

Worth of platform work in Estonia

Summary

Platform work constitutes the fastest growing segment of alternative work. While many problems (e.g. low wages, unfair treatment of workers) have been reported, the more existential question of worth has received scant attention. Other than providing an (extra) income and a flexible schedule, we know little of what makes platform work worth doing, and why. This is especially true for low-skill and low-status platform work such as ride-hailing or delivery work (often labelled as gig work). The goal of this research project, thus, is to explore why gig work is considered work worth doing by those who have a choice. The question will be investigated through a single case study of Bolt drivers in Estonia. In Estonia, Bolt is not just another platform company, it is a huge start-up success story that is taught in business schools and regularly features in the national news. Thus, Estonia provides a well-bounded and interesting societal context to better understand the social construction of new forms of work as worth doing (or not) in the digital economy. The project is supported by the Estonian Research Council.

Research field:	Business
Supervisor:	Prof. Dr. Mari-Klara Stein
Availability:	This position is available.
Offered by:	School of Business and Governance Department of Business Administration
Application deadline:	Applications are accepted between October 01, 2022 00:00 and October 23, 2022 23:59 (Europe/Zurich)

Description

The project explores the topic of platform work's worth from the theoretical perspective of "account making" from organizational psychology and management (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017; Stein et al., 2019). Account making describes the process of socially constructing the worth of work, where workers justify why their work is worth doing (or not worth doing) by drawing on a set of "raw materials", such as culturally-defined values and job conditions present in their context (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017). Workers draw on different sources ("raw materials") for such justification – most commonly cultural and/or religious values (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017, p. 112), but also the opinions of others (Tosti-Kharas and Michaelson, 2021). Platform economy is characterized by a transactional focus, lack of labor regulation, and algorithmic management - these characteristics generate a working environment that values independence, cunning and entrepreneurialism (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Colloquially, this is often described as the "hustle and grind" – a do-it-yourself, work-hard-for-the-money, take-any-opportunity – kind of mentality. It is unclear what values are associated with this mentality and how they influence gig workers' constructions of work worth (or not worth) doing.

The goal of this PhD project is to address the following overarching question: How and why do gig economy platform workers justify their work as worth doing within a particular societal context?

The thesis should address the question through: (1) semi- structured interviews with Bolt drivers, (2) ethnographic observations (collection of field notes and digital artifacts in the form of screen captures) on forums where Bolt's Estonian drivers socialize (e.g. "Bolti juhtide foorum" on Facebook) and (3) archival document collection of Bolt-related news articles in Estonian press (focusing on articles published in Estonian and/or Russian, as these are more likely to represent local societal attitudes than international English-language articles).

Responsibilities and (foreseen) tasks

- The candidate's main task will be to prepare a doctoral thesis in the domain of digital transformation of work (with a specific focus on platform work) under the supervision of Professor Mari-Klara Stein.
- The candidate is also expected to engage in small-scale teaching and supervision.
- The candidate can also contribute to the organization of research and practitioner workshops where project findings are disseminated.

Applicants should fulfil the following requirements:

- A master's degree in social sciences (preferably in business administration, information systems or sociology)
- A clear interest in the topic of the position
- Excellent command of both Estonian and English
- Strong and demonstrable writing and analytical skills
- Capacity to work both as an independent researcher and as part of an international team
- Capacity and willingness to provide assistance in organizational tasks relevant to the project

The following experience is beneficial:

- Working knowledge of qualitative methods (e.g., case studies)
- Working knowledge of qualitative data analysis software (e.g., NVIVO)

The candidate should submit a research plan for the topic, including the overall research and data collection strategy. The candidate can expand on the listed research question and tasks, and propose additional theoretical lenses to be used.

We offer:

- 4-year PhD position in one of the leading social science research centers in Estonia with a large portfolio of ongoing pan-European and national projects on various topics in business administration, entrepreneurship and digital transformation
- The chance to do high-level research in one of the most dynamic start-up and platform work contexts globally
- Opportunities for conference visits, research stays and networking with globally leading universities and research centers in the field of digital transformation of work

About the department

The Department of Business Administration deals with topical and relevant aspects of businesses – covering sustainable business development, knowledge and innovation management, risk management, strategic management, marketing, operations management, supply chain management, accounting, human resources management, performance management, digitalization, international business, and entrepreneurship – in its research and teaching activities.

The department is highly internationalised. Its staff have been involved in a multitude of international research projects with the EU (INTERREG, COST, FP7, H2020).

Additional information

For further information, please contact Prof Mari-Klara Stein (marste@ttu.ee) or visit <https://taltech.ee/en/department-business-administration>



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