Gig economy workers say they can no longer survive

Meager earnings from jobs leave workers increasingly vulnerable

PARIS: Whether in Paris, Kuala Lumpur or California, gig economy workers fear they can no longer survive on meager earnings from jobs that leave them increasingly vulnerable. The term "gig" stretches back a century to jazz musicians who used it to refer to a one-off show but now the "gig economy" involves millions of people in all sorts of jobs, from Uber drivers to Deliveroo delivery teams.

Algorithm slaves

Wissem Inal does more than 700 kilometers (450 miles) a week on his scooter, delivering up to 10 takeout meals in the Paris suburbs every evening. "At the moment, with the lockdown I end up with 500 euros ($600) a month net," said the 32-year-old who has driven for Deliveroo since 2017 but also takes jobs for Uber Eats and Stuart.

Inal has trouble seeing the "good side" of his job at the moment and criticizes calculations by Deliveroo's algorithm that decide how much to offer him for jobs. "A delivery that's worth six euros at noon is worth just three euros in the evening. You can't earn a living with this job, unless you're willing to live like a slave."

He recently joined an association of gig delivery drivers that seeks to improve working conditions. "We should be able to defend ourselves," he maintains.

'Flexibility' or 'on demand'?

When Erica Mighetto began driving with Lyft three years ago, "I just loved it", she said. Her grown son had left the house and she thought it would be a great move until she found a job in bookkeeping or property management. "I really enjoyed, you know, choosing my own hours," she told AFP. "I thought life was good."

Mighetto lived in Sacramento but would drive more than an hour to the San Francisco area on weekends because there was more work in the richer towns. She slept in her car or shelled out $25 for a room. Mighetto was pulling in $60-$80 an hour before expenses in 2017 but a series of rate cuts caused that to fall to $20 at the beginning of the year and to less than $10 in March.

She finds the algorithms opaque and pernicious.

"So it knows me personally," said Mighetto. "And the bonus offers were changed, you know, based on what I was willing to accept." If friends were getting bonus offers of $50 for doing 20 rides per week, the algorithm would offer her $350 — but for 120 rides a week.

To get enough jobs and claim the bonus, drivers would accept lower fees. "You're in this like, vicious cycle black hole," said Mighetto. She does not buy the argument that gig work is flexible. "I personally call it on demand work... there's no flexibility-you have to work when there's demand. You're going to work late nights, long weekends and every single holiday."

In the spring, she gave up driving for fear of catching COVID-19 but had to fight for unemployment benefits of $450 per week instead of the $167 paid to gig workers. She received a $600 per week supplemental federal benefit that the US introduced as part of its COVID-19 stimulus measures but it ran out after four months.

Mighetto is bitter about a California referendum-backed by Uber-to overturn a state law that would have forced gig firms to recognize their drivers as employees, and pay them minimum wages and benefits. California voters approved the measure with 58 percent of the vote.

"We shouldn't be stripping workers of basic labor protections so people can get cheap rides," she said.

Juggle the platforms

Twenty-seven-year-old Devon Gutekunst delivers for DoorDash, which just took in almost $3.4 billion in its stock market debut. His smartphone offers him a job — $5.50 for a 4.6-mile delivery in 30 minutes.

"That's the equivalent of $11 an hour, that's too little," said Gutekunst. "My personal minimum is $18 an hour. I often make more than that, because I have a strategy." Part of it is to be selective and focus on western Los Angeles and the beach towns of Marina Del Rey and Santa Monica. But mostly it consists of playing different platforms off against each other. Gutekunst's job acceptance rate for DoorDash was 12 percent that day but he said it can often be just two percent. "To make decent money... you really have to juggle, to play with all the offers to make your living."

$27 for 14-hour shift in Malaysia

Amal Fahmi, 24, keeps his eye glued to his cell phone and the Grab delivery app popular in Southeast Asia. He is one of many Malaysians who makes a living delivering food, medication and shopping by motorcycle in Petaling Jaya, an affluent suburb of Kuala Lumpur. Before COVID-19 hit, he was a driver for Grab in Johor, southern Malaysia. "I could easily make a comfortable living. But after the virus outbreak, life became tough as many people lost their jobs and my income was reduced," Amal said as he waited outside a department store for his ninth order of the day. Given the bleak prospects in Johor, he headed to the capital.

"There were no job opportunities in my home town as I lack academic qualifications," he explained.

Amal earns a little more than $700 a month if he puts in long hours. That day he reached his daily average of $27 after a grueling 14 hours. "Look around, there are so many of us doing delivery. It is getting tough," he said. Amal would prefer a steady job but does not completely regret the path he has chosen. What motivates me is I am the boss... I can manage my time and most importantly, no one scolds me," he laughed. —AFP

The "gig economy" involves millions of people in all sorts of jobs, from Uber drivers to Deliveroo delivery teams.

Rise of rural telework in Spain hit by digital divide

VILLALBA DE DUERO, Spain: Tired of Madrid's crowds, Antonio Linaje took advantage of the shift to telework sparked by the pandemic to move back to the village where he spent his holidays as a child.

The 28-year-old political consultant settled in October in a house he inherited from his grandparents in Villalba de Duero, a village of around 700 people about 170 kilometers (105 miles) north of the bustling Spanish capital. "I always dreamed of returning home," he said, stressing that the move was only possible thanks to the availability of high-speed fiber optic internet broadband in the village.

But for many Spaniards looking to make a similar move to the countryside during the pandemic, a lack of good internet access often stands in the way. Just over one in four Spaniards-some 13 million people-do not have decent internet access, according to Spanish trade union UGT.

This digital divide is the legacy of years of a lack of investment in Spain's depopulated interior, which has been emptied out by the flight of young people to cities since the 1950s in search of better job opportunities. Some parts of Spain have just two people per square kilometer-the same density as in Siberia. Carmen Rogado, a 36-year-old bank employee, said she abandoned her plan to move back to her home village of Arabayona de Mogica in western Spain because she could only get slow internet access there.

"You want to come back and in the end circumstances force you to stay in big cities," she said.

The problem is not unique to Spain. Two thirds of school-age children worldwide have no internet at home, according to a UN report published earlier this month, even as pandemic-induced school closures have made online access vital to getting educated.

The Spanish government has promised an ambitious European Union-funded program to provide "adequate" internet connectivity to 100 percent of Spain's population by 2025 as part of its efforts to revive the countryside. —AFP

Opinion

Rethinking energy projects' status quo

By Badar Chaudhry

A constant rush to build as much infrastructure and curate as much talent as possible is a narrative that has long pervaded the fossil fuel boom. But the energy transition - especially its surprising acceleration this year - is changing that. Now the burgeoning push to find project financing for new types of greener energy projects and innovations, notably renewables, nuclear and liquified natural gas (LNG), is raising a very pressing question. How to avoid a potentially financially crippling surge in stranded fossil fuel assets, notably coal and oil?

A $900bn red flag

The cost of writing off stranded assets could reach $900bn worldwide - or one third of the current value of big oil and gas companies - if governments aggressively tried to meet the limit of 2∞C, according to the Financial Times' Lex. Consider the financial burden of this figure amid lower oil prices, the economic strain of the Covid-19 pandemic, plus the cost of the energy transition. Wood Mackenzie expects a minimum of $30-$40trn of investment is needed to put the world on a 2∞C or lower pathway.

Of course, the potential financial strain will differ region-to-region. For example, oil and gas will remain a central part of the Middle East's energy basket up to 2050. This is not a failure, but key to sustaining energy security as the world finds its greener footing. That the 'last drop of commercial oil' will very likely be from a Middle Eastern well reduces the region's immediate risk of stranded assets, but the risk must still be factored in as the renewable portfolio matures. The combined shares of oil and gas as part of the region's energy mix will fall from 98 percent in 2018 to 61 percent in 2040 with a Rapid scenario, 37 percent in a Net Zero scenario, and 79 percent in a Business as Usual (BAU) scenario, according to BP Outlook.

Pick your path

So, how to mitigate the risk of losing the billions of dollars invested in existing fossil fuel infrastructure, much of it based on multi-decade contracts and multi-decade debt packages? One route is to continue business as usual and risk the hyperbole image of stranded assets - a bleak landscape with rusting infrastructure en masse creaking in the wind - becoming an expensive reality in the next few decades.

Another route is one of proactivity, which sees legacy infrastructure getting a reboot to make it more aligned with the Paris Agreement goals. Broadly speaking, this means embracing a circular carbon economy (CCE), which in turn, includes bolstering energy efficiency within legacy infrastructure, updating human resources skillsets, and applying the digital tools of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) to help maximize value and relevance.

This is an undeniably vast and complex task, but it is our best chance at stabilizing the environmental and economically human-induced elements of climate change. Improving energy efficiency and switching to renewable energy will address 55 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, detailed the Ellen McArthur Foundation. But by adopting circular practices, the world can reduce a significant proportion of the remaining 45 percent.

The systems-based approach of a circular carbon economy combines economic opportunity with better environmental and societal outcomes by addressing the multitude of facets of the energy transition - i.e. water scarcity, loss of biodiversity, packaging pollution and more. All parties in all industries must zoom their lower carbon microscopes on their supply chains - both linear and interconnecting - to redefine environmental efficiency from production through to the end user. And back again. Climate finance plays a vital role in this positive disruption, starting with educating stakeholders about what greener finance means and how to leverage it.

Plus, the price tag of this route is far less than that of stranded assets or the catastrophic impacts of unmitigated climate change. Payback margins are increasingly appealing in today's economic environment. For example, the Global Commission on Adaptation (GCA) calculated that every dollar invested in building climate resilience could result in between $2-$10 in net economic benefits.

Domino effect

Let us not forget that the value of a circular carbon economy goes far beyond ticking sustainability boxes in the energy transition. It also directly links to lower resource scarcity and geopolitical tensions. The Ecological Threat Register 2020 results show that 141 countries are exposed to at least one ecological threat between now and 2050. The 19 countries with the highest number of threats have a population of 2.1bn. This mean a minimum of 20 percent of the global population by mid-century would be significantly affected.

The economic fallout alone of this global ricochet of disruption - something the world has already witnessed with Covid-19 - would be life-changing for many more billions of people. We have the solution for reducing the risk of stranded assets via a circular carbon economy at our fingertips. Now we just need to proactively reach for it.

Note: Badar Chaudhry is senior vice president, unit manager, Energy Sector, Mashreq Bank

SOPHOS

The realities of ransomware: Five signs you're about to be attacked

By Peter Mackenzie, incident response manager, Sophos

Whenever we work with ransomware victims, we spend some time looking back through our telemetry records that span the previous week or two. The telemetry sometimes records behavioral anomalies that (on their own) may not be inherently malicious, but in the context of an attack that has already taken place, could be taken as an early indicator of a threat actor conducting operations on the victim's network.

If we see any of these five indicators, in particular, we jump on them straight away. Any of these found during an investigation is almost certainly an indication that attackers have poked around on the network prior to the attack: to get an idea of the network layout, and to learn how they can get the accounts and access they need to launch a ransomware attack.

Attackers use legitimate admin tools to set the stage for ransomware attacks. Without knowing what tools administrators normally use on their machines, one could easily overlook this data. In hindsight, these five indicators represent investigative red flags.

A network scanner, especially on a server

Attacks typically start when an attacker gains control of one machine they can use as a foothold, from which they begin to profile the target organization: is this a Mac or Windows workstation; what's the domain and company name; what kind of admin rights does the computer have. Next, attackers will want to know what else is on the network and what can they access. The easiest way to determine this is to scan the network. If you detect a network scanner, such as AngryIP or Advanced Port Scanner, query the admin staff to make sure they weren't responsible for leaving it there. If no one recalls using the scanner, it's time to investigate.

Tools for disabling antivirus software

Once attackers have admin rights, they will often try to disable security software using applications created to assist with the forced removal of software, such as Process Hacker, IOBit Uninstaller, GMER, or PC Hunter. These types of commercial tools are legitimate, but in the wrong hands, security teams and admins need to question why they have suddenly appeared.

The presence of MimiKatz

Any detection of the password extraction tool MimiKatz anywhere should be investigated. If no one on an admin team can vouch for using MimiKatz, this is a red flag because it is one of the most commonly used hacking tools for credential theft. Attackers also use Microsoft's Process Explorer, one of the Windows Sysinternals tools, that can dump LSASS.exe from memory, creating a .dmp file. They can then extract the passwords right on the foothold machine, or take the memory dump to their environment and use MimiKatz to safely extract user names and passwords on their own machine.

Patterns of suspicious behavior

Any detection happening at the same time every day, or in a repeating or regular pattern or tempo, is often an indication that something else is going on, even if malicious files have been detected and removed. Security teams should ask "why is it coming back?" Incident responders know it normally means that something else malicious has been occurring that hasn't (as yet) been identified.

Test attacks

Occasionally, attackers deploy small test attacks on a few computers in order to see if the deployment method and ransomware executes successfully, or if security tools stop it. If the security tools block the attack, they change their tactics and try again. This will show their hand, and attackers will know their time is now limited. It is often a matter of hours before they launch a much larger attack.

Sophos' next-gen cybersecurity solutions to stop Ransomware

Sophos offers layered IT security for defending against the latest ransomware. Sophos not only provides best protection at every point, but also provides threat intelligence sharing between all these security points with synchronized security.

Sophos XG Firewall prevents attacks from getting onto a network. In the event ransomware does happen to get onto a network, Sophos XG Firewall can automatically stop ransomware dead in its tracks thanks to integration with Sophos Intercept X.

Sophos Intercept X Advanced with EDR includes anti-ransomware technology that detects malicious encryption processes and shuts them down before they can spread across network.

The Sophos Managed Threat Response (MTR) service adds human expertise to an organization's layered security strategy. An elite team of threat hunters proactively look for and validate potential threats, and then take action to disrupt, contain and neutralize attacks.