



New forms of employment

Crowd employment, UK

Case study 27: Taskhub

Crowd employment platforms are a relatively new phenomenon in the UK. This case study examines Taskhub.co.uk established in 2012 to provide a crowd employment platform which functions as an online marketplace for tasks and services in and around London.

Introduction

Crowd employment platforms are a relatively new phenomena in the UK. Their very nature (virtual, digital) means that exactly when and where they have emerged is difficult to pinpoint. This is because crowd employment platforms can operate in one region (such as the UK) while the parent company is registered and based elsewhere. The fairly rapid emergence of crowdsourcing means that, as with many waves of ‘new technology’, there has typically been widespread speculation about its potential economic and social impact.

Given the newness and ‘footloose’ nature of crowdsourcing, there is no central register in the UK and no legislation or regulation that specifically covers crowd employment platforms.

Indicative of this lack of understanding is the example of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. Although it prides itself on its expertise in the digital sector, it has no specialists in this field and limited knowledge of key players such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Crowdfunder, and other popular sites. This is why empirical research can provide a grounded understanding and assessment of crowd employment platforms, such as Taskhub (www.taskhub.co.uk).

Taskhub has generated a significant amount of media interest because it taps into popular concepts such as collaborative consumption, community building, and social enterprise. It describes itself as part of the ‘Sharing Economy’, depicted in the press as based on a plethora of micro-jobs fuelled by online marketplaces trading paid errands and office chores.

To gain a better understanding of the platform development, operation, and evolution of Taskhub, a number of stakeholders were interviewed. To gain insight into everyday working conditions, the interviews were supplemented with a tour of the building and office. Eight interviews were conducted: the respondents were two platform-owners, two workers described in this paper as ‘doers’, one person described as a ‘requester’, one ‘requester/doer’ who has filled both roles, the head of business intelligence at Manchester Chamber of Commerce and a trade union representative. Each interview lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. Published materials available on the Taskhub website have also been analysed to gain an overview of company operations and processes.

General characteristics of Taskhub

Taskhub.co.uk is a start-up company established in the UK in 2012. By January 2014 its staff consisted of its two co-founders and four others (two in marketing, one iOS developer and a web

developer) besides the two co-founders. The company provides a crowd employment platform, an online marketplace for tasks and services in and around London. The company was originally set up to match a task that needs completing, provided by a requester, with someone willing to complete the task, a doer. Requesters post tasks on the website suggesting a basic fee and doers bid for the work.

The wide variety of tasks posted cover services such as delivery/transport, household chores, handyman, and computer help. Assembling flat pack furniture is a particularly popular activity outsourced to doers. The only exceptions are childcare and elderly care since these services are perceived to be risky as they involve people who are not able to fully represent themselves. Tasks go live as soon as they are posted without being screened, but the owners report that Taskhub receives an email alert about all new posts. It monitors these alerts every day. Most of the tasks specify no deadline, but an important factor in a 'doer' getting the job is how quickly they respond.

The requesters interviewed in this case study were all people living in London aged between 20–50 years old and had a university education. Analysing the website confirms that most, if not all, requesters are individuals. No requesters presented themselves as companies. It is not possible to present demographic data on the requesters and doers in general, since this data is not available on the site and nor does Taskhub collect this type of data.

The co-founders and partners of Taskhub are Aurore Hochard and Rahul Ahuja. The co-founders are in their mid-30s, and have had previous careers in teaching (Aurore) and investment banking (Rahul). The company places strong emphasis on the social aspect of helping people, which is seen to contribute towards its niche position in the market.

The office is based in Piccadilly, Central London, on the fifth floor of a large office building which is well equipped with hi-tech facilities. Taskhub occupies a small part of an open-plan office which accommodates Telefónica employees and is organised in a manner similar to a call centre. The layout of the Taskhub area is based on a large central table. Employees face each other and the co-owners sit together at the head of the table.

Taskhub operates as a virtual organisation and its business is generated by its website, using Amazon web services, and through a mobile phone app which has been developed in-house. There is also an ongoing blog which links to information that may be relevant to its clients, such as how to find help if you are a victim of the UK floods or how to source the perfect gift for Valentine's Day. The public Beta launch of the website took place in January 2013; this provided a landing page so that people could register interest and request access. Access was initially provided to people who the platform owners knew on a professional or personal level, before increasing levels of interest were generated by media publicity. The Beta version of Taskhub Offers was well received by service providers and there were over 100 applications from small businesses and professionals in the first week, and Taskhub launched publicly in March 2013.

For the platform to operate effectively, it is important to achieve a balance between doers and requesters while reaching a critical amount of supply and demand. As the firm realised that more people were requesting rather than doing tasks, they launched a new function in January 2014 called Offer. This means that people can post an offer – saying 'I can do this for you' – for a set price. This is an example of how the platform has evolved and the co-owner was keen to stress Taskhub strives to promote equality on their platform. Prominence has been given to people offering services, allowing individuals and small businesses to generate income from their skills using technology.

Taskhub markets itself as the only website where people can find, hire and review trusted local services in one place, connecting people in need of help with skilled people in their area. Small local businesses and professionals can offer their services at a fixed price, extending their online presence.

At the time of this study, in January 2014, there was no information available on the demographic profile of Taskhub users. At the outset, the platform owners anticipated that students would be completing the tasks and professionals would outsource tasks. However, it seems that full-time professionals are also willing to compete for simple tasks (such as photographing an apartment before it is put on the rental market) for extra income – for example, GBP 25 (€30.5 as at 28 February 2014). Anecdotally, participants are technically competent, generally aged between 20 and 45 years, with significant numbers of trades people and ‘mums’ who are not officially employed but looking to generate additional revenue.

There is no information available on the number of tasks advertised and commissioned. There are now around 3,000 members, both requesters and doers, registered on Taskhub. According to the platform owners, many have been attracted by word-of-mouth.

At an international level, Taskhub can be compared to the US site TaskRabbit. This site is marketed as bringing together entrepreneurial professionals willing to contribute their time and skills to support ‘busy people’: ‘Neighbours helping neighbours — it’s an old-school concept reimagined for today’.

However, the platform owners feel Taskhub is different, since the same person can be both a doer and a requester and everyone participates on the same level. In the UK, Taskhub can be compared with Gumtree (Gumtree.com), an international site with a strong presence in the UK which claims to be the UK’s number one classified advertising site, posting nearly one million new adverts per week. However, Gumtree has a broader focus, also offering products for sale, house and apartment rentals and jobs.

Design and implementation process

As mentioned previously, there is no central body in the UK regulating crowd employment platforms and so the process of establishing Taskhub involved activities typical of a start-up company. The company sought legal advice to draw up the terms and conditions of operation between users, with the aim of making sure participants would take full responsibility for their activities.

One of the owners acknowledged that the legal documentation was difficult, partly because of the lack of regulation for crowd employment platforms and because of issues involving the selling of services rather than products. A lawyer investigated other examples of similar platforms for inspiration, while recognising that there was very little similarity between most of them and the proposals for Taskhub.

The inspiration for the site came when Aurore tried to find help for a friend who was a new mother and needed support around the house on a one-off basis. The only option available on the internet was Gumtree.com, but its adverts are placed anonymously and safety and trust were therefore a concern.

Aurore said Taskhub was borne out of a desire to engender community and a sense of people helping each other, an element that is often absent when people live and work in big cities such as London.

On the website, the following categories are listed: delivery, house chores, office help, handyman/tradesman, computer help, creative, instruction, transport/moving, and ‘other’. Here are some typical examples of tasks found on the Taskhub website in January 2014, which reflect the diversity and payment levels.

- *Safety gate installation, for GBP 10 (€12.2): ‘I need someone to install safety gate which requires some drills as well.’*
- *Weekly apartment cleaning for GBP 30 (€36.6): ‘Our lovely little apartment at the top of Ladbroke Grove/Kensal Rise is in need of cleaning once a week; unfortunately our fabulous*

cleaning lady is moving out of London and we need someone to fill her shoes. The cleaning should take up to 3 hours per week, ideally on a Friday, with all cleaning products provided. We are looking for someone who wants to do this on a regular basis, so there is the offer of a weekly cleaning for someone who is a good cleaner and trustworthy. Looking to start it this week – Friday 13th with the right candidate coming for a trial run. Look forward to hearing from you. Previous cleaning experience a big advantage.'

- *Hand out an envelope outside Westminster Abbey (in progress so no fee advertised): 'I am setting up an intricate treasure/scavenger hunt for my partner for our 9th Anniversary which will end with a proposal. This will be stop number 4 and I need someone to hand her the next clue in a silver envelope. I can post the envelope in advance so would ideally like to sign someone to the task by Friday for post. Date for envelope will be 28th Jan 2014 at 2.45pm.'*

Taskhub is now expanding the services by allowing people to offer services. This new service includes some of the following examples.

- *Record vocals for a cover song or for your Demo, for GBP 46 (€56.1): 'I'm an Italian native singer/songwriter, vocally trained in SLS. I work with different artists and I've released 1 EP and 4 singles in the past few years. I know how hard it is to make it out there, and I know how expensive it is to go to a studio to record your vocals for a cover song or a demo you need for an audition. What I'm offering here, is my experience as a singer and recording artist. I will invite you to my place, and I will record your vocals of a song you wish. You will have to provide your own backtrack, if you are recording a demo. If you are recording a cover song, I can help you to find the backtrack you need. When the song is mixed I will send the file in the format you prefer. Notes 1. This recording Offer takes place at my flat in Streatham - Zone 3, it's not a professional studio. 2. Under 18s must be accompanied by an adult. 3. The price is intended for max 2h recording per song. For Ref Check youtube.com/lucadgofficial soundcloud.com/luacdg.'*
- *Custom Designed Website for your Business, for GBP 220 (€268.4): 'Local web designer offering a comprehensive bespoke web design service to promote your business or a personal web presence. This offer includes: domain, reliable hosting, marketing such as google search engine optimisation, directory listings and links to your Facebook page etc. plus any photography and graphics to provide what you really need for your business to be found. You can have up to 3 pages on your website. I have 10 years' experience and cover the Medway area. For an example of a website please view my portfolio at <http://absoffice.co.uk/Portfolio.php>.'*
- *1 hour man with van removal services, for GBP 35 (€42.7): 'My name is Dave and I am a man with transit van based in Crouch End, London N8, working in all areas of London and going anywhere in the UK. I'm independent so no hidden charges. No job too big or small, short or long, near or far – houses to single items. Clean van with GPS to save you time. Happy to help with loading and unloading. Extra man available on request. For more information please have a look at my website VAVAVAN.com. This Offer is for one man with van.'*
- *I will take your dog out for a walk, for GBP 23 (€28.1): 'I love dogs and miss my dog back home now that I'm in London. But what better way to spend my time, than giving your dogs the exercise they deserve while you work. I will travel to anywhere in Zone 1 and Zone 2 in London and will work for up to 2 hours.'*

In interview, the doers said they became aware of Taskhub through informal contacts such as family and friends and this meant that their social capital and existing networks encouraged participation. Taskhub was the only site that they had used for crowd employment and they all found the process of registration simple and straightforward. The interviewed respondents live in Central London, are university educated, and in full-time employment (paid or internship). However, given that their income levels were not high, they were looking for ways to earn more

by doing tasks that could be reconciled with their regular work, so were not too challenging or time-consuming. At the time of the interviews, alternative crowd employment platforms had not been considered by most of the doers, and there was limited awareness of their existence and operation. However, respondents were open to other options, but not actively pursuing them.

Their motivation for participating and completing tasks, crucially the task being requested, was that it had to appeal to their existing skill set so that the doer felt able to complete the task effectively (for example a two-day task photographing clothing items for eBay, and assembling IKEA furniture). In addition, one of the doers specifically mentioned her commitment to the concept of sustainable and collaborative consumption and the opportunity to share skills. She had previous experience of other crowdsourcing websites (as opposed to crowd employment platforms), such as Freecycle, Lift Sharing, and Couch Surfing, and explained that she was committed to the Transition Movement (based on community-led responses to climate change).

These examples are in keeping with the findings of the consultancy company Massolutions (2012), whose study of crowdsourcing found that nearly 77% of all doers had a primary job, but find it useful to participate on crowd platforms at least once a month. Other doers faced different challenges, and the platform owner described how an unemployed man from Eastern Europe was desperate for work and so he bid for every task available on the site.

The requesters who participated in the study also had social and business connections with individuals based at Taskhub, with one person participating in the same social network of female French entrepreneurs. The main motivation for using the Taskhub services was that it felt quick and easy compared to managing the whole process of finding a useful person by themselves. Some also said that it felt safer since they could ask Taskhub for its experiences with a certain person. They said they would be reluctant to hire someone not already known to someone they trusted, highlighting the importance of established connections. One requester explained that she needed to clean her terrace but viewed it as a boring task that she did not want to do herself; however, she also welcomed the community element.

The review and feedback system that allows requesters and doers to assess the credibility of other participants is based on two key elements. Users are invited to collect so called 'badges', which involves linking their digital identity on Taskhub to their other digital identities (email, phone, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts). This is seen to signify a certain level of trust, so the more badges a member can add, the better. As one of the doers explained, if requesters can see that you have more than one online profile, they are probably more inclined to trust you, on the assumption that it is more time-consuming and complicated to create a fake identity across many different platforms rather than just one.

As with many new start-up companies, Taskhub's initial circle of users was based on informal connections of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. This created an initial problem of authenticity, as when the platform owners posted reviews of each other on the Taskhub website (for example, 'Thank you so much Aurore. You're wonderful!' (Rahul); 'Rahul was very nice and efficient. Arrived on time too :-' (Aurore)).

Working method, processes and procedures

As a consequence of the co-founders' vision of helping to build communities, requesters and doers are asked to comply with the same terms and conditions. To signal equality between the two groups, both are referred to as 'users'. Users can be both requesters and doers. The platform owners explained that it was important to them that all users received the same level of respect. However, this can lead to areas of ambiguity since the rights and responsibilities linked to the different roles of requesters and doers are not specified.

The role of Taskhub is to provide a forum that makes connections between people and services easier (see Table 1 for an overview of the process). All members must be aged 18 or over, and

must agree to accept the terms and conditions and create an online profile. The interviewed requesters and doers all admitted they had not read the terms and conditions and were unaware of their rights and responsibilities. There is no registration fee, but users may be charged for enhanced features, such as being positioned at the top of the bidding list (as of January 2014 this does not appear to be operational). However, since our requesters received between two and five bids for the tasks they advertised on Taskhub, this was not a major concern at the time of the interviews. When choosing between the bids, the interviewed requesters said they were motivated by two key factors when choosing the doer, response time and personal characteristics. Assessments of personal characteristics and skills were based on rather short text descriptions provided by the doers. One requester said she has also got in touch with a Taskhub employee she knew to get a personal recommendation.

The autonomy and control given to the doers differed between requesters and tasks. For example, one doer whose task was to take pictures of clothes and upload them to eBay, was given plenty of autonomy since she had quite a lot of experience of selling things on eBay, while the requester had none. She could therefore plan and carry out the task the way she wanted. Another doer, whose task was to assemble IKEA furniture, did not have as much autonomy since there is a limited number of ways in which this task type of can be carried out.

Taskhub reserves the right to close a user account at any time if the behaviour of the user is judged to violate the agreement. Taskhub does not get involved in communication between doers and requesters. Similarly, it does not take responsibility for the monitoring and quality of service delivery, and it disclaims all responsibility for loss of profit, goodwill, personal injury or death. While users retain intellectual property rights (IPR), Taskhub has the right to communicate that content to the public and to identify the author of the content.

Responsibility for the doer's welfare while working, said one of the requesters, was covered by Taskhub. On reflection, she recognised that this was not the case and that she had been responsible for the safety of the doer. She would consider using Taskhub in the future, particularly for tasks that she does not enjoy doing, such as cleaning and tidying the children's playroom.

There are five steps involved in accessing and using Taskhub services as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Process of accessing and using Taskhub services

Stages	Activity	Description
1	Sign-in	To join Taskhub and access its services, users have to sign in. This is done by accepting Taskhub's terms and conditions and its privacy policy. This is available on the homepage. The user has to enter a user name, email address, and password OR sign in via a Facebook account.
2	Acknowledgement	Email to acknowledge registration and account activation required.
3	Payment	Can add credit card or PayPal details to pay for tasks; for receiving payment only, enter PayPal details.
4	Taskhub Activities	Can post a task or post an offer (that is, bid for a specific task)
4a	Post Task	Enter details of title, description, address, category and price

Stages	Activity	Description
4b	Post Offer	Enter details of title, description, address, category and price
5	Feedback	Can give feedback on the task or offer performed, as well as the working conditions

The authors signed in on Taskhub and went through the process step by step.

To receive payment, doers need a PayPal account. Taskhub takes 15% of all transactions, deducted from the fee before it is paid to the doer (PayPal also deducts a percentage for each transaction). The terms and conditions state that Taskhub does not take responsibility for the collection of task fees from the requester and only processes payments. Some of the doers felt that the 15% fee was somewhat excessive given that the platform is a ‘finder’ that facilitates the matching process and there is no prescreening process.

The interviewee from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce raised issues of concern from an employment perspective. Individuals finding work through crowd employment platforms operate under self-employment regulations, and this may have serious implications for tax revenue and collection as this means of sourcing paid work rapidly increases. When people sign-up to complete tasks, Taskhub assumes that they are responsible for their own tax situation and report responsibly to the relevant authorities – it does not operate as an employment agency.

The platform owner said that, to date, there had never been a conflict between members that required Taskhub’s intervention. The terms and conditions clearly state that any agreements concerning tasks are exclusively between the users. Any disputes should be resolved between them and are not the responsibility of Taskhub. However, according to one doer, there was an issue regarding non-receipt of payment for a completed task. The requester had moved overseas and, despite a number of reminders, failed to respond to the worker’s request for payment. Taskhub intervened and eventually payment was received, but it is unclear whether this originated with the company or the requester.

To participate on Taskhub, there is no requirement that users be registered as self-employed, since the agreement is at the task level and centred on task completion. The interviewee from the Manchester Chamber of Commerce spoke of the wider implications of this, particularly lack of social protection and statutory benefits such as redundancy payments, maternity leave, sickness pay and so on, which may put people at significant financial risk.

Taskhub is interesting in this respect, as the nature of the work is quite different from many other crowd employment platforms that operate on a purely digital basis. Much of the work that occurs involves a face-to-face interaction, often in the home of the requester. This has a number of consequences. In interview, doers said they had sometimes been anxious before arriving at a venue, given that they only knew the requester’s name and the details on their online profile. One doer recalled arriving to find the requester’s boyfriend and cleaner already in the apartment. There are also health and safety issues. For example, accidental damage to property or persons is not covered in Taskhub’s terms and conditions and remains an ambiguous area. When this was raised during the interviews, it became clear that neither requesters nor doers had considered this, although they quickly realised that it was a significant issue.

The platform owner also commented on the importance of people’s online profiles, backed up with a presence on social media such as Facebook, which is seen as a way of adding value and security to the service transaction. It implies some level of guarantee of work quality, that payment will be made, and of personal identities. This sentiment was echoed by both requesters and doers of Taskhub who were positive about the system of feedback and ratings. For the

platform owner, achieving positive ratings is a way of incentivising and encouraging participants to return to the platform as they build their online reputation.

External support

According to the platform owners, Taskhub emerged from a start-up incubation process that involved Wayra, a new initiative that is part of Spanish broadband and telecommunications provider Telefónica. Wayra began operating in 2011, calling for projects across Latin America and Europe that would accelerate technology start-ups. The project call is a highly competitive process, and the platform owner described how they went through a number of stages before being selected as one of 16 start-ups from around 1,000 applicants.

Once a project has been selected by Wayra, start-up funding of up to €50,000 is provided, depending on the level of maturity and need. Further financing and support may come through Wayra's network of 'business angels', mentors and partners. According to one of the platform owners, Telefónica offered them a loan which, if not repaid after a certain period, converts into equity. Telefónica also has a share in revenues if the start-up uses its services as its distribution channel. Key for the platform owners was not simply to find finance, but to find a source of strategic advice and be able to tap into the right business networks. Taskhub was also able to base itself at Telefónica's central London office which houses a number of firms from the technology industry, and provides internet design support and advice when needed.

Outcomes and effects

In a fairly short period of time, Taskhub has evolved and expanded in response to its founders' understanding of the market, shifting from providing a forum that was predominantly focused on task allocation to one that offers a wider range of services.

The interviewees expressed varied opinions on the impact of crowd employment platforms on the labour market and economy. The platform owners and Head of Business Intelligence at the Manchester Chamber of Commerce were generally optimistic. They described crowdsourcing as one way to move from salaried employment to self-employment. In the context of high levels of youth unemployment, flexibility was a key theme and the opportunity to 'achieve the dream of being your own boss' was viewed positively.

By contrast, the doers were not quite as enthusiastic and viewed crowd employment platforms as more of a stopgap for times when people are between jobs or looking for extra income, rather than providing long-term opportunities. One interviewee noted that it was a good way to make ends meet at a time of unemployment, but the mediation fee of 15% could have a negative impact on income generation.

When compared with larger enterprises, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, which mainly sources micro-tasks for low levels of remuneration, Taskhub offers reasonable payment for tasks (tens to hundreds of pounds compared to cents or a few dollars). One of the owners explained that this could be because of the geographical proximity of doers and requesters, with the latter being willing to pay a little more for face-to-face interaction.

One of the requesters said that she was happy with the return on investment since she felt that she did not pay a lot and the girl who accepted the task did a good job in a very short period of time.

Strengths and weaknesses

Based on this analysis of Taskhub operations and from the interview material, a number of strengths are evident – some apply generally to crowd employment platforms and others are specific to Taskhub.

- The UK has a strong technical infrastructure, which is vital for digital platforms. Users of Taskhub described the digital platform as simple and easy to use.
- For doers, digital platforms provide personal visibility, giving access to a large marketplace.
- For doers who choose self-employment over salaried employment, crowd employment platforms can provide flexible work, a range of clients, and the pace of work a doer prefers.
- The physical orientation of Taskhub can engender a sense of community spirit for those living and working in a big city.
- Compared with crowd employment platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk, Taskhub offers reasonable fees for doers and requesters.
- Crowd employment platforms can provide opportunities for doers to supplement their income with extra activities outside formal working hours.

A number of weaknesses have also been identified.

- At the policy level, there is a notable absence of regulation and limited knowledge and understanding of the operation of crowd employment platforms.
- The level of social protection is deficient and there is a lack of income security. Operating within a wider marketplace (based on digitally-based bids for work) results in a highly competitive environment.
- For those individuals who prefer salaried employment, the *modus operandi* of flexible work using crowd employment platforms can be challenging.
- Users of crowd employment platforms often lack understanding of the terms and conditions of IPR agreements. The absence of a formal contract means that issues of personal responsibility remain ambiguous. This has potentially serious ramifications.
- A labour market based on a more digital marketplace can be exclusive to particular demographics. While the majority of the under-30s are familiar with all things digital, this level of familiarity cannot be assumed of an ageing population.
- For platform owners, crowd employment platforms lack legal precision, especially as different platforms operate in different spaces. Establishing the appropriate legal framework for operation can be costly for small start-up companies.
- When comparing the experiences of UK business with the US, improved access to financial backers is needed. Until a start-up has a critical mass of users, the UK banking system is still reluctant to lend money.

Future plans

Taskhub would like to consider expansion into other cities such as Manchester and Edinburgh. Long term, it also wishes to consider developing an international presence. According to one of the owners, Taskhub would like to offer some form of insurance which provides minimum protection and coverage to keep the platform popular.

Commentary

The following comment from the Head of Business Intelligence at the Manchester Chamber of Commerce typifies some of the positivity surrounding crowd employment platforms:

‘From a free market economy point of view, crowdsourcing’s brilliant. It gets much closer to creating what we in economics call the perfect market situation. It can’t be anything but a good thing.’

In the context of the current economic climate with high levels of youth unemployment, commentators are quick to capitalise on the appeal of crowdsourcing to the under-30s internet generation who focus on the positives of self-employment, enterprising behaviour, flexible working, and interactions with multiple clients. This model of working, increasingly normalised within particular sectors such as the creative and digital industries, is becoming increasingly pervasive as doers strive for economic survival.

It represents a shift in orientation from firm level responsibility for social protection and welfare of the workforce to responsibility at the individual level. It feeds into the rhetoric of portfolio workers and 'horizontal-boundaryless careerists' who proactively pursue wider opportunities with high levels of autonomy and market value.

Crucially, the question is whether these changing working practices materialise as an active choice or in response to workplace conditions, an increasingly deregulated labour market, and the constraints of market structures. For the many workers participating on crowd employment platforms, the downside is increased precariousness, uncertainty, and insecurity. At the policy level, the lack of social protection and regulation has consequences for contributions to social security and tax revenues, pensions, and so on, and this requires investigation.

Long term, there are wider issues about the expansion of digital firms, often US-based, with significant brand reputations, who have the resources to develop bespoke platforms and supporting infrastructure. Platforms have often initially been developed for the firms' own services (for example, Amazon and Apple), and then expanded and opened up to individual retailers and sellers of products, services, and labour. However, it is not predetermined that technology itself will influence direction in any specific way. The combination of technology, firm strategies, and regulatory context is what determines whether social and economic change can be steered along a particular course.

In the context of the wider market for crowd employment platforms, Taskhub is positioned in an interesting niche that differentiates it from other digitally-based, virtual, placeless, digital platforms that pay trivial amounts for the completion of micro-tasks. The differences play out in a number of areas.

Firstly, it Taskhub is London-based and places emphasis on restoring a sense of community for those based in a city that contains more than eight million inhabitants. The website prominently displays Google maps with 'pins' to highlight the location of various Taskhub users and activities. Press releases stress its role in the sharing economy, 'empowering' people to find services and make money in their local area through technology. To what extent the employment of a local person to run errands or do chores will restore a sense of community remains to be seen.

Secondly, the predominantly physical nature of the service interaction (for example, piano lessons, shellac nails, building flat-pack furniture) is unlikely to be replaced by technological innovations, certainly in the foreseeable future. Although Amazon Mechanical Turk originated in response to the inability of computer power to spot duplicate web entries, technological advances may soon be able to replace minor data processing activities by humans. However, it is doubtful that certain types of interactions can be automated.

Finally, the material basis of the service interaction links to pricing levels. Indicators on Mechanical Turk suggest that the pricing of tasks is being driven down, especially with the uptake of work from people based in developing economies. The physical aspects of Taskhub activities, which also includes transportation to and from the client site, means it is unlikely that services can be provided at low cost. Prices may be driven down in the future, but for the task to be financially worthwhile for workers, a minimum ceiling is in operation.

When these three elements of locality, physicality, and pricing are combined, crowd employment platforms like Taskhub appear to be more sustainable in the long-term than digital giants such as Mechanical Turk.

Information sources

Websites

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