

Pushed or Pulled? Becoming Gig Workers in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The gig economy is expanding with more workers joining digital labour platforms globally. Gig work has become popular in Sri Lanka as well, especially during the recent past. Since the gig economy is still a relatively new concept in Sri Lanka, the area is understudied. Hence, the objective of this research is to examine what motivates Sri Lankans to become digital workers. We use push-pull theory as the theoretical lens of the study. Based on qualitative research methodology under the interpretive research paradigm, 22 digital workers from various backgrounds were interviewed in person to identify their motives and experiences with web-based digital labour platforms. This study found four important reasons for Sri Lankans to choose digital work, 1) pursuit of passion 2) pursuit of money (earning in foreign currency, gaining financial independence and an additional source of income), 3) pursuit of agency and 4) pursuit of developmental opportunities. While the motivation for participants to join gig work was mainly identified as pull motivation, in some instances it was identified that the participants were also pushed to join gig work.

Keywords: *Digital labour platforms, Gig work, Pull factors, Push factors*

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Introduction

Digitalisation, flexibilization, restructuring, and demographic trends have contributed to drastic shifts in the labour market in recent years (De Stefano & Aloisi, 2018). These trends have a significant impact on the employer-employee relationship. One of the recent trends is digital labour platforms and gig work. "Digital labour platforms facilitate work using digital technologies to intermediate between individual suppliers and clients or directly engage workers to provide labour services" (EU, 2020 as cited in ILO, 2021, p. 33).

There are two ways that digital labour platforms work. One, clients request an individual gig worker to complete a task. Two, the workers continue to seek platforms for listed tasks of various scopes and needs, then choose which to pursue by submitting applications with preliminary bids (Kost et al., 2019). Gig work benefits both workers and the economy of a country by boosting employment growth and household income (Dokko et al., 2015).

Over time, there has been a tremendous growth of digital labour platforms and digital labour. In 2016, the market for digital work was estimated to be valued around US\$ 4.4 billion (Chew Kuek et al., 2015). According to Statista research department, the gross valuation of the gig economy in 2021 is 347.8 billion USD and the forecasted gross value of the gig economy in 2023 is estimated to be 455.2 billion USD. According to a global index evaluating the use of digital labour platforms, the rate of growth of digital workers is around 25% every year (Kassi & Lehdonvirta, 2016).

Measuring the scale of the gig economy is difficult because gig work is generally invisible and is not included in existing labour market data and economic indicators (Bajwa et al., 2018), the existing statistics indicate an increasing practice of gig work

among Sri Lankans. Based on the research of LIRNEasia (2016), an estimated number of 17,000- 22,000 web-based workers are in Sri Lanka. By conducting a non-representative survey at FreelancerSL 2.0 event, the team witnessed the annual growth of the registered freelancers was 44% (LIRNEasia, 2016). This growth rate was confirmed by Alexa rankings, which showed an increase in the world rank of Sri Lanka on the website, indicating greater use of freelancing sites. Therefore, an increasing trend can be seen in the number of digital workers¹ and the usage of digital labour platforms in Sri Lanka over the years.

In the Sri Lankan context, digital workforce functions as a foreign exchange earner because digital workers are paid in foreign currencies, and it helps to reduce the deficit trade balance (Priyankara, 2021). This is ever so important for Sri Lanka due to the foreign deficit issue the country is facing at the moment, leading to economic recession. Further, it provides employment opportunities in the global market which helps to reduce the unemployment rate of the country as well (Priyankara, 2021).

While the benefit of digital work is numerous for workers as well as the country, the coin has two sides. Hence, there is a negative side to the increase in digital labour. Many scholars explained the challenges that digital workers face in the digital platforms. For example, non-western workers are said to be underpaid on digital platforms (Beerepoot & Lambregts, 2014). Moreover, as digital workers are considered as independent contractors, they are rarely covered by national labour laws (Graham et al., 2017). Further, economic exclusion and discrimination are also said to be present based on nationality in the digital platforms (Graham et al., 2017). Also, due to platform or client constraints, digital workers from developing nations are unable to access work and well-paid jobs (ILO, 2021). Despite their willingness to work more, workers are unable

¹ The terms digital workers and gig workers are used synonymously and interchangeably in this

research as in the normal practice.



to find more work due to excess labour supply and lack of projects (ILO, 2021). Particularly in Sri Lanka, though the 'gig-economy' provides new employment options for part-time and casual employees, it also produces new types of precarious labour and degrading workers' livelihoods and rights in numerous ways,

according to the ILO's 'Future of Work in Sri Lanka' (2019). Gig worker contracts are said to create threats in protecting gig workers' well-being in terms of the security of the work, minimum working conditions, benefits, retirement plans, minimum wages, compensation in industrial accidents, because they are not covered by current laws (Bajwa et al., 2018; Priyankara, 2021). Also, as global gig platforms are usually not being registered as businesses in host countries, it is difficult to control them through the existing regulation, legislation, and taxation system of the host country (CBSL, 2019).

Apart from the criticisms over the concept of digital labour and digital labour platforms, still the number of digital workers is increasing over the years globally and in the Sri Lankan context. Despite this increase in digital workers and the increasing significance of the gig economy and its popularity, relatively little is known about the motives, characteristics, and experiences of the digital workers (Bajwa et al., 2018). Within this background, the aim of this study is to explore what motivates Sri Lankans to choose digital work and to continue to work on digital labour platforms?.

The significance of this study is manifold. First, given that very little research exists of gig work (Spreitzer et al., 2017) generally, and gig work in the Asian, developing country context more specifically, we add to the existing knowledge on gig work and the country context. Second, given the continuous increase in gig work and gig economy and the lack of legal protection they have and other difficulties that gig workers face, it is important to explore why individuals are motivated to join gig work to

provide them the legal and other support that is needed.

Literature Review

Motives of Digital Workers to become Gig Workers

The number of workers entering digital platforms is steadily growing. According to estimates, there are 163 million workers registered on digital labour platforms worldwide (Kässi et al., 2021) and the digital market is expanding. These statistics point towards an interesting research area - the reasons why people enter and what motivates them to enter digital labour platforms.

One of the core components of the expansion of digital labour platforms is the reasons why workers are attracted to them. There are two main types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, and they both operate in distinct ways. Intrinsic motivation is doing something because it is interesting and gives a source of satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation is doing something for an ulterior purpose (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Workers' psychological and financial motives to join the platforms are extensively discussed in the literature. While gig workers are known to engage in the gig economy for financial reasons (extrinsic motivation), gig workers have also been mentioned as being intrinsically motivated by specific aspects of the nature of the gig work (Jabagi et al., 2019).

The report world employment social outlook which was issued by the International Labour Organization (2021) included a global survey which identified motivations for working on digital platforms. The reasons they have identified follow: unable to find other employment, getting paid higher than other jobs available, to earn an additional income and job flexibility. They did the surveys in Argentina, Chile, China, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, and Ukraine. They covered the taxi and delivery sectors of the countries, but



web-based workers are not included in the survey.

One of the intrinsic motivations to be a digital labour is that it allows people to pick where they work, when they work, and what kind of job they do (Kuek et al., 2015). Many Uber drivers in the United States of America stated that the flexibility to control and change their driving schedules is why they chose to be enrolled in Uber platform, according to a survey (Hall & Krueger, 2015). According to a survey conducted by a business services firm in the United States of America, nearly two-thirds (68%) of full-time independent workers who work independently feel more secured working independently than having traditional employment (MBO partners, 2021). It also identified a growing number of traditional job holders who agree that working independently is less risky than having a traditional job. This opinion grows to 29% among traditional jobholders in 2021, compared to only 19% in 2019. Scholars argue that because of the nature of at-will employment, where an employer can fire an employee for any reason without warning and frequent layoffs in some industries, a freelance career can help to mitigate economic risk (Kuhn, 2016). One of the specialties of digital labour platforms are that work opportunities on platforms range from short-term, low-skilled, repetitive tasks such as delivering commodities and transporting people to high-skilled tasks such as website development and data analytics (ILO, 2021). The psychological benefits of digital workers, such as enhanced autonomy and personal growth, were also addressed by Kuhn (2016) and they are the intrinsic motivational factors for joining digital labour platforms.

According to Joan et al., (2021) who conducted a quantitative study on European digital labour platforms, the motivations of gig workers are the flexibility or autonomy provided by digital platforms, and it is expected that if these motivations are met, the results of gig employment will be perceived positively. However, since gig workers' motivation is the difficulty of finding a secure

job, it's likely that if their instability is confirmed,

the opinion of gig work will be negative. As a result, participation motives are key in explaining job satisfaction in digital employment (Joan et al., 2021).

Although some reasons for working in the gig economy are stated in the annual report of Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2019) such as the need to work at own pace, earn while searching for a job, work-life balance, no other ways available to earn and an additional source of income, the report does not state how they have collected the data to identify the reasons. The report also mentioned, the unavailability of reliable data remains the major backdrop in understanding the significance of the gig economy and its impact on the Sri Lankan economy and as it is one of the fastest growing trends and it must be monitored (CBSL, 2019).

Although "digital work is now a global phenomenon, it is characterised by distinct geographies" (Graham et al., 2017, p. 16). By this statement we can understand digital work characteristics tend to change based on the geographical places and humanities and research should be conducted in Sri Lankan context to identify the nature of the digital work and the motivations of Sri Lankans joining the gig platforms.

Push and Pull Theory

Every motivation we have, every action we take, is either motivated to achieve a desirable outcome (pull) or a push away from an undesirable outcome (push). Generally, push theory discusses the circumstances in which people are forced to act in a certain way out of necessity, in order to survive, and in order to fight against negative external forces (Kirkwood, 2009; Dawson and Henley, 2012). Pull theory discusses about how individuals are attracted to opportunities that allow them to accomplish their goals, demonstrate their independence, experience self-fulfilment, and present new challenges (Gilad and Levine, 1986; Kirkwood, 2009;



Dawson and Henley, 2012; Staniewski and Awruk, 2015 as cited in Jeeva & Lorraine, 2019).

Succinctly put, push theory describes why people are pushed to behave in a manner out of necessity and to resist negative external factors such as job dissatisfaction, insufficient pay, and flexible work hours (Kirkwood, 2009; Dawson & Henley, 2012). Further, Dawson and Henley (2012) stated that individuals pushed toward self-employment due to a lack of other options during times of economic crisis and higher unemployment. The pull theory explains why people are drawn to opportunities that allow them to attain market opportunity, financial gain, or personal liberty (Dawson & Henley, 2012).

The following factors have been recognized as push and pull factors for being self-employed based on past research findings, which are demographic shifts, public and private sector restructuring/downsizing, changing industrial structure, contracting out, tax policy, self-employment aid programs, rising entrepreneurial spirit, growing unpredictability in paid are unemployment, redundancy, and an absence of job or career possibilities (Keith et al., 2020; Lin et al., 1999). Although not every intrinsic force is a pull factor or every negative force a push factor. For example, quitting a job and choosing digital work because one is unsatisfied with it is considered as a push factor (Jeeva & Lorraine, 2019).

Push-pull theory is also widely used to explain entrepreneurial motivation, why someone wants to start their own business or to be self-employed (Amit & Muller, 1995). Amit and Muller (1995) state push entrepreneurs are dissatisfied with their jobs and feel compelled to start a business as they are being pushed out of their existing jobs because they aren't performing well for reasons that may or may not be related to their entrepreneurial desire. They further add that pull entrepreneurs are attracted by business idea and begin business activity because of the entrepreneurial inclination and

they are pulled out of their existing state by the challenges and potential monetary and non-monetary rewards. It is because of their entrepreneurial abilities and characteristics that they feel more at ease professionally outside of the corporate framework and being self-employed (Amit & Muller, 1995).

Given that entrepreneurship, self-employment, and digital employment have many commonalities (Karlson & Wranne, 2019), push and pull theory can be used to explore the motivations of gig workers to enter the digital/ gig economy.

In fact, a few studies of push and pull motives have been undertaken in the emerging concept of gig economy. Identified push motives are frequently economic in nature, including lack of adequate revenue, educational debts, and family pressure (Keith et al., 2020). Desires for flexible work schedule, autonomy, enjoyment, or variety in the gigs get are examples of pull motives (Keith et al., 2020). Also, the motive for joining the digital economy is either push or pull. This in turn has an influence on work outcomes like job satisfaction, quality of work life, career continuity and so on. In a sample of Mechanical Turk workers, Keith et al. (2019) discovered that pull motivations were positively impacted present and expected future life satisfaction, while push motivations were adversely connected to present and predicted future life satisfaction. As a result, understanding why people join the gig economy could have an impact on critical outcomes like worker's health and well-being.

Methodology

Employing a qualitative research approach, semi-structured, in -person interviews with 22 gig workers were conducted to gather data for the study.

We initially contacted our friends and colleagues through social media and emails to find contacts of digital workers who enrolled in web-based digital labour platforms who were willing to participate in



our study. Then, once we received a few contacts of digital workers, we contacted them by telephone and social media and explained to them the requirement of the research. Once their voluntary informed consent was obtained, we conducted the interviews.

Accordingly, 22 interviews were held between January 2022 to May 2022. Each interview lasted, on average, between 40 to 60 minutes. The majority of the interviews were conducted in English, while others conducted in Tamil. 15 interviews were held with male digital workers and 7 interviews with female digital workers. The interviews started with inquiries into the background information of the participants to build rapport and then the questions related to their motives behind joining digital labour platforms, experience, the challenges they

encountered while working in the platforms, the strategies they use to overcome the difficulties they face and their views on age and gender influence in their motives and challenges they go through were captured.

The participants were engaged in teaching, software development, video editing, graphic designing, content writing, logo designing, doodling, and motion designing. Men and women with a minimum of less than 1 year to 4 years of experience were included in the study. Digital workers who work part-time and full-time were included, and the majority are part-time workers. The participants' ages range from 20 to 38, and the majority are single. Table 01 lists the participants' demographic information, years of experience, the type of gig work they have been involved in, and whether they work part-time or full-time.

Table 01: Demographic Profiles of Digital Workers

Pseudonym	Gender	Age in 2022	Field of work	Experience	Full-time/Part-time
Umada	Female	25	Content writer	3-4 years	Part-time
Inthushan	Male	26	Software engineer	1 year	Part-time
Vijay	Male	24	Video Editor	2 years	Full-time
Rachel	Female	24	Content writer	1 - 2 years	Part-time
Sanduni	Female	24	Content writer	1 - 2 years	Part-time
Munishka	Male	25	Brand developer	1 - 2 years	Full-time
Rashif	Male	26	Motion designer	1 year	Part-time
Visakan	Male	25	Software engineer	3 years	Part-time
Thivyaa	Female	22	Teacher	1-2 years	Part-time
Madhushika	Female	24	Graphic designer	3 years	Part-time
Abilash	Male	24	Content writer	Less than 1 year	Part-time
Razik	Male	28	Software engineer	2 years	Part-time
Dushanthan	Male	24	Graphic designer	Less than 1 year	Part-time
Saif	Male	24	Software engineer	1 - 2 years	Part-time
Mino	Male	24	Digital artist, Doodler	2 years	Part-time
Faazna	Female	30	Content writer	1 - 2 years	Part-time
Anuja	Female	35	Voice artist	Less than 1 year	Part-time
Insaf	Male	24	Video Editor	2 - 3 years	Full-time
Hamsalojan	Male	25	SEO Specialist	1 - 2 years	Part-time
Katheesan	Male	23	Logo designer	Less than 1 year	Part-time
Prakash	Male	28	Software engineer	2 - 3 years	Part-time
Nesigan	Male	23	Content writer	Less than 1 year	Part-time



The data thus gathered were analyzed through thematic analysis. For that, we followed the six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Accordingly, we carefully familiarized ourselves with the data and then carried out a sentence-by-sentence coding. Then the codes were analyzed for similarities and differences. Accordingly, first order codes and second order codes were developed by merging and collating similar codes and categories. Finally, 4 main reasons (themes) and several sub-themes were identified, which will be explained in detail below.

Findings

The participants indicated different motives they had to choose digital work and enroll for web-based digital labour platforms as 1) in pursuit of passion: Opportunity to engage in work that the individuals are passionate about, 2) in pursuit of money: financial benefits 3) in pursuit of agency: ability to exercise agency and 4) In pursuit of development opportunities: increased exposure.

It was difficult to identify one dominant motivator for the participants to become gig workers in many instances, and generally several factors appear to be interlinked to motivate them. However, for ease of explanation, we will present the different motives separately. However, in the discussion we attempt to bring the intersections and commonalities to more focus.

In Pursuit of Passion: Opportunity to Engage in Work that the Individuals are Passionate About

Overwhelmingly, our participants described entering gig work as it provided them the opportunity to pursue their passion and interests in work, which they have felt was not possible in normal/typical types of work. It is common to see passion being discussed in terms of creative work in prior literature, where creative professionals' pursuit of passion is explored and discussed (e.g.

Ravenelle & Kowalski, 2022). While there were a number of individuals who were motivated to join gig work because of the creative work that they do and hence passion actually led them to gig work, other participants were referring more to doing work they enjoy, more fulfilling and work that brings them happiness. In fact, as research indicates, individuals might fear that a more stable job can weaken or change their passion (Adler, 2021). Hence, overall, it appears that digital platforms provide individuals the opportunity and freedom to pursue their passions and interests, which otherwise is difficult.

There is a general misperception that you cannot use your creative interests to earn money in a formal job. But digital labour platforms provide opportunities to those who wish to pursue their interests as a career. Madhusika, a social media strategist and graphic designer said,

“Passion in the sense, from this I used my interest to make money. I didn't think that my creativity would make a lot of money. When I figured out that I can use my creativity in advertising and designing, here I am making a good amount of money by using my creative skills”.

Interviewees who are studying and working in a completely different field than what they do on digital labour platforms shared that they do not want to lose touch of something that they love and enjoy doing, and hence work on digital platforms as gig workers. According to them, this makes them happy.

Sanduni who is a full-time medical student works as a creative content developer:

“I have been passionate about writing and creative work since I was 15. I wanted to do something related to biology, so I chose that. Since I was passionate about writing as a hobby, I thought why don't I try this? I don't want to stop the creative content developing. I was not just working for the money. I was passionate about creative writing. Maybe I



will choose that as a career over biology [one day]. I don't know".

This ability of individuals to engage in their passion while engaged in some other profession was not always possible before. Yet, with the digital platforms and digital work, that opportunity is now available and that is what participants like Sanduni were doing. Also, through our data collection, we learned that not only for entering the platforms, but passion and loving what they do is what make them continue to work on these platforms without ever giving-up and thriving amidst the numerous challenges. Umanda, one of the leading content-writer from Sri Lanka in the web-based platform Fiverr emphasized:

"Around 150 of my articles have been published online, so as you know, it's a great asset for me to showcase my talent. Because writing constantly on the platform is not something that anyone can do, it is something that they have to be passionate about what they are writing and how they are writing. Also, they have to keep improving".

Inthushan, a software developer shared:

"Irrespective of these difficulties, what's motivating me to stay in this field is that I'm passionate about this and do not want to give up".

We could also see that passion was not always related to creativity for our participants. In other words, not all participants who stated that passion was a reason for them to persevere gig work were referring to creative work. As Thivya, an online tutor said:

"I started this because I really enjoy teaching, I'm able to earn as well while doing what I love, also, I can take care of my other priorities as well".

In fact, it is clear that passion as well as flexibility and financial benefits has led Thivya to become a gig worker. The passion and the motivation to work on the platforms

is interrelated. Digital labour platforms provide opportunities to pursue passion through their work and the passion helps workers to thrive and continue to work on the platforms. However, pursuit of passion through gig work leads them to forego greater stability of a permanent job (Umney and Kretsos, 2015). Nevertheless, being a pull factor, passion can enhance their performance and reduce work-related stress.

In Pursuit of Money: Financial Benefits

Another primary reason that the participants engaged in digital work was the higher earnings. On the one hand, the financial benefits that digital labour platforms provide appear to pull the participants to join the platforms. On the other hand, as a result of Covid and the uncertainties it generated, participants appeared to be pushed toward joining digital labour platforms to earn a living. There were also participants who have joined gig work to earn an additional income. Accordingly, we identified the four sub-themes under financial benefits, as 1) earn a living 2) gain financial independence, 3) earn in foreign currency, and 4) additional source of income.

To Earn a Living

Rashif, a motion designer, Mino, a digital artist, and Insaf, a video editor, stated how different circumstances let them to join gig work to earn a living.

"Family situation and the delay in getting my degree on time due to COVID were the reasons for me to join the platform. So, I decided to become a full-time digital worker".

"I lost my job during the pandemic period, so I wanted to make some money for a living, so I joined the platform".

"Before COVID, till January 2020, I followed chartered accountancy, and I wanted to become an accountant then, I tried to move to Singapore to get work in the accountancy field. At that time, COVID



lockdowns were imposed so I couldn't travel, then only I joined this platform to explore ways to earn some money".

As is seen above, COVID-19 outbreak has specially contributed to these participants to become gig workers, Loss of employment, change of career plans and delays in getting qualifications due to COVID-19 has thus been the reasons for the participants to become gig workers.

Further, gig work is known to provide good earning for employees. Hence, the good payments participants get from foreign clients compared to locals is another reason for the participants to be motivated to be gig workers.

Madhushika: "Sri Lankans are not ready to pay high amount of money. They always come with a small budget, but their expectations are very huge. Five or four times bigger than that and they expect us to do in the small amount of money. [for example] Sometimes they need, like the girl coming from the image and talking or something like that, but they want to pay around few thousand rupees. I think it's the mentality. I think they don't know how much work we put behind that art. That's why it happens".

Gain Financial Independence

Financial independence implies being in charge of one's own finances instead of relying on a parent or guardian to cover the expenses or being the provider. Accordingly, through our participants we could note that many university students are enrolling in digital labour platforms to earn some money to at least to cover their expenses by rather than relying on their parents. They are trying to reach financial independence in any possible way. Umada, a content writer said,

"Apart from my passion, I want to be independent. I wanted to buy a mobile phone before I went to university with my own money, so it motivated me to work on the platform. Likewise, I have my own goals, so I need money to work on those".

As they are able to work part-time with flexible options, they prefer digital labour platforms to earn money while studying. Abilash, another content writer also mentioned,

"Because of my full-time studies I couldn't work, so somehow, I wanted to earn money to take care of my expenses, so I've joined the digital labour platform.

Rachel, also a content writer, said something similar,

"The money I get through the platform is enough to cover my basic small expenses".

Earn in Foreign Currency

It was also seen that many of the participants had entered the digital labour platforms to improve their income. With the United States Dollar (USD), British Pound Sterling (GBP), and Euro conversion rates being high, participants appeared to have gotten attracted to earn in strong foreign currencies which are becoming more valuable relative to LKR. Madhushika, a social media strategist and graphic designer said,

"It's money. I believe in this side hustle. Just think about this, converting dollars to Sri Lankan money. We can get a good income through this side hustle".

Since LKR is depreciating against foreign currencies drastically in the recent months, Sri Lankans prefer to earn in foreign currency than LKR to fight inflation and he is increasing cost of living. Visakan, a software developer, mentioned the same,

"To be honest, with the current situation of the country, I'll prefer to earn in dollars rather than rupees. That is the motivation I think for me to stay on the platform".

Benefiting from the conversion rate enables individuals to generate higher income. In addition, digital platforms offer better pay for jobs in the digital sector than Sri Lankan companies do and together with the earnings being in foreign currency makes gig work a



lucrative employment for gig workers. Hamsalojan, SEO specialist added:

“I wish to earn in foreign currency; therefore, I can get a lot of income than doing the same work in Sri Lanka”.

Additional Source of Income

How people join gig work to earn an additional income is often documented (Balaram et al., 2017; Bonciu, 2016; Codagnone et al., 2016). For example, ILO (2021) surveys revealed that 39% of the respondents consider the income from the web-based digital labour platforms as complementing pay and that is the major motivating source for them to become gig workers. Similarly, Balaram et al. (2017) document how a significant percentage of workers in Britain use digital platforms as a secondary source of income. In our study too, we could see how some participants have become gig workers to earn an additional income. Hence, these individuals' main source of income is not gig work and they are engaged in full-time work, while pursuing digital work for an additional source of income. For example, Prakash, who is working as a full-time QA engineer and a software developing digital worker, said,

“The main reason for me to enroll in the platform is the need for additional money above my salary for my personal needs”.

For many participants, low income from a full-time job or insufficiency of the income of the full-time job to cover their needs were the main reasons to seek digital work. However, they do not consider digital work as the main job due to job insecurity and the unstable income from digital work.

“I consider digital work as a side hustle. I don't believe that doing this digital work, as a full-time work, would work. We can't do this full-time. But if we are going to take it full-time, we need to build an agency and we need to hire people. Because in the platform, we can't have a continued and stable revenue”.

Having multiple revenue streams from a second job or side hustle helps one feel more secure financially and achieve financial stability. Given the country's recent economic downturn and the resultant high living cost, it appears that the attraction for digital work has increased as it provides people with an additional salary/earning.

In Pursuit of Agency: Flexibility

The degree of agency that gig work provides by allowing some level of flexibility, control over one's life and the decisions also appear to attract participants to gig work. In fact, how gig work has continued to attract individuals from a wide range of professions and countries due to flexible work schedules, the ability to work from anywhere at any time, and the freedom to choose the tasks to be completed has been discussed widely (Berg et al., 2018). Due to their very nature, web based digital platforms allow workers the flexibility to plan their days around other commitments or are suitable for those who are not seeking full-time work (Bajwa et al., 2018). In fact, the main differentiator between outsourcing and digital work and conventional 9–5 employment is flexibility. As such, it was apparent that especially students who are pursuing full-time studies and women who struggle to balance work and life are mostly attracted to gig work due to flexibility offered by the platforms. Generally, flexibility can be seen as a pull factor, but it can also work as a push factor. Since platforms offer flexibility and freedom, workers are drawn (pulled) to working on them. On the other hand, people are pushed to work on platforms because they are unable to continue 9–5 jobs for a number of reasons. As Umada, content writer and a full-time student shared:

“On digital platforms, we are independent, as there's no one to assign us to work, [saying] you do this, or you do that. I really like to work on digital platforms, which are so much more comfortable that you can even work in your pyjamas. It's not a 9-5 job, we can work at our own space and own pace and that's why I chose digital platforms. I still



prefer to make this my career than go to a 9 to 5 job in a physical workplace. You know, even if you go to a physical workplace, the workload that we complete is so much higher, but the wages are so low in a country like Sri Lanka”.

We could see the participants enjoy the authority/ control they have over the work they do, than being always instructed or restricted by a set of rules.

Dushanthan: “And no one here to instruct or command us what to do or force us to do it in their way. We can have our own creativity and we can do it in our style without any interferences”.

The digital labour platforms also draw workers through the work-life balance they offer. This was clearly seen in the interviews where we could see how digital workers enjoy the work-life balance offered by the platforms. Vijay, who is working in the digital labour platforms full-time as a video editor said:

“In nine-to-five work. I have to be at the workplace at a particular time and I can leave at a particular time. But if I can stay at home and work on my own, I can fix my work schedules and I can manage my personal works and household work and balance them with my profession. I think that is one of the main benefits”.

Inthushan who is working as a software engineer mentioned:

“Like, you know, let's say I'm not feeling well, or I have to go to a party or anything else. I can take rest or go to a party, and I can work at night or anytime that I wish, and I can cover”.

Work life balance is discussed also with regard to women, who generally are forced to forego their jobs to look after their families in certain contexts. This is specially seen in the South Asian Patriarchal societies where women are reported to be leaving their employment after marriage or having kids

due to pressure from their families or not being able to balance their domestic responsibilities and professional lives (Barhate et al., 2021). When we interviewed Anuja, a content writer in a digital labour platform who is married with two kids, she said the following:

“I worked as an editor in a magazine, but after having kids I needed to stay home to

look after them. I was sad to resign from my job, but I didn't have an option at that time. A few years later, one of my friends told me about this platform, so I started working as a content writer, and now I can do what I love and take care of my children. I normally work when the kids are sleeping, or when they go to school”.

In Pursuit of Development Opportunities: Increased Exposure

Web-based digital platforms also offer access to a broader range of work opportunities and have the potential to connect employees to global work opportunities (Graham et al., 2017). Prior research indicates how people driven by improving skills, network, and career perspectives join digital work, and how this situation is more prominent in the competitive programming field (ILO, 2021). Platforms offer workers the challenging work they want and help to build a global network of future clients. In other words, workers can gain access to global employment opportunities through digital labour platforms, increasing their exposure in their field. It is another pull factor that had encouraged participants to enroll in digital work.

Occasionally, clients will refer workers to get more projects. As Prakash, a software engineer mentioned,

“I love to work on challenging projects, and I would like to work with different kinds of clients, especially clients from different countries. Because when we complete projects on time and the clients are satisfied,

they refer us to other people in their network. I've got a few projects in this way”.

In addition to the good payment and the challenging/global network the participants are able to build, there were also other reasons for our participants to be motivated by the global exposure that they gain through gig work. One such reason is that they think that global clients are more aware of the value of digital projects and products than clients from Sri Lanka, thus they tend to pay the fair market price.

Inthushan: “The foreign countries that we are targeting to get projects from are mostly from developed countries. When it comes to Sri Lanka, as it's a developing country, people don't know the value of software development and they are not willing to spend”.

The other reason is that workers appreciate the simple, yet clear work arrangements with global clients while negotiating and agreeing to terms. Visakan, a software developer said:

“I would say it's really easy to work with foreign clients. Like, we don't get that many revisions after completing the work. Maybe one or two reviews will come, that's also like very rarely. But with Sri Lankan clients, they ask us to change the design like, 10 to 20 times after we designed. That was the challenge. So, it's easy to work with the foreign clients, So I prefer to work in digital platforms”.

Conclusion

Our findings indicate 4 important reasons for individuals to be motivated to join gig work. Many of these reasons can be identified as pull factors (Keith et al., 2019; Angelucci, 2020). In that, our findings are in line with Keith et al., (2019) findings, where pull motivations for location-based digital workers were identified as desire for a flexible work schedule, autonomy, and enjoyment. We could see that the pull factors that attract workers toward the gig economy are basically the same whether the platform is location-based or web-based. However, we

could also identify how some participants were pushed into gig work due to due to involuntary economic circumstances or the inability to find permanent employment. Especially the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant recession the country went into have forced some participants to engage in gig work as a part time or secondary source of income to meet the rising cost of living. Further, the retrenchments and layoffs during the COVID-19 has also pushed some participants to become gig workers, to earn a living, the need to support their families, or to meet the rising inflation.

Further, while prior research report that low skilled workers are the ones who are often pushed into temporary work arrangements such as gig work due to economic circumstances or the inability to find a full-time job (Keith et al., 2019), we could see that even skilled workers can be pushed into gig work. Even though generally money or finance is considered as a push factor, whether the participants being attracted to gig work because of higher pay compared to typical work or because they can earn from foreign currency is a push factor or a pull factor is not clear. Being engaged in gig work to earn an additional income, however, can be identified as a pull factor as it is a supplementary income and not an economic necessity (Keith et al., 2019). At the same time, when participants have engaged in gig work to earn an additional earning, because the current earning is not sufficient to meet the needs or the rising cost of living will be a push factor, as it then becomes an economic necessity. Similarly, while pursuit of agency might have pulled participants to join gig work, they can also be pushed to join platforms because the need for agency has become a necessity. For example, work-family conflicts might push participants to seek flexibility and agency, therefore join gig work as they are unable to work a standard 9–5 job. Indeed, as Dawson and Henley (2012) stated, since motivational factors are unique, situational, and individualized, it can be challenging to identify and classify motivation sometimes into push and pull forces.



At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that there was no one reason for participants to become gig workers and in many instances, it was a number of reasons that had led them to become gig workers. As such, we cannot always clearly demarcate the motivation for participants to become gig workers as pull or push. For example, while the main reason for a participant to become a gig worker might be necessity (to earn a living – a push factor), they might also have been attracted to gig work due to its flexibility (a pull factor). This paradoxical nature of the push and pull factors are discussed elsewhere too. In fact, we can see that both push and pull factors have influenced in tandem to motivate participants to become gig workers in some instances. In other instances, several pull factors drove their decision. However, overall, pull factors came out as more dominant factors. As research indicate that push factors have a negative relationship while pull factors have a positive relationship with life satisfaction (Keith et al., 2019), we can deduce that our participants who were mainly motivated to become gig workers because of pull factors have more life satisfaction.

Practical Implications

First and foremost, knowing why employees select digital work will help human resource managers to understand why an increasing number of their employees resign to join digital work. This understanding will help human resource managers to plan their retention strategies by fulfilling the expectations of these employees who leave organizations for digital work. At the same time, knowing why individuals are motivated to join gig work can help platform providers and clients/employers to develop strategies to attract gig workers to their platforms/companies. For example, if individuals are motivated to become gig workers to earn an additional income, they would most probably not consider their work as their primary job. As such, for them, certain organizational concepts such as

organizational commitment and job satisfaction might not be very relevant (Keith et al., 2019), which the employers/platform providers can take into consideration in managing the gig workers.

Additionally, this study encourages more Sri Lankans to understand what gig work is and how it operates. By being aware of gig workers' motivations, one may direct his/ her interest in the direction of digital labour platforms if they share a similar motivation. This motivated individuals to seek gig work while acknowledging the advantages of the platforms and keeping their drawbacks in mind.

Further, this study contributes crucially to the gig economy literature in Sri Lanka because the gig economy and gig workers are rarely studied in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this contributes to enhance the understanding of the growth of the gig economy and digital labour platforms in Sri Lanka and supports policy makers and future researchers to study the gig economy in depth for the growth of the Sri Lankan economy. As gig economy is a great solution for reducing Sri Lanka's severe foreign currency shortages and trade deficit balance by increasing foreign currency earnings and fueling economic expansion. As such, the findings of the study highlight the need for Sri Lanka to introduce a regulatory framework and policies for regulating and ensuring decent work on the digital labour platforms and in all aspects of the gig economy. For that, the size of the gig economy needs to be measured and data should be collected as part of the labour force survey. Since the majority of these digital labour platforms are international platforms, regional or national offices should be established in the host countries, and it should be mandated by the law. At a national level, understanding the gig work and gig economy will help the policy makers to draft policies and laws to encourage digital work, which is increasingly important for Sri Lanka, given the current economic downturn of the country.



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