

GHOST WORK

How to Stop Silicon Valley
from Building a New
Global Underclass

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Many of India's on-demand workers are wary of unscrupulous companies. Most of the country's workers have a personal or family experience of being bamboozled by a fly-by-night contracting agency that made big promises but fell short in providing paid work. For instance, in the 1990s, a spate of call centers opened in the country. The companies would hire Indian workers and then disappear three weeks later, leaving unfulfilled promises of paychecks in their wake. That experience has left many young people like Lijo suspicious of online jobs that may be phishing for information or trying to fool them into working for free.

Pundits both champion and criticize the flexibility in these labor markets. Champions see flexibility as the saving grace of the new economy, while critics curse flexibility as a source of downward pressure on wages in the sector. Again and again, those doing ghost work are told what an amazing perk it is that they can work anytime, anywhere.⁵ But more often than not, this so-called perk masks the reality of online work. The most hypervigilant workers, those always looking for the next task, are the most rewarded. In practice, on-demand requesters and the algorithms behind labor platforms automatically generate quick-turnaround deadlines for jobs, even when the work isn't time sensitive or a worker's availability — beyond turning an app on or off — could be added to the decision-making mix. That artificially imposed time squeeze means workers must constantly scan for jobs, especially if they want lucrative opportunities, which get snapped up quickly. In reality, flexibility is a myth. Instead of the utopian vision of an endless stream of online work that a person can dip into between other pursuits, on-demand labor more closely resembles the infamous *I Love Lucy* television comedy sketch with Lucy and Ethel working on the assembly line at a chocolate factory. As they scramble to keep pace, the pace of work comes faster and faster.⁶

Our research shows that workers take advantage of chances to control their time.⁷ We paid MTurk workers to categorize a batch of Amazon product reviews as positive or negative, which could be done in less than 30 seconds each. One-third of the workers had to do each categorization within one minute (no flexibility), one-third had to do each categorization within one hour (some flexibility), and one-third had to do each categorization within one day (lots of flexibility). Workers in each group were given the same number of tasks, and workers were randomly assigned to each group. When given more time to finish a task and gain more flexibility over their schedules, MTurk workers took it.

Recall that MTurk workers can accept tasks and then hold them in their queue to work on at a later time. On average, workers with an extra hour on the clock would start work 17 seconds after accepting it. But workers with a day to turn around tasks would start work slightly more than four minutes after accepting it. At first glance, the difference between 17 seconds and four minutes might not seem that large, but imagine how you'd feel if the longest you could step away from your computer was 17 seconds. Four minutes gives workers like Natalie and Diane the chance to answer a phone call, check on a napping newborn, go to the bathroom, or focus on other, more pressing work and not worry that this job will be taken by another worker. Furthermore, as we gave workers a longer amount of time to complete the task, once workers started the categorizing, they would do more work before taking a break and take a shorter break once they did. Workers, when given more control of their time, spend it wisely, taking breaks as needed and then sitting down and cranking it out when the time fits their schedules. "Flexibility" is an empty euphemism unless workers are able to set and control their schedules on their own terms.

Re-creating the Social Side of Work

On-demand platforms operate as though individuals can do their work effectively without any support from others. Not a “thank you” or “good job!” or “have you thought of doing that differently next time?” But these unexamined, pernicious assumptions unravel when you talk to on-demand workers. Workers re-create social work environments to encourage one another’s progress and development. They mingle in online forums that function much like the brick-and-mortar break room. And they empathize with, commiserate with, and confide in their peers.

Akbar, 19, lives in Hyderabad. He is a cricket enthusiast. He has worked on MTurk for two years and often swaps information about requesters when he sees his local friends at the neighborhood mosque. “We discuss MTurk for five to ten minutes, sharing who worked on what and what jobs were good and what jobs weren’t . . . Later, when we go back to work . . . we keep chatting on Skype or Facebook. We talk and even video chat.” Akbar and his fellow workers also help to keep one another motivated and awake. On-demand labor is an industry driven by U.S. and European time zones, which means most Indian workers work nights. To fill the long, dark early-morning hours, Akbar turns to his friends. “If you have to work throughout the night,” he says, “you plug in earphones, put the phone to charge, and talk all night.” Akbar spends most of his time talking with his friend Mohsin, because “we both use Aircel [mobile phone service] and it’s free to call between Aircel numbers, so we talk a lot.”

Watercooler 2.0

On its surface, on-demand labor looks atomized, ephemeral, and contingent. But upon closer inspection, it's clear that digital labor depends on workers collaborating to shore up one another's support and participation. We found that on-demand workers collaborate to reduce overhead costs, to get work done, and to re-create much-needed social aspects of work. We even found them using their professional social networks to collectively organize. Collaboration is more than an immediate, prag-

matic attempt to compensate for a broken technical system. Rather, it reflects the value that people assign to social connections in work environments and their willingness to tenaciously build them into their work lives, even when it works against their earning potential. The kindness and collaborations of workers helping one another are, arguably, the digital economy's most valuable ingredient. Yet most ghost work platforms seem determined to delete it.

Purposefully or not, creators of on-demand labor platforms take aim at workers' social worlds by presuming that workers connecting is a waste of time that slows things down and is therefore worthless. The mantra of "less talk, more work" through the magic of automation seems synonymous with "scaling up" and, ultimately, market dominance in delivering goods and services on demand. Platform designers assume that better-matching algorithms, atomization of work, and the complete elimination of hands-on management are key to reducing the search costs that come with labor markets, for both buyers and sellers.

We argue that companies cannot eliminate workers' desire to invest in their jobs as something beyond a payment transaction. No system can erase workers' needs for connection, validation, recognition, and feedback without damaging both the worker and what they produce. The widespread and varied reliance on collaboration we discovered — from friends who call one another when a good job comes online to a husband-and-wife team who split tasks according to their strengths to a worker who makes a cheat sheet of quick key commands for a friend who tapes it on the wall next to his desk — all speak to the social fabric that binds work relationships.