
Gig Work in Post Pandemic Times: Does it an Agile Work Structure?

*Journal of
Entrepreneurship and Business*
E-ISSN: 2289-8298

Vol. 11, Issue 2, pp. 56-68. Sept. 2023

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Date Received: 1st May 2023

Date Accepted: 30th Sept 2023

DOI: 10.17687/jeb.v11i2.1014



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Abstract – Gig economy is known as situations where workers work based on demand or known as ‘online gig work’, or on-demand economy’. The purpose of this paper is to explore the effectiveness of gig work configuration to overcome the post pandemic impacts. Qualitative research design is employed to answer the research question. Data for this study was collected from the online sellers in Malaysia using online interview. The phenomenology approach is adopted to analyses the data with labour context perspectives. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data. The underlying assumption of gig works implementation are explored and lead to the understanding of its effectiveness in terms of providing sustainable income and solving financial difficulties due to the Covid-19 impacts. Findings suggest that most Malaysia gig workers was involved in the gig works due to financial difficulties during pandemic. However, the potential of this flexible work structure outnumbered its challenges, suggesting a huge opportunity for gig works system to be utilized by the people. Findings also discovered the awareness among respondents to equip themselves with communication skills, content writing, information technology, leadership skills and product knowledge. The findings imply that the social support could be geared up to assist the people in dealing with the challenges of this flexible work system realizing its huge potential to minimize the detrimental impacts of the pandemic and uncertain economic conditions.

Keywords: Sustainability Management, Gig Economy, Human Resource Management, Covid-19, Flexible Work Structure

1. Introduction

During Covid-19, economic uncertainties have become an intense challenge for people around the globe. The difficulties during critical times were beyond the control of people as the situation brought impact to the daily live and organization’s operation. Due to that, the difficult time during pandemic hinders the facilitation of growth that has been planned earlier. As such, during the challenging times of pandemic, more countries have experienced the impacts of negative national output, and this is similar to Malaysia that led to economic downturn (Kollias & Tzeremes, 2021). It is reported that the country had loss amounted of state output and increased of unemployability (Taskinsoy, 2020). Service, manufacturing, mining, and quarrying, agriculture and construction was the listed sectors that experiences negative gross domestic product (GDP) impact on economic distress

during the disease attack in 2020 (Department of Statistic Malaysia, 2021). The situation is worsening as business operations are also fluctuate and result with more downsizing, cutbacks, layoffs, and restructuring. Even after the pandemic, the impact still can be felt when looking at the economic conditions and household incomes.

Reacting to this economic situation after pandemic is crucial for the society to survive their increased cost of living while the government and business are trying to bounce back from the detrimental impact of Covid-19. It is reported that the middle-class people are those who affected much with the constant rise of living cost and variety of movement restrictions (Simon, et al., 2021). Employees are facing with high uncertainty and low job security due to the complexity of the labour market, fluctuation of economic situations as well as unrest political issues. The pressure to survive and fulfil the personal and family necessity has increased the demand of gig works.

The trend of online gig work or also known as 'platform economy', or 'on demand economy' came into interest following the growth of employment flexibility that is highly demanded in the modern workplace (Guest, 2017). This is also a result of an effort to increase work-life balance among employees within the challenging time. In fact, Guest (2017) views technology advancement as a 'blessing' to most people when they can work based on the contract of their choice. This is also supported by other researchers who see the establishment of online platform in job matching (Kuhn & Mansour, 2014). Thus, it is assumed that future employment will be dominated by 'freelancers' or online gig workers who work based on current demand, because of pandemic issue, internet adoption and technology advancement.

Employment insecurity is one issue to be considered with the growth of gig works (Schneiberg, 2021; Standing, 2011). It is proven that employment insecurity is a serious problem to be solved because it will bring negative consequences to the employee's well-being (De Witte et al., 2016). This includes problems that influence the quality of life, productivity, and revenue of an organization. Therefore, while job searching through the internet become effective as for its ability to be a significant labour market matchmaker (Kurekova et al., 2015), this method requires an effective measure and system to give benefits towards the society. Researchers believed that more investigation on the issue of gig economy is crucial for modern workplace development particularly in ensuring the paradigm switch is understood by related stakeholders as to differentiate between traditional employment processes with that of boundaryless works in the gig economy (Kost, Fieseler & Wong, 2019).

In Malaysia, among the popular gig works includes food rider, ride-hailing, freelancers, and online sellers. The increased standard cost of living in Malaysia becomes the main reason why people choose gig works as their source of income. Even before the pandemic, half of Malaysians earn below than RM2000 (453.26 USD) per month as their main income and the median income of Malaysian only RM1703(385.95 USD), which is insufficient to live with the current economy situations (Chong & Khong, 2018). This is even worse after the Covid-19 hit the world. Based on Business Today (2022) on EMIR Research in 2020, Malaysia workforce was involved as the gig workers or freelancer closed to 26% that was equivalent to 4 million out of 15.1 million people. The livelihood of the people in the country is hugely depends on the economic situations. Good economic

situations may offer employability, good infrastructure, business and social development and more benefits to the country. In contrast, economic uncertainties may slow down the development of the nation due to limited economic activities that could generate enough income to the society with the need of additional income (Glick et al., 2022). The sustainability of gig works was increasingly accepted during and after the pandemic especially on online transaction practices as it supports the limitation and reducing face to face interaction between gig workers and customers as recommended by the government.

In the human resource management perspective, the emergence of gig economy pushed aside the traditional employment relationship of employee-employer with the low employment security identifiable (Cross & Swart (2022)). The relationship of employees and employer within the organization has low detection and nearly not exist in this kind of economy. The usage of technology platform took over the traditional function of human resource on workers management. In ensure that the gig workers meet the specific standards with high performance, variety of human resource management activities being implemented by the intermediary platform's firms in the gig economy. therefore, the standard of the output gain being well-controlled (Lee, Kusbit, Metsky & Dabbish, 2015). The issue of digital labour and online jobs is not new for Malaysia as the country has been introduce to the online transaction since 2000 by the initiatives from Maybank Berhad as the largest domestic bank at the time. Meanwhile in 2013, Digital Malaysia Strategic Programme has been launched by the Government of Malaysia with the aim to prepare Malaysian to involve in the global digital revolution and help the country to achieve the status of high-income nation (Digital Malaysia, 2013). In the current year 2023, the Digital Malaysia reported that internet user was 33.03 million with 96.8% penetration rate in Malaysia at the start of the year. This figure proven that the online transaction was well received and reached towards the population in Malaysia. Therefore, the gig works that emphasize on the internet and online transaction platform was adapted and enhance during and after the pandemic situation. In line with the effort of the country and the people to bounce back from the detrimental impact of Covid-19, the aim of this paper is to explore the implementation of gig works for post-pandemic adaptation among people in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

A gig economy is an economy that has optional work arrangement with variety kinds of jobs that grow fast (Katz & Krueger, 2016; Murray & Ball, 2016). In gig economy, the workers have the authority to diversify their income from many sources in their niches (Kuhn, 2016). On the side of consumers, instead of fully depending on the permanent workers, the gig economy enables them to be served by the freelancers from the company of the product or service (Duhaimie & Woessner, 2019).

Based on Abraham, Haltiwanger, Sandusky & Spletzer, (2018), gig economy can be defined as the existence of flexible jobs with less structured work arrangements that using online applications such as social media and technological tools such as smartphone to connect interaction between employers, gig workers and customers. The job matching demand of customers and supply from company that implemented by the gig workers. The collection of markets having the gig workers as the intermediaries to completing the

transaction with the collection of markets match. This approach was the support to on demand commerce by balancing the profit gain by each party involved. Therefore, the gig workers also having formal agreement with the suppliers or company to reacted as the server to the customers' demand that has been requested through the applications provided. The gig workers engaged with the on-demand company as the provider and completing the roles as expected by the customers and company (Donovan, Bradley, & Shimabukuro, 2016).

Parallel to the passage of time, the battling in financial difficulties was well assisted by the emergence of gig works. The job offered via online platform with the app-enabled work open variety of job opportunities with the versatile works schedule, self-directed workplace and limitless earnings (Ravenelle, 2019). The accessibility of the applications among the consumers was guaranteed as well as it eases the movement of the gig workers in job completion. as the norm of the freelancers, it gives freedom to the gig workers in remotely completing the job without specific restrictions on the workplace as compared to the normal permanent workers.

Along the implementation of gig workers in their job, the issue arises on regarding the skills and competencies of the gig workers to meet the quality perceived as performed by the permanent with skilled workforce. The focus on having the satisfaction from the customers was crucial to ensure that the reputation of the company was well maintained and improved. Further, despite the lack of experience in performing new job, the motivation and determination of the gig workers also become the additional issue that could be disputed. As the job features, the company in gig economy has low control towards the quality of services performs by the gig workers (Duhaime et al., 2019). Both sides of the gig workers and company has different expectation especially in the service-based company with temporary connection based on the availability of the job.

Based on Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski (2019), the elements of gig works comprise of constraints, confine, reassure and orientation. The constraints consist of limitation of time, lack of energy and tool in task completion that become the push factors in finding the most creative way to complete the job. The confine environment also helps the gig workers to seek for better ideas. In response to the lack of employment relationship with the company, the gig workers find for their own assurance through the bearable workload, supportive colleagues, and sufficient sources (Brocq et al, 2022). The orientation was helping to introduce the job workers towards the tasks and explain the specific items needed to produce high quality of the completed tasks. Gig works become one of the bridges for the gig workers in entrepreneurship that provide added value in their job experience (Roy & Shrivastava, 2020).

Due to the different interpersonal networks, the culture and legal norms of gig workers have limited relationship between gig workers and company (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta & Hjorth, 2019). Most gig workers have limited cover and support from the employer in terms of personal, social, and economic that creates anxieties among them (Williams & Lebsock, 2019). Putting the gig works at disadvantage as norms, the using of compensation supported productivity can help the gig workers in future and at an equivalent time challenge the permanent employees in the organization who got the benefit to improve their performance (Cook, Diamond, & Oyer, 2019).

3. Methodology of Study

Review of the methodological aspects for studies related to online job platforms found that most research employed content research (i.e., Backhaus, 2004; Beblavy et al., 2016; Capiluppi & Baravalle, 2015; Stefanik, 2012). A quantitative research design also involved in few studies (i.e., Young & Case, 2004; Tijdens et al., 2015). Further, most analysis of the quantitative data is done using descriptive analysis, frequencies, and correlation. While the absolute number of internet population may not be counted, researchers believed that sampling for internet-based data collection is almost obsolete (Askitas & Zimmerman, 2015). Therefore, the research design and data analysis for this type of study is hugely influenced by the research objectives and scope (Kurekova et al., 2015). In this study, the research design is based on qualitative data as the purpose of this study is exploratory in nature.

Respondents are chosen among online sellers due to the accessibility and willingness of the respondents to participate in this study. Due to the increased number of online markets during and after the pandemic, most of them offer services to the customers. Based on the record, Malaysia has 25 million active internet users with about 22 million mobile users and almost half of the population in 2018 was an online shopper. There were forecasted that in 2020, the online market will increase to 5% as compared to 0.5% in 2014. In this study, online sellers that are chosen are those who acted as the middlemen between the suppliers of the main company and the customers.

Online interviews were conducted with respondents and the questions asked are related to their experience as gig workers. Snowball sampling was used to choose the respondents as the online sellers usually have a group of friends. The respondents suggest their friends to be the following respondents until the data was saturated. After the interview was completed, the transcripts were prepared accordingly by listening to the recorder and field notes. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the interview data. The study used Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) theory to underpin the data interpretation. AMO theory discussing on three main elements in human resource management practices comprises of ability, motivation, and opportunities. This theory was introduced by Appelbaum et al. (2000) and Bailey (1993) with the suggestions that in ensuring employee's discretionary, there were efforts needed with the explanation that employees need to have necessary skill (ability), with the appropriate motivation (motivation) and opportunities need to be given to them by the employers (opportunities).

4. Findings and Discussion

A total of 31 respondents involved in this study. Several themes were identified through the data analysis. Themes are gathered through the Gioia data analysis framework involving three main stages; first order analysis, second order analysis and aggregate dimension (Gioia et al., 2013). The highest number of themes fall under the Opportunity

(social media, financial problems, gig goals) element as compared to Ability (Gig skills, internet connectivity) and Motivation (Competition).

The findings from the interview found the potential of gig works for the workers. This is explained through the involvement in the gig economy jobs consist of gig skills possessed, social media adaptation, financial problem solvent and the avoidance of unemployment in gig goals. Meanwhile, the challenges among the gig workers also found on the competition in business and internet connection problems. The explanation of the finding based on the respondent's experiences was described as follows;

4.1. Gig Skills

In terms of the job structure, gig workers need to have the expertise in promoting their products and utilizing social media as the platform to promote the products to potential customers. They are obligated to possess the knowledge skills to describe the products and the skills to use the social media application along the transaction. Some of the gig workers take classes to learn more about the products function and features as well as for the marketing strategy used for products promotion. The respondents also mentioned on the need and learn social media usage knowledge. This situation cultivates the exposure to knowledge skills and IT skills among the gig workers directly.

By doing online jobs, we also need to know the knowledge of information technology such as the software or application that we need to use. We are also must have skill expertise to use the software or business-related application (R9)

An inappropriate marketing strategy may affect gig workers sales and trust from the customers. Hence, the marketing strategy implemented must come together with good communication skills. Despite non-face-to-face interaction occurs in gig work, proper communication in term of language, voice intonation during calls and sentence management on messaging play a vital impact towards the successfulness of the transaction between gig workers and potential customers. This situation shows that communication skills and writing skills must be possess by the gig workers. Based on the respondents, along the online selling involvement, they able to learn appropriate communication skills needed in handling the customers. The daily routine on customer handling become the learned experience for them to communicate based on the customers preferences and situation.

In addition to that, the punctuality and commitment also being mentioned by the gig workers as the crucial criteria in performing the gig works effectively. The gig workers must be able to control their own time in task completion. Based on the respondents, beside the autonomy in deciding, the appoint as leader for the team also enable them to handle their commitment in solving any problems arise.

From the point of time and commitment, it is very good. We help each other and communicate constantly to solve any problems that arise. In the support group provided by the company, we support each other. Both want to pursue sales, and both succeed. A group full of positive aura like this will be able to give birth to high leadership qualities in us as traders. (R14)

4.2. Social Media

Most of the gig workers started being in the business of gig economy from the social media such as *facebook* and *instagram* and from the online web such as *shopee* and *lazada*. The process of online selling mostly uses social media platforms starting from promotion until testimonial stage. The involvement of the gig workers in doing side income mostly being influenced by the family as well as the exposure from their friends that introduce the usage of social media as the platform to promote their product and services. The process of selling through social media enables the respondents to continuously learn to expert the usage of previous, current, and new features.

Doing work as a sales agent. Just need to promote the item on any platform like Lazada Shopee Facebook Instagram. Get feedback from customers about sales ads. Give feedback and testimonials about sales items) (R4)

The emergence of social media in online business opens various opportunities for people to reach various level of people especially their target market. Social media plays a vital role for the performance of the gig workers with the features and function introduced by those platforms accordingly. The work structure that mostly uses social media gives clear picture to the gig workers to not only using social media as the socialize platform but can be utilized as the income generation platform. The respondents mentioned that instead of having social media only for entertainment purposes, they take the opportunity to well expert the various functions provide and turn it into income. Therefore, the respondents believe that social media has become the sources of agility among the gig workers to further their future career.

It started when I noticed that I needed to have an extra income to support my studies and slowly do some saving for my future. And it turns out I enjoy doing business while studying and as teenagers we like to post out our photo on social media, so I just promote my product by myself donning my own product. (R7)

4.3 Financial problems

Most of gig workers were doing the online business due to financial difficulties they faced due to the increased cost of living and fluctuating economic situations. There is consensus among respondents that the main motivation to get involved in gig works is due to financial difficulties they faced during the pandemic Covid-19.

Selling online can help the family's economy considering the country is currently under MCO and job is uncertain (R2)

As expected, the involvement of the gig workers in online sellers was helping them to have additional income to deal with increased cost of living recently. The gig workers can avoid poverty due to the economic situation faced especially during pandemic Covid-19. The gig workers have the agility to resolve their financial difficulties by expecting and looking for the income sources in the gig economy industry. The work system enables the gig workers to complete the task without neglecting their main job. The level of income in the gig economy depends on their effort to achieve their own specific target. Therefore, the gig workers believe that the variety of jobs in gig economy provide opportunity for them to survive in life.

Online selling is a huge field in the industry and economy. We can go further and higher if we keep committed to it. We can gain income, help others to have income, and even contribute to the economy. (R24)

4.4 Gig goals

The main purpose of the gig workers involvement in the gig works was due to have additional income. Despite having the main permanent job, the gig workers have the objective to increase their income through the additional job in gig works. Hence, in order to ensure consistency on income generation, respondents spoke about few approaches they learnt to increase the revenue from time to time. Half of the respondents had the set target by the main company for the profit calculation. Others learn to calculate their revenue by themselves and have manual calculations based on their own understanding. However, after some time, most respondents agreed that they can set their own timeline for sales and revenue.

We have unlimited income if we go to the extra miles and all out with our business. (R8)

Most of the gig workers become passionate about the gig works to the flexibility and income gained from the products and services offered. This is suggested to give more work and life satisfaction to the respondents as they felt more secure during uncertain economic situations. The flexible works system in gig works also enables them to perform well and manage their time efficiently.

It's more about time management. If you had your own time management, you could maintain your performance. (R21)

4.5 Competition

Competitiveness in business becomes the challenges for the gig workers to survive in the business environment. They must get trust from customers to repeat the purchasing and become loyal customers by having various strategy before, during and after sales service. Online platforms have exposed the gig workers to competition because there are no limitations for anyone to enter the market. Various generations and levels can be involved in the online selling that offers product and services resemblances.

The competition between the services of sellers with customers and how they keep on track to attract customers to buy their products. (R15)

However, competition is also perceived as a push factor for the respondents to be creative and open their mind to find the best strategy to win the customer's trust. The motivation of the gig workers to have healthy competition with the competitors shows how the work system runs effectively. From the positive perspectives, the competition enables the gig works to have more effort with creative marketing strategies.

Healthy competition because each service uses its own strategy to attract customers. It gives no problem. We need each other. So, both existing services providing sector and online sector should be continuously committed to contribute so that it would continue to give benefit to economy. (R23)

4.6 Internet connectivity

The use of social media and internet for the online transaction along the work process increases the need of fast internet speed among the gig workers. Some of the respondents stay at their home that is far away from the city where normally provide better internet network. Therefore, slow, and limited internet connection is also perceived as hindrance to complete the work process in gig works. Most respondents agreed that besides the need for material for promotion and financial, fast internet connection become the most important requirement to perform gig works where the support is expected to be provided by the related authorities. In this regard, respondents also believed the ability of the gig workers to deal with the internet connectivity also become one of the main factors that encourage them to fulfil the sales process smoothly. Some respondents relate this factor as they responded to the interview.

Nowadays, internet and website usage are very important to us to gain more information (R6)

5. Discussions

In recent years, the using of technological application due to the fast growing of digitalization transaction have largely influenced employment matters. As the emergence of the social media appears recently, the utilization of the technology was seen able to help the society in dealing with the Covid-19 impact as well. Through an early article from Harvard Business Review about the potential of internet platform for the society, it is said that internet could provide an enormous job opportunity for job seekers and influence the income generating activities (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). This is proven in this study as respondents agreed of the gig works' potential more than the challenges they must deal with. The potential was on having possessed the gig skills which are knowledge, IT, communication, writing and leadership skills. The potential also was seen on the social media utilization and the opportunity to resolve the financial problems. The competition among the gig workers seen as both challenges and potential. Meanwhile, the internet connectivity resembles the challenges faced by the gig workers. Further, it has long been expected that internet platform can create value of how people live and adapt especially in a modern environment. One of the values of internet adoption has been said in relation to give advantage to many related stakeholders including employees and employers (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). This contention is evidenced in the current situation of post pandemic where the growing numbers of employees who work based on demand (not fixed to one employer) has occurred in many parts of the world including Malaysia. In most situations, employees are doing several works without relying on one permanent job with one employer.

The agility of this flexible work arrangement is discussed in terms of its potential to assist the people with the financial difficulties during and post pandemic. The findings suggest that themes developed under Opportunity element outnumbered other elements of Ability and Motivation. Themes that fall under Opportunity consist of social media, financial problems, and gig goals, meanwhile under Ability were on gig skills and internet security and Motivation goes to the competition. This suggests that the differences between traditional employment and gig works are not the hindrance for the people to believe in the

potential of gig works. This supports the AMO theory assumption that an effective acceptance and implementation of work performance does not build on well-designed human resource practices (Bainbridge, 2015; Ozcelik and Uyargil, 2015).

The involvement of gig workers in online business is one of the signs of income contribution in the Malaysia economy as the business industry now takes many online traders as middlemen to convey the benefits of their products through social media. Further, the gig workers that have enjoyment in completing job have work and life satisfaction as such become the pull factors to sustain in the gig economy and rejecting the permanent employment (Keith, Harms and Tay, 2019). This may enhance the agility of gig work structure to reduce the unemployment rate in Malaysia especially during post pandemic of Covid-19.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The continuously increased cost of living with high uncertainties in the local and business environment push the labour market towards many changes. Following the latest trend, an effective work system was crucial to ensure this new employment type brings long-term benefits to the community. The effectiveness of the system can be viewed through its sustainability in bringing the potential to many related parties. This paper offers preliminary insights into the potential of a gig work system for sustainable employment for the community. Further empirical investigation is needed to examine the effectiveness of the proposed framework.

In Malaysia, the uncertain economic condition after Covid-19 with the rising cost of living has affected many people in the society. Even for those employees who have currently owned their job, searching for additional income is sometimes necessary to accommodate the higher living expenses that gradually rise. One way to reduce the differential in individual income with that of the rise in living cost is through employment opportunities. Through digitalization, more opportunities exist in the cyber market where products or services are sold through an online platform. This innovation significantly changes how people live and work, especially with the rise of gig economy. Whenever job is available, people can try and grab that opportunity to get the income. The purpose of this research is to explore the implementation of gig works for post-pandemic adaptation among people in Malaysia.

Theoretically, the study contributes to view the implementation of the gig works in Malaysia from the perspective of employees themselves which is highlighted in human resource management studies. Taking employee's perspective is regarded as an important mechanism to improve the implementation of human resource management as the input is coming from the role holders themselves. The fundamental use of AMO theory also seen to contribute in comparing the gig workers perspectives in their work system on Ability, Opportunity and Motivation. Practically, gig workers have a huge potential to assist people in dealing with financial struggles, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19. The findings of this research will benefit society by providing employment guidance while looking for flexibility in solving financial difficulties in uncertain economic situations.

Funding

This research is supported by the Postgraduate Research Grant Scheme (2019-55193/9) from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu

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