

Islamic Banking, Accounting And Finance International Conference– The 9th iBAF 2020

Gig Economy: The Promise of Platform Work

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Abstract

The International Labor Organization defines gig work as a task-based job with higher presence in an online labor platforms. Gig workers are part-time workers or freelancers offering their jobs and services via platform economy. The recent COVID-19 financial crisis has highlighted the fact that gig workers do not receive benefits and perks associated with permanent jobs. This study explores the future direction of gig economy in Malaysia. A survey questionnaire was carried out to students and alumni from the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia in June until September 2020 based on purposive sampling. The results suggest that most of the respondents have at one point, during the Movement Control Order period, involved in gig jobs such as dropship, courier services and food delivery. In general, the respondents perceived that gig works contribute to the economy. However, it is important for the gig workers to continue the process of upskilling and reskilling themselves to remain competitive. For the employers, benefits such as social security contributions and medical benefits should be provided to gig workers accordingly. Policy makers may utilize the information of how the traditional labor market is disrupted by the gig economy, raise awareness on the different expectations of both employers and employees, and devise appropriate strategies to support gig economy as an enabler of growth post-pandemic period.

Keywords: gig workers, gig economy, traditional jobs, digital economy, platform work

1. Introduction

Gig economy is identified as a new source of economic growth and would be made part of the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021-2025) as announced by the government in early 2019. The word 'gig' used to be associated with performing artists hired for short-term engagements. The word gig later was identified with any job that is on an *ad hoc* or temporary basis. Examples of gig jobs are freelancers, project-based workers, independent contractors and part-time hires. The latest trend is professionals are starting to offer their services as well such as journalism and copywriting and legal consultation. Gig economy flourishes because remote working, technological advancement such as virtual meetings and co-working spaces, makes hiring freelancers a norm in the human resources industry.

McKinsey & Company recent report indicates that the gig economy is predicted to contribute USD2.7 trillion by 2025 to the world, or two percent to the global economy. In Malaysia, according to the World Bank data, about 26

percent of the total of 15.3 million Malaysian workforces are freelancers and the trend is increasing. That is approximately close to four million freelancers.

However, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the dark side of Gig economy. The biggest concerns are welfare considerations and financial safety nets for gig jobs. Unlike salaried employees, gig workers generally do not have company covered insurance plans. Thus, they have to bear the cost if there is a job related accident. Those in gig economy run the risk of being mistreated or disadvantaged by employers. Without a policy in place to address such issues, the expansion of the gig economy could create financial instability, which then poses more serious socio-economic and political issues in the long run for the country. Should gig workers decide to switch for traditional jobs, it would fail to become the new engine of growth post-pandemic crisis. The present work is motivated by the fact that the Gig economy is introducing a new market structure and bargaining power into the labor market. It disrupts the traditional employer-employee relationships and permanent employment status. The expectation is that gig jobs are going to be the new normal and the future of work. Therefore, it is important for those involve in gig economy sector to understand how the new labor market functions.

The paper contains five sections. After the Introduction, Section 2 covers literature review. Section 3 explains research method and Section 4 continues with the discussion on results and analysis. Section 5 concludes the discussion with some policy recommendations.

2. Background

Gig economy refers to a labor market characterized by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work as opposed to permanent jobs. Examples of gig employees are freelancers, independent contractors, project-based workers and or part-time hires. A recent study predicted that by 2020, 40 percent of American workers would be independent contractors. In Asia, the number of gig workers is growing and their incomes are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the crisis highlights their lack of protections like health care, sick leave, workers' compensation, and stable pay. These workers have no benefits and financial safety nets as compared to permanent employees.

In recent years, the share of jobs that do not involve a formal employer-employee relationship is increasing. The term gig economy refers to these less structured work arrangements and flexible jobs mediated through various online platforms. This is also known as non-traditional work arrangements. The trend of working online from home is on the rise, as COVID-19 pandemic requires governments to impose mandatory work-from-home (WFH) policies. The switch to remote digital work will change the way people work. Gig jobs are prevalent among younger generations because they can offer their services through apps and websites worldwide and not be hindered by geographical locations. The gig economy thrives when there is massive unemployment or underemployment.

Gig workers' rights and benefits, including healthcare and access to unemployment, have become key topics for governments. It remains to be seen if the recent health crisis will change the future of gig economy. Gig jobs are impacted by the pandemic as it stops businesses and stalled payments. Many gig workers now become frontliners in delivery industry as customers stay at home. Food delivery, Grab drivers and e-hailing drivers, for examples, are among those still able to work. Other freelancers such as wedding organizers are not able to operate at all.

3. Recent trend in the Gig Economy Literature

The recent interest in non-traditional work arrangements reflects the new structure and organization of work that is having important effects on both workers and firms. Making a similar point, Hurst and Pugsley (2011), for example,

argue that self-employed workers enjoy substantial non-pecuniary benefits in the form of being one's own boss, enjoying flexible hours and so on. However, there are gig workers who do not enjoy the legal rights and protections afforded under the unemployment insurance system, the workers compensation system and other benefits received by permanent workers.

The literature on the state of knowledge in understanding and measuring the rise of the gig economy is limited. Identifying the key attributes that characterize different forms of non-employee work, such as independent contractors, self-employed business owners, on call workers, temporary help agency workers, and seasonal workers, help us close in on the traits of jobs that are most consistent with gig work.

Since gig workers represent a substantial number of workforces, the government is looking for ways to ensure better social protection for them. According to a survey by Zurich Insurance in early 2020, 38 percent of Malaysians will join the gig economy in 2021. At present, 2.2 million gig workers have registered with the Malaysian Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC). Ultimately it would widen the income gap between the rich and the poor, and affect the country's social support infrastructure to address the needs of an ageing population. The gig economy does provide a short-term solution for economic woes, but empirical evidence is required to show its sustainability in the long run. Therefore, is there a need to regulate the gig economy to put in place some protection measure to ensure the well-being of gig workers, for now and in the future.

4. Advantages and Disadvantages of Gig Economy

Gig economy benefits consumers because there are a lot of choices available. It benefits large organisations due to job flexibility and lower cost of productions. For the workers, they enjoy working hours flexibility, good salary and freedom to choose the type of work. Some of them have the benefits of receiving cash upfront instead of having to wait till the end of each month. The New Strait Times reported that in Malaysia, there are 13,000 Foodpanda and 10,000 Grab Food riders in the Klang Valley. People take many different jobs to earn more income. The workforce has changed in the last decade where younger generations, who are technology-savvy, prefer to work independently. The gig jobs are mostly occupied by students, unemployed and fresh graduates seeking jobs. The younger generations are less concerned on having savings for retirement purposes.

Among other advantages of gig jobs is greater flexibility in completing jobs, greater independence in performing the task, more employment opportunities and reduce transportation costs because work can be performed at home. However, they do not receive benefits such as social security, pensions, health care or medical leave. High level of isolation, greater possibility of being mistreated, uncertain payment structure and less possibility of building a career are other disadvantages facing them (Gaile, 2019).

As for the firms hiring temporary workers, they have to carefully plan how the temporary staffs are going to fit in the future planning of the company. Even though the hiring firms can benefit in terms of not having to provide physical office building or human resource department, temporary workers might be less reliable. Besides, it would be harder to recruit upper-level and executive management positions in the long run (Gaile, 2019).

5. Current Issues in Gig Economy

The demand and supply for gig jobs are instantly communicated through sharing information and opportunities from work in digital environment via apps. However, the study by Price Water Cooperhouse revealed that the gig economy might place these workers into skills and career traps. Temporary or part-time positions they hold prevent

them from developing solid skills or build an in-depth expertise, which can offer a more positive career path. In addition, these temporary jobs would leave them unable to have precautionary savings to help them in time of need.

Some gig economy organizations, especially ride-sharing and food-delivery services, have raised public concerns on skills and retirement plans. Although the gig economy freelancers are offered independence and flexibility in working hours, they are not entitled to company-sponsored retirement. In addition, another issues are low-skilled level jobs have little or no future prospect for career advancement. Gig workers with higher level of education may be in a situation of skills mismatch or fall under the underemployed category. Others include irregular workloads and getting paid on time by different employers which would build up stress level.

Unlike full time workers who receive benefits in the form of the Employees Provident Fund (a mandatory retirement scheme by the Malaysian government), financial safety, pensions, insurance coverage, among others, gig workers do not have such privileges. This is because those who form part of the gig economy are often registered as vendors by businesses that hire them for their services. As the gig economy expanding alongside traditional jobs market, it remains to be seen whether the gig economy will replace traditional jobs.

6. Methodology

This study conducted a preliminary study on alumni and students of the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) during April until mid-August 2020. The purpose of the survey is to gather preliminary information on the level of awareness among the younger generation on the usage and future expectation of platform economy. The respondents are selected among those who have access to the Internet and have been using platform services at least once during the Movement Control Order (MCO) period and its subsequent extension lock down period of 18 March until August 31, 2020. The instruments were pilot-tested and validated by peer experts prior to the distribution.

The questionnaires were distributed based on purposive sampling to 100 students and alumni of USIM via google survey form. The response rate was 54 percent. The Survey questionnaire has two sections and contained 20 questions. Section 1 collects information on the demographic background while Section 2 asks questions related to gig economy and gig jobs. The Survey instrument was adapted from the work of Abraham et al. (2016) and Kassi and Lehnorverta (2016). In addition, there are three respondents who were interviewed in early April until June 2020 to get their feedbacks and wider perspectives on gig economy.

The descriptive analysis of the survey conducted is shown in Table 1. The respondents are mainly female (63 percent), below 25 year old, single and receive tertiary education. Most of them are still studying and earn less than RM2,500 per month. Majority of them reside in the central, northern and southern part of Peninsular Malaysia.

The jobs that most of them have been involved-in are dropship, food delivery, courier services, consultation and tutoring or editing. The reasons why they have taken part-time jobs are mostly to cover daily expenses, to be used as savings and to gain experience. Majority of them earn less than RM100 per week performing various tasks. Approximately 27 percent of them earn between RM101 to RM200 per week doing part time jobs. Almost half of them think part-time jobs will replace permanent jobs in the future. Majority of the respondents think that part-time jobs help them go through the difficult period of COVID-19 crisis and they agree that gig jobs will contribute to the economy and have a promising future.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Demographic status	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	20	37
Female	34	63
Total	54	100
Age (years)		
Below 25	40	74.1
26 – 35	14	25.9
Total	54	100
Marital Status		
Married	6	11.1
Single	48	88.9
Total	54	100
Household		
4 people or less	4	37
5 - 7 people	24	44.4
More than 7 people	10	18.5
Total	54	100
Job Sector		
Private	17	31.5
Further Study	29	53.8
Self-Employed	4	7.4
Government	2	3.7
Looking for job	2	3.8
Total	54	100
Salary per month (RM)		
Less than 2,500	43	79.6
2,501 – 3,000	6	11.1
3,001 – 5,000	4	7.4
More than 5,000	1	1.9
Total	54	100
Geographical location		
North (Perlis, Kedah, Perak & Penang)	12	22.2
Central (Selangor, WP & Putrajaya)		
South (Johor, Melaka & Negeri Sembilan)	22	40.7
East Coast (Pahang, Kelantan & Terengganu)	12	22.2
Sabah, Sarawak & Labuan		
Total	6	11.1
	2	3.7
	54	100
Education		
Degree	44	81.5
Master	5	9.3
SPM	3	5.6
Diploma	2	3.7
Total	54	100
You provide the following services during MCO besides your permanent job.		
Food delivery		
House cleaning	10	18.5
Tutoring	0	0
Personal shopper	7	13
Dropship	2	4.9
Personal assistance	26	48.1
Designing	3	5.6
Baby sitting	1	1.9

None	1	1.9
Total	16	29.6
	54	100
You provide the following services to self-employed individual or company.		
Consultation on a project		
Editing work	7	14.6
Maintenance or repair	9	18.8
Dropship	2	4.2
Setting/Maintaining a computer system	24	50
Courier services	0	0
Administration		
None	5	10.4
Total	1	2.1
	6	12.5
	48	100
You provide ride sharing services such as Grab and Uber.		
Yes	9	17
No	43	81.1
None	1	1.9
Total	53	100
You have assisted with medical, marketing and/or other researches.		
Yes	7	13.5
No	44	84.6
None	1	1.9
Total	52	100
You have posted video, blog, or other contents online, such as You Tube that generates income or commission.		
Yes		
No	7	17.1
None	33	80.5
Total	1	2.4
	42	100
You do other types of informal work or part-time job (please specify)		
Agent for printing company		
Research Assistant	1	4.2
Design	2	8.3
Grabfood	2	8.3
Dropship	2	8.3
Selling dessert	2	8.3
Waiter	1	4.2
Child care	1	4.2
Fasilitator	1	4.2
None	1	4.2
Runner	6	25.2
Stockist	1	4.2
BB Bed & Breakfast	2	8.3
Work From Home	1	4.2
Total	1	4.2
	24	100
I do part time job because		
Help family	3	6.1
Cover daily expenses	10	20.4
Pay for education	5	10.2
Savings	13	26.5
Hobby	1	2
To gain experience	9	18.4

To increase net worth	2	5.3
Networking	2	4
None	3	6.1
Total	49	100
Your average earning from all part-time jobs per week (RM).		
Less than 100	26	54.2
101-200	13	27.1
201-300	4	8.3
301 and above	5	10.4
Total	48	100
You acquire new skills while working part-time.		
Yes	38	77.6
No	3	6.1
Not Sure	3	6.1
Maybe in future	5	10.2
Total	49	100
Part-time jobs will replace permanent jobs in the future.		
Yes	21	42
No	8	16
Not Sure	21	42
Total	50	100
Part-time jobs (gig workers) helps during COVID-19 situation.		
Yes	38	96
No	0	0
Not Sure	2	4
Total	50	100
Part-time jobs (gig workers) is the future economic trend.		
Yes	43	87.8
No	2	4.1
Not Sure	4	8.2
Total	49	100

Notes: Figures may not tally because respondents can tick more than one answer.

Source: Survey, 2020.

Based on Table 2, majority of the respondents are from the central and southern regions of the country. Women are more optimistic of the possibility that gig economy would contribute to economic growth (61.54%). However, almost the same number of both male and female freelancers are not sure about whether gig economy could be growth enhancing. Looking at average earnings per week, in general, men are earning more than women. There is a higher number of women in the 'less than RM100' and 'RM301 and above' category, suggesting a possible inequality in income earning based on gender. This situation might lead to a K-shaped economic recovery post COVID-19, in which income inequality will be wider among professionals and low-skill workers as well as between gender.

Table 2: Geographical Location, Perception and Average Weekly Earnings Based on Gender

	Central (Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan & Putrajaya)	East Coast (Terengganu, Kelantan, Pahang)	North (Perlis, Kedah, Penang & Perak)	South (Johor, Negeri Sembilan & Melaka)	Sabah, Sarawak & Labuan
Gender	percentage (%)				
Male	19.48	5.19	6.49	11.69	1.30

Female	25.97	7.79	10.39	10.39	1.30
Do you think gig economy will contribute to economic growth? (%)					
Gender	Yes	No	Not Sure		
Male	38.46	58.33	47.22		
Female	61.54	41.67	52.78		
Average weekly earnings from all part-time jobs (RM)					
Gender	Less than RM100	RM101-RM200	RM201 - RM300	RM301 and above	
Male	13	10	2	4	
Female	21	5	1	6	

Source: Survey, 2020.

There are also interviews conducted in April until June 2020 to three respondents who have been doing part-time jobs before the MCO was implemented and have continued to do so until present. One of them is below 30 years old and another two respondents are in their early 30s and early 40s. Two of them received tertiary education. Below are their descriptions on how gig jobs are affecting them during the MCO period. From the responses, skills and willingness to upgrade themselves in their respective field of business are key factors that will help them go through the crisis period.

Respondent 1, who has a Bachelor degree in English language from a foreign university, has been conducting tuition classes during weekend with minimum fees charged as part of his community work. He also has some skills in cooking, and take-up orders from his colleagues at the school he is currently teaching. Below is his response towards the income earned doing part-time jobs. He is in his early 30s and work as an English teacher in a government school in Perak.

“Since I have my day job, I continue with home tutorials for primary and secondary school students who cannot afford to pay online tuition fees. I continue to do so during MCO, but I give them discount. Some of them do not have computer and access to Internet at home. Some have only one computer and they have to share with their siblings. I also provide dinner and lunch to them, if they take more than three subjects with me. I teach English, Mathematics and Sciences mostly for primary school children. My intention is more to helping them. I consider this as my social work, helping the community in the time of crisis.”

Respondent 1, Bachelor in English Language

Respondent two is in his early 20s, male and single and resides in Selangor. He receives formal education up to Form Three Assessment. Afterwards, he opted for home schooling. Since young, he has been working with his father at their family’s car workshop and is quite skillful in repairing motorcycles and cars. He has been working at various places and will repair his friends’ motorcycles whenever he has free times. Below is his perception on gig jobs.

“The competition is stiff in the food delivery service. Some of the orders come from different locations and all of them want their order to be delivered as quickly as possible. During MCO, it is difficult to earn even less than what

we usually earn before this. But since I live with my family and all my sisters are already married, the MCO has not been affecting me much. Besides, before this I help my father repair car and motorcycle at home. So from time to time, I repair my friends' bike so I earned some money. But my mother, who take care of our neighbors' children, are affected since parents do not send their children during MCO since they can work from home."

Respondent 2, Secondary Education

The third Respondent is in his early 40s, married with two children and lives in Penang. He works in a private construction business and do part-time job as Grab driver during weekend and public holidays. His response is recorded below.

"I have been involved in the platform economy for quite some time now, even before the COVID-19 period. I have business online and I also offer Grab services. The online business selling traditional medicine is having low sales during MCO period. But since I have regular customers, the business can sustain. For the Grab services, I experience people moving office equipment such as chairs and computers home to work from home (WFH). I learn how to keep up in the online business and make great efforts to keep good ratings for my services. I also read and learn. Even during my spare time, for example when I go fishing, I will ask for business advice from the other person sitting next to me. For the Grab services, I usually get business tips from European tourists. It is good that I can converse in English. At the beginning of the MCO period, I was jobless for about one and a half month, luckily my wife works in the essential electronic industry. So our family can survive. I have two daughters. I also take care of my mother in-law who lives nearby since she is quite old and on medication due to diabetes.

Respondent 3, Diploma in Mechanical Engineering

7. Results and Discussion

Gig works can be divided in two; first based on geographical location which requires workers to be in a particular place; and second, the online platform which refers to work that can be completed remotely via a computer, or the digital nomad. From the survey conducted, most of the respondents are doing unskilled gig jobs, with the exception of a few. Therefore, they can up-skilled and reskilled themselves and move into either semi-skilled or medium-level skilled jobs. Fiscal stimulus targeting the gig economy workers should focus on this aspect.

Some of the survey respondents are not aware of the changing patterns of jobs market and how gig jobs would affect the labor market in the future. Their responses also indicate that they are not aware of the monopoly power of the employers and the debate surrounding the rights of gig workers in more advanced economies such as Europe and the United States. In China, for example, the MCO period has seen that millions of unemployed gig workers are not able to switch to traditional jobs at will. The European countries, considered as pro-employees, are voicing out concerns on the welfare aspect of the new economy that is digital based. However, the interviews-based responses highlight the importance of planning for the future and the strong family support to get through the crisis period. One particular aspect from the interviews that should be highlighted is that all three of them have other skills and they take time to acquire new skills to be able to offer better services and remain competitive. They are also having a good social network, which would enable them to continue working in a healthy working environment. This is because one of the main disadvantages of performing gig jobs are they do not have the physical contact with others, thus missing daily office exchanges which will lead to loneliness.

There is also a recent movement by multinationals and big corporations to enter the labor market. These corporate gigs have been investing in providing sharing working spaces for the digital nomads. Digital nomads refer to those

who work remotely. WeWork business model, a pioneer in coworking space, is one example, where in 2017, Japanese company was investing billions in sharing economy with planned offices in Tokyo, Shanghai and Singapore to capture the digital nomads in Asia. They believe this approach will redefine a new wave of productivity around the world. The digital nomads have found a new wealth, not in terms of money, but wealth in terms of time and space. The younger generation concept of working is not the 9 to 5 hours of traditional jobs, but their lifestyles define their jobs. Flexibility is the bottom line for the gig economy workers.

The COVID-19 crisis highlights gig workers lack of protections like health care, sick leave, workers' compensation, and stable pay. The Gig economy does provide a short-term solution for economic woes, but more evidence is required to ensure sustainable footing. Therefore, there is a need to regulate the Gig economy and to provide some protection measures to the workers. The recent health crisis has put a spotlight on gig workers. If gig economy is expected to be the new engine of growth, social protections should be provided to them.

In Malaysia, there is a plan to include the provisions for gig workers benefits in the Twelfth Malaysia Plan (2021 to 2025). Several initiatives are undertaken to leverage on Gig economy since it currently represents about four million jobs in the country. There are empirical evidences from researchers stating that digital platform jobs do contribute to economic growth. For instance, the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) report suggests that digital economy could add between one-third and two-thirds of one percent to the growth rate of the United Kingdom economy.

8. Conclusion

The study conducted a preliminary survey to examine the perception towards Gig economy and gig jobs. The findings indicate that in general, the respondents agree that part-time gig jobs help them survive during the pandemic. Furthermore, the part-time work has a promising future and it does contribute to the economy.

The World Bank estimated that for every one month of MCO, economy would shrink by 2.5 percent. The crisis impacted all sectors in the economy, including gig workers that formed the Gig economy. Gig jobs are prevalent among younger generations because they can offer their services through apps and websites worldwide and not be hindered by geographical locations. The gig economy thrives when there is massive unemployment or underemployment. To gig workers, freedom is a new form of wealth. Provision of gig workers benefits similar to permanent jobs will ensure they stay in the industry, thus help the economy achieve the intended growth rate. Re-Skilling and up-skilling, especially in low-skilled gig jobs, will help sustain gig economy's contribution as a new source of sustainable and inclusive growth.

Gig workers increased during 2007 global financial crisis, and now they represent a third of the workforce. A consulting firm in New York predicts that by 2030, it will increase to 80 percent. They provide the so-called 'liquid workforce' with their knowledge organized via the Internet or the digital earning platform. The United States Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates that digital economy grew by an average of 5.6 percent per year from 2006 to 2016 compared to 1.5 percent growth in the overall economy. The gig workers accounts for four percent of total US employment. This is comparable to industries such as finance and insurance and transportation. This trend will continue with the 5G technology where by the end of 2020, 70 percent of the world population will have a smartphone and business models and work culture will have to adapt to flexible work arrangements. For the policymakers, labor laws in terms of work permits and taxable income for the digital nomads have to be overhauled.

Acknowledgements

The research is funded by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia, USIM COVID-19 Research Grant: PPPI/COVID19_0120/FEM/051000/13520.

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