequency, and fee calculation (Gallagher et al., 2023, p. 32). Rather than a hoarding of information as private property currently done by profit-oriented and oligopolistic platforms, Jordan (2020, p. 164) envisions digital industries where collectivised information acts as distributive property that support community-beneficial industries. Radical data transparency can enhance worker welfare and promote collective wellbeing by informing advocacy and potential policy changes: for instance, each time a gig is offered to a worker, information about how many other workers is also receiving and seeing it should also be communicated in real-time and support the worker's learning of spatiotemporal demand. In another example, assuming consent was given, based on the profiles of recently injured workers, recommendations about the maximum number of hours an average driver or rider can work consecutively prior to fatigue—a risk factor for accidents—can be formulated to guide the design of 'gentle reminder' notifications that nudge drivers to take breaks for their safety.

(B) Expand manoeuvrability by transferring final price determination from algorithms to workers.

With algorithm-led dynamic pricing, ETAs are theoretically shortened, but in practice, this centralised process of distributing gigs and determining prices may not be the most efficient as consumers can strategic wait for the platform to offer lower prices (Freund & van Ryzin, 2025). Meanwhile, worker-determined pricing enables drivers to respond to ride requests with their own price bids, and clients can choose the best offer. Algorithms that coordinate the offers sent and received still exist—the difference is that the ‘last call’ on the price charged is not for the algorithm to make. As drivers and users go back and forth, suggesting fare revisions or moving on to other offers, the pricing model is rendered *truly* dynamic at every given point. Such a model is already operational on platforms like Pathao, where drivers avoid unprofitable rides instead of a single price allocation, and clients choose from multiple drivers instead of a single driver allocation. By rethinking algorithms as social and relational systems, rather than rigid control mechanisms (Gallagher et al., 2023, p. 23), their coordinating capabilities, not coercive capabilities can be fully utilized to benefit both workers and consumers.

(C) Invent and icentivise a community of care by conceiving opportunities for interconnected and inclusive ‘teamwork’ via neighbourhood units and top-ups for value-added members.

How should these workers be better supported and engaged? Autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential (Hayes et al., 2019, p. 48). We must first remove penalizing performance metrics that may arbitrarily curtail the level of monetary compensation or the number of gigs sent to food delivery riders and private-hire drivers. We should then incentivize service delivery efficiencies as achieved by team-based gig distribution and redeployment. A study suggests that allocating platform tasks on a ‘first-come, first-serve’ basis is inefficient—changing algorithms to allow workers to self-schedule hourly working slots can raise productivity, service quality, flexibility and worker well-being (Guha, 2023). Essentially, the best work is done when a worker is most willing and able to do so. I propose allowing workers to transfer tasks and trade offers. This means that even after a successful match between a service user and the worker, a separate courier, for example, can sent a request to take up the responsibility of completing the task or switch roles. Similarly, should the tasked worker not want to complete certain orders in their middle of ‘order-batching’ where workers fulfil multiple orders in one journey, they can ‘re-offer’ the task at a partial-value rate and receive help from others.

Ideally, such allocation reversibility is structured through neighbourhood units based on a worker’s frequented vicinity. Over time, these ‘tag-teaming’ exchanges form social network data that would reveal key nodes, edges, bridges, and links between workers that are more active in helping one another or providing crucial services to underserved localities. A remuneration structure based on overall team performance, rather than individual speed or hours worked, can also reward key players—usually older or more experienced platform workers—that provide crucial support during task reshuffling, thus rewarding positive contributions to community-building and overall service quality. These tag-teaming groups can also foster social bonding and mutual aid among workers.

Limitations and considerations

Instead of extraction, we must design true flexibility and adjustability, where older and more experienced workers are not disadvantaged, but compensated from their contributions to the open, participatory, and community-centred data and people network. This is just a sketch of how Internet-enabled platform work opportunities with low barriers to entry can be initially reformed to resist the centripetal force of growing economic precariousness, such that we reverse and defy the currently dominant dynamic of returns to nonstandard work arrangements as a race to the bottom. Not every service user may be agreeable to these changes. Expectations management and communication of these values-driven service provision, especially through ground-up consultations with relevant stakeholders, must also be conducted.

There are also concerns about the gig economy entrenching underemployment when the skills of workers on digital labour platforms are poorly matched to the actual delivery or ride-hailing service

they are engaged in, or how deliberate human capital investment for sustainable economic development is difficult when a large proportion of the population are stuck in low-skilled and low-paying jobs. Active labour market policies aimed at promoting better job matching or creating job opportunities that would incentivise or complement ongoing upskilling efforts is also necessary. However, service-based workers, however 'low-skilled' are still largely essential infrastructural labour that cannot be eliminated from the economy, and so my proposed interventions complement other policies addressing the intersection between demography and the changing nature of digital economic work.

Conclusion

The outcome of 'flexible' platform labour being exposed to blunt force of economic precariousness should not be a predicament that we come to unquestioningly accept. Instead, we need true platforms that carve out a space for coordination and collaboration based on the organised ideals of consent and care, not confusion and coercion.

In the context of ageing populations and the age-intolerant nature of platform work, I argue that we can minimise the harms of digitally enabled work on workers' income security by placing the valuation of their on-demand services outside the bounds of mechanistic dynamic pricing algorithms. The algorithms used should instead focus on worker-driven allocation, bidding, and redistribution, which would not only maximise aggregate welfare, but also preserve the benefits of platform-enabled services so long as clear communication avenues to service users, productive consultations with service providers, and incentives for community building are centred and maintained.

Economic efficiency is still possible, if not enhanced, when people, and not profit, is prioritised. By adopting a human-centric choice architecture that effectively organises synergistic solidarities between working groups, we can make technology work for us and our changing populations, and not the other way round.

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