

SHIFTING TO GIG LABOUR: PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Digitalization is a global megatrend. Digital labour platforms allow companies to outsource work through an open call to a crowd of people and are the forefront of the “gig economy”, characterized by one-off tasks, without further commitments for the involved partners.

Sustainability is another megatrend and controversial from the gig economy perspective. Non-standard gig arrangements bring higher time flexibility for the workers, allowing more individuals to integrate with the labour market. However, these digital employment relationships are associated with relatively weak labour market institutions and regulations, resulting in precarious jobs.

Using data collected by semi-structured interviews, this paper explores the experience of Swiss workers who switched from a “standard-contract” employment position to occasional gig employment. This study finds evidence that the voluntary change towards a gig job may be associated with an improvement in perceived social sustainability, but a degradation of economic and environmental sustainability.

The conclusion may be specific to the high development context where the study took place, Switzerland. However, if that is the case, a stronger policy message emerges - even in newer forms of employment, protective legal

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frameworks ensuring a basic safety net for individuals continue to be key for more sustainable labour arrangements.

Keywords: gig economy, sustainable development, decent work.

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's online-driven world, job mediation is becoming increasingly digital. Online work transactions are an important part of the trendy platform economy (Bevan et al., 2018). Digital labour platforms are cropping up, allowing work to be outsourced through an open call to a crowd of potentially interested workers, known as “crowd work”, or through location-based applications by which individuals in a specific geographic area perform a service-oriented task, such as driving or delivering items (ILO, 2020). These labour platforms are at the vanguard of what is often called the “gig economy”, evoking a musician’s life in which each small performance or ‘gig’ is but a one-off task or transaction, without further commitments for the involved partners (Prassl, 2018).

The novelty of gig labor relies on the usage of digital platforms which connect business clients and workers, operating through cloud infrastructure and software, utilizing computing algorithms to access, manage, and evaluate, the performance of the on-demand labor input (De Stefano, 2019). The fact that many tasks can be completed online or near the place where the worker is located, provides new and additional labor

opportunities. Often, for crowd-workers, the requester can be in a totally different geographical and time-zone area, enhancing the number of possible tasks at reach. Individuals living in developing regions can access job opportunities in more developed countries, without having to move between countries (ILO, 2021). These new job opportunities have been especially popular in challenging economic crises such as the 2008 financial crisis, and the contemporary 2020-21 global pandemic (Henderson, 2020). Several researchers (e.g., Huws et al., 2017; Prassl, 2018) have found evidence that this type of work arrangement is spreading into diverse occupational areas, growing into a real global phenomenon. Based on data from 98 countries, the 2021 ILO report on World Employment (ILO, 2021) found that the number of digital labor platforms grew rapidly from 2007 until early 2021, from around 50 to 777 platforms, respectively, in sharp contrast with the consistently small number of platforms in use in the previous decade.

However, on a less positive note, the labor relations based on digital platforms entail a blurred definition of the employment status of the workers. The platforms explicitly avoid creating an employment relation, claiming that they are only an

intermediary between the requesting clients and individual service providers (Kenney and Zysman, 2016). At the same time, the platforms unilaterally determine and modify the working conditions included in the contract of adhesion, which the worker must agree with, without any possibility of negotiation, before accessing the platform. Furthermore, the platforms usually allocate tasks, monitor, and evaluate individuals' performance using automated algorithms, with codes that are inaccessible to workers but directly impact their rating and working reputation. As a consequence, these ratings affect the remuneration and future opportunities of work for the working individuals (De Stefano, 2019). The emerging literature classifies this ambiguous labor relationship as a new form of dependent self-employment (Williams and Lapeyre, 2017), since individuals are excluded from accessing the regulatory frameworks and protections as standard employees, but at the same time restricting their own capacity to influence important decisions of their work and compensation. The complexity of the gig labor relationships are exacerbated by the fact that the digital platforms and their cloud activities operate across multiple geographic and jurisdictional areas, making it difficult to identify which laws and regulations should apply and who would be the responsible legal entity to enforce them (Cherry, 2019; ILO, 2021).

Besides the gig economy trend, sustainability and the development

towards more sustainable societies has become prominent on the international policy agenda (United Nations, 2015), consequently also becoming a topic of interest for researchers. Since there is a rising interest to move economies towards greater sustainability, the change in the way employees do business in the digital age can be seen as an opportunity towards sustainable development.

From a sustainability perspective, the gig economy is controversial. On the one hand, these non-standard employment arrangements seem to bring higher flexibility in terms of workers' time commitments, which may allow for more individuals to become integrated into the labour market. On the other hand, occasional and intermittent employment relationships, such as the gig economy, are associated with relatively weak labour market institutions, standards, and regulations, resulting in precarious jobs (e.g., Prassl, 2018; Wood et al., 2019; Bevan et al., 2018). Economic and social risks, as well as the responsibility for social security and skill development, are transferred to the workers (Hacker, 2006; Rafferty and Yu, 2010).

The existing literature discusses some of these socio-economic aspects of the gig economy through several different lenses, such as law, ethics, or psychology (e.g., Cunningham-Parmeter, 2016; Tan et al., 2020; Ashford et al., 2018). Regarding the environmental changes associated with the gig economy, not much

research has been conducted so far, as our efforts have exposed.

Given the emphases on the workers' perspective, the analysis in this study uses the framework of socio-economic sustainability pillars for decent work developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2013). Emerging literature has begun to uncover the experience of gig workers and the associated challenges in aligning it with decent working standards, as uncovered by Aleksynska et al. (2018) on the working conditions of gig workers in the Ukraine, and by Graham et al. (2017) on the impacts of gig work for individuals in low and middle-income countries of Asia and Africa, as well as by Berg et al. (2018) on the challenges faced by the workers of five main European digital platforms. Besides extending the analysis to the environmental dimension of sustainability, this paper contributes to the existing literature by providing an in-depth analysis of the experiences of workers who changed from a stable "standard" fixed employment position, towards occasional non-standard gig employment arrangements, in a specific highly developed country, Switzerland. Seven in-depth interviews were conducted to analyse the possible motivations of the individual workers and how they perceive their freedom to achieve valuable outcomes. More specifically, this paper explores how the shift to the

gig economy is perceived by the individual workers living in Switzerland, as an opportunity towards sustainable development.

The focus on Switzerland is particularly interesting due to three main reasons. *First*, the Swiss gig economy and its related businesses are still a new phenomenon, with relatively few known experiences. *Second*, it is a country that ranks very high in terms of economic and social development,[†] where individuals have access to different types of social security schemes. These safety nets allow for the coverage of basic needs, and therefore the change to gig employment arrangements is most likely not driven by the arguments of necessity to tackle poverty, previously identified in some developing countries (e.g. Schreiner and Oerther, 2014). Furthermore, it is interesting to explore the motivations and experiences of workers who voluntarily moved away from standard employment status with well-defined social protection mechanisms and legal frameworks, to the blurred employment status of the gig economy. *Third*, Switzerland is an innovation-driven society, ranking in the first place in the Global Innovation Index of the World Economic Forum since 2011, among almost 130 countries and territories (Hutt, 2019). As such, Switzerland is commonly seen as the innovation benchmark for a myriad of states. For countries in the upper-middle income range, such as

[†] According to the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2019), in 2018, Swiss economic and social development ranked 2nd in the world, out of 189 countries and territories.

Thailand, which aim to improve their global economic situation also through innovation and digitalization (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2017), the Swiss experience on the gig economy may be a lightning rod on how such digitalization can be aligned with the sustainable development of societies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Facets of the Gig Economy Phenomenon

With the rise of the digital age, new business models have emerged, and a new form of accessing workforces has become possible. The gig economy introduces a new chapter of non-permanent working contracts which leads to greater attention to working relationships and the way work is conducted (Bound et al., 2019). The inception of this new form of work is often associated with Amazon and its struggles with algorithms to find double listings in its online shop, in the early 2000s. The solution found was the creation of an online platform with small micro-tasks, whereby a “crowd” of individuals could complete them, whereas the client would pay a small amount for each task fulfilled (Prassl, 2018).

In the literature, there are several different definitions of the gig economy, but there is still no commonly agreed idea of what specifically a gig business looks like. Some refer to the gig economy as non-permanent work, while some refer to

it as part of the platform economy (Bevan et al., 2018). There is an imprecision about the gig economy and the workers who are engaging in it, as the term gig economy may range from non-permanent jobs to renting apartments out on Airbnb (Jacobs, 2017). Furthermore, the gig economy may also include the delivery of physical services such as taxi-driving, shopping, delivery, handyman services, cleaning, and babysitting.

Given the lack of an official definition for gig work with a clear classification system and typology of activities included, this research analyses the experience of workers who moved from standard fixed to occasional gig-characteristic working arrangements, which may include different employers, with the support of digital channels.

Some discussions have recently emerged on how this new form of occasional gig employment arrangement impacts the individual's life, but the results have been mixed. On the one hand, there is some evidence that they can provide good job opportunities while allowing for flexible work schedules (De Stefano, 2016). For example, in 2017, the Bank of Montreal conducted a survey to 1005 self-employed Canadians who were performing gig jobs and concluded that the large majority decided for that type of work in a voluntary way, aiming for higher autonomy and control (Bank of Montreal, 2018). On the other hand, employers delegate any social responsibility to workers and there is a risk for exploitation of workers in

the gig economy, along with low income and employment unpredictability (Bound et al., 2019). In other words, the impact of the rising gig economy on the individual's life and its possibilities to ensure autonomy in a sustainable way is an open field which should be discussed and critically questioned.

2.2 Sustainability in the Context of the Gig Economy

When in 1972 the Club of Rome published its influential “Limits of Growth”, it opened a new focus of attention for the international community (Meadows et al., 1972). By emphasizing the negative impacts of aiming for continuous economic expansion, this publication was the outspoken recognition of the imbalances created by the economic growth efforts undertaken in the aftermath of the 2nd World War. By the end of the 1980s, with the clear incapacity of economic-centred neoliberal policies to solve the persistent and increasing social and environmental challenges, the international community under the convening power of the UN paved the way to a broader development discourse. A commonly mentioned landmark is the report “Our common future” (WCED, 1987), commissioned by the General Assembly of the UN to a group of experts known as development thinkers, ultimately generating the highly recognized definition of sustainable development as a collection of actions which “seeks to

meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future” (WCED, 1987, page 16).

Since then, several socio-political events and environmental disasters have occurred (such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Arab Spring protests, or the Tokaimura Nuclear Plant disaster, among many others). Understanding this reality, the UN has embraced several initiatives in the past decades (such as the Rio Conferences in 1992, 2002, and 2012), aiming for progress on these multidimensional priorities. These initiatives lead to the most recent and prominent 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which presents a list of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030, aiming to build an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient future for people and the planet (United Nations, 2015).

The three core dimensions of sustainable development – social, economic, and environmental – have also been translated into a more business-oriented framework, the *triple bottom line* model (Elkington, 1998, 2018). Such a model argues in favour of reporting and auditing systems, by which companies are accountable not only for their financial performance, but also their environmental, social, and ethical performances (Jeanrenaud et al., 2017). The current research project shares the view that businesses have a role in supporting societies to become more sustainably developed in its three dimensions, and therefore

presents a systematic way to evaluate the sustainability of its labor arrangements, while taking into account the impact of digitalization.

For businesses, being sustainable requires a capacity to adapt to change. A major source of change is technological, which also affects the relations with their stakeholders in general, as well as with their workers in particular. Since the early 2000s, and especially following the 2007-8 financial crisis, it is recognized that more businesses rely on online platforms to manage their relationships with their workers (Huws et al., 2017). For example, the Online Labour Index created by the Oxford Internet Institute tracks the number of projects and tasks posted on five major English-language online labor platforms (Kässi and Lehdonvirta, 2018); this shows that from May 2016 until November 2020, the number of projects increased by more than 60 percent.

Despite the growing importance of platform labour arrangements, the research regarding it has only recently emerged. Most of the existing literature has focussed on particular platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk and Crowdfunder in the USA (e.g., Irani, 2015; Berg, 2016), Upwork in India (D’Cruz and Noronha, 2016), and Uber in USA (Hall and Krueger, 2018). In 2017, a study by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and the European Services Workers Union presented the result of surveys about crowd workers’ experiences in seven European countries, highlighting the

challenges that those workers face (Huws et al., 2017). The current research paper aims to contribute to this literature, by focusing on the opportunities that gig work may offer for the achievement of more sustainably developed societies.

The recent literature on labor platforms is mostly related to social and economic aspects (e.g., Graham et al., 2017; Aleksynska et al., 2018; Berg et al., 2018). As far as it could be ascertained, there is only one study focusing on the Nordic European countries (Skjelvik et al., 2017) that assesses the environmental impacts of new business models that are mediated by digital platforms. The study focuses on the potential environmental benefits occurring when consumers share resources, concluding that the largest potential benefit is associated with transportation. This study takes the distinct perspective of workers and their new labour arrangements. However, it does not seem intuitive that there would be significant environmental gains in other segments besides transportation when considering gig labor. The worker must still use energy in the working space, job specific equipment, and the energy to perform their tasks, but s/he may avoid daily trips to the office.

The pivotal research question that this paper aims to answer is *whether individuals perceive these new forms of labor, mediated by online arrangements as being aligned with more sustainable employment conditions*. To better understand the potential sustainability aspects of the

new forms of employment, the analysis is disaggregated on the three core dimensions of economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental protection.

Given that the current research takes the perspective of the workers, the analysis would be incomplete if it would not take also into consideration the extensive work done by the ILO. Since 1919, this entity has been setting labour standards and taking initiative to promote *decent work*, that is, employment that “sums up the aspirations all people have for their working lives; for work that is productive, delivers a fair income with security and social protection, safeguards basic rights, offers equality of opportunity and treatment, prospects for personal development and the chance for recognition and to have your voice heard” (ILO, n.d.). In its essence, *decent work* is the translation of sustainable development in the sphere of labor. Therefore, this research project assesses in a thin level of analysis the actual experiences of gig workers inspired by the decent work framework developed by ILO (2013). The framework covers 10 substantive elements: i) employment opportunities; ii) adequate earnings and productive work; iii) decent working time; iv) combining work, family, and personal life; v) work that should be abolished; vi) stability and security of work; vii) equal opportunities and treatment in employment; viii) safe work environment; ix) social security; and x) social dialogue, and employers’

and workers’ representation.

3. METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research analyses the interviewees’ perceptions regarding their work experiences after voluntarily switching from a “standard-contract” employment position to occasional gig employment. More specifically, this paper explores how this shift to the gig economy is perceived by the individual workers as an opportunity towards sustainable development, by applying the framework of the ILO (2013).

Following psychology findings (e.g., Bem, 1972), the individuals’ self-perception of their behavior and of the context in which those behaviors occur are key determinants for their attitudes. While analysing the perceptions of gig workers, for example in terms of their level of authority, autonomy, and freedom of choice, regarding their work and career, it will be possible to infer whether their shift to gig work as an affective domain of learning, allows them to advance themselves as individuals and to drive valuable outcomes for themselves as well as for the society, which is ultimately the essence of sustainability (Chaiken & Baldwin, 1981).

The analysis of the workers’ perceptions on the sustainability of their transition to the gig economy, that is, whether the interviewees’ gig work conditions are perceived as “decent” or not, follows a qualitative

research methodology based on in-depth semi-structured interviews, using a narrative style. Qualitative methods are used to allow the researchers to continuously form and test new insights and to compare the factors mentioned by different interviewees during the interviewing process (Strübing, 2008). The narrative style allows the interviewer to participate as s/he elaborates on an area of her/his interest (Flick, 2014).

In Switzerland, with its well-established legal frameworks and social security schemes, the gig economy is still a new phenomenon, with an estimate that only 1.6 percent of the working-age population have offered some kind of good or service using a digital platform in the most recent year of 2020 (ILO, 2021). Those individuals switching to gig work most likely do not do this out of necessity as may happen in other less developed countries (Schriner and Oerther, 2014).

For this study, a total of 7 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Whereas findings based on such small number of interviews don't allow the researchers to speak of "representativeness of the sample", the in-depth interviews certainly contribute to a better understanding of the personal motivations to voluntarily leave a well-established legal framework of work protection, and to uncover how the shift to gig work is associated with the individual's perception of higher or lower sustainability in their working conditions.

Taking into account the

definition of gig work for this research, the targeted interviewees were workers who voluntarily moved from standard fixed to occasional gig-characteristic working arrangements; these may include different employers, with the support of digital channels. The sample of respondents was based on their capability to share experiences before, during, and after their transition to the gig economy. Although the phenomenon of gig work in Switzerland is still very unknown and the relevant population is mostly hidden and hard to find, the interviewees were identified from their presentation of themselves on the LinkedIn platform as gig workers or via their active use of existing Swiss platforms such as "Gig-me", "Migros Amigos" or "Coople". Table 1 presents the summary of the sample characteristics.

An interview guide was designed, for asking the interviewees general questions about their experience with the gig job and what had changed since they moved from a fixed to a gig work relationship. The interviewees were given a free hand in telling their story and as the flow of speech was decreasing, more specific questions were asked. The follow-up questions were specifically related to different aspects of the sustainability dimensions. All interviews were conducted in German, the mother tongue of all interviewees, were recorded, and then transcribed.

The data analysis was conducted in systematic steps, following the narrative structured approach proposed by Flick (2014). These steps

Table 1 Summary of the Sample Characteristics

Characteristic	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4	Interview 5	Interview 6	Interview 7
Previous Job Position and Business Industry	High Managerial Level / Bank	Engineer / Transport Business	Software engineer	Sales worker	School Teacher	Airport Security Service	Lithographer and graphic designer
Age (years)	49	43	30	33	28	29	27
Female (F) / Male (M)	F	M	M	M	M	M	M
Swiss National (yes/no) ?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Previous work experience in the industry, before gig economy (in years)	11	4	0	6	0.5	0	9
Work experience in the gig economy (in years)	8	15	6	3	2	8	2
Business Industry in the Gig Economy jobs	Financial industry (e.g. support setting up a fund, help buying property in Switzerland)	No specific industry focus, gig work examples are building a Gig-Economy cooperative, support projects in startup phase, etc.	Software industry, “PC jobs that can be done from anywhere”	No specific industry focus, gig work examples are organizing events, managing projects, and consultancies	Industrial engineering, e.g. designing CAD, drawing and prototyping	Security business and also music industry	(Online) design and (online) media communication industry, e.g. designing the media appearance for all kind of businesses
After shifting to gig economy, the percentage of work or working contract that are still in the non-gig business	0	0	20-30%	flexible	40-60%	Flexible	Flexible
After shifting to gig economy, the income level is lower, similar to, or higher than in previous fixed employed status	Lower	Lower	--	Lower	Lower	Varies	Lower
Overall workload after the shift, compared with former non-gig job	65%	>100%	<100%	<100%	<100%	<100%	40%

Source: authors.

of narrative data analysis include starting with reading the whole interview text to understand the overall experience told by the interview, then identifying and dividing the text into important experiential units, which later enable an in-depth analysis of each of these blocks and coding into thematic fields of analysis and interpretation. As the analysis progressed, more similarities, differences, and patterns were found, allowing the construction of a certain manageable number of categories. The final set of categories in which the information of the interviews was coded and interpreted emerged from matching any intuitive patterns with the existing frameworks of sustainability, especially those related to decent work (ILO, 2013).

From the interviews, two additional sustainable elements of the work experience emerged, which were then added to the initial 10 elements of decent work proposed by the ILO. The complete list of the overall 12 sustainable elements of work experience were analysed and the attributes of each are presented in Table A1 in the Appendix. These attributes are the basis to decode the interview statements and later classify whether the shift to the gig economy has been perceived as an improvement or degradation of the sustainable elements of the interviewees work.

4. FINDINGS

Based on a detailed analysis of the interview transcripts, it is possible

to summarize the main changes perceived by the gig workers according to the 12 sustainable elements of work experience. Since the interviews allowed the respondents to freely express their experience, for each of the 12 sustainable elements of work presented, the total number of comments is not necessarily equal to the number of interviews conducted.

i) Employment Opportunities

A sustainable work situation is characterized by sufficient demand for work, allowing for employment opportunities, with workers not feeling any threat of unemployment.

The interviewees perceived their possibilities to find sufficient paid work at any time mostly very positive. Out of 14 comments regarding “employment opportunities”, only two expressed some doubts. For example, Interviewee 2 stated: “... there is no fixed salary to go back to ... the [gig] business may start, and I cannot pick enough and have to close. That is a very big risk.” (statement lines 188-199).

On the positive side, most of the interviewees emphasize the variety of gig job offers available on their platforms, even if “they can’t speak the language or they don’t have a local network or they are (over)qualified” (Interviewee 2, statement lines 125-130). Furthermore, Interviewee 6 mentioned that “whenever I need more money, I just work more. I actually can call my office and ask for more missions I could work on” (statement lines 93-103).

ii) Adequate earnings and productive work

In a sustainable situation, workers perceive that the payment received for work allows them to participate in society and its activities, while not living in poverty (ILO, 2013).

For the interviewed gig workers, the opinions were somehow divided, but mostly negative. There were about 10 positive statements, while 18 were negative. For example, Interviewee 6 stated that “it became harder to manage income [...] and sometimes there are not many gigs to make or they’re not well paid” (statement lines 158-172). Interviewee 3 expressed his burden while mentioning “I needed a lot of time [...] I wanted to earn money, but I couldn’t. That is the uncertainty to deal with” (statement lines 50-55).

Nevertheless, the interviewees experienced that a standard employment position with a fixed income may also result in income concerns as “some colleagues lost their fixed jobs” (Interviewee 1, statement lines 77-80). Interviewee 7 brought up the point “it is risky where you go and you can’t just rely on a fixed income [...] I had to find out how to win orders” (statement lines 41-47).

iii) Decent working time

Regarding adequate working time arrangements where workers don’t feel exploited, the interviewees delivered only positive statements. All the 10 statements about this element of work confirm the

perception that workers can limit their own working time, while mastering their work-life balance. “I’m happy I can regulate how much time I can spend for work and how much time for other things” (Interviewee 1, 58-64). Also, Interviewee 2 confirmed his appreciation for the gig economy working time, “I have so many ideas in my head and things I wished to do [...] I’m not a person who feels happy with an ‘eight-to-five’-job” (statement lines 87-89).

Interviewee 5 expressed his perspective of a decent work condition, by mentioning “I’m more flexible [in the gig economy] and I can decide when I want to work [...] when I have earned enough money I can decide not to work for the rest of the month” (statement lines 26-34).

iv) Combining work, family, and personal life

Regarding a sustainable work-life balance, there were about 20 statements, from which 18 expressed a positive change when moving to the gig economy. For example, Interviewee 1 mentioned “I don’t want to go back to this very structured job, very regulated. It is something I just don’t want to do.” Furthermore, she stated, “once you become older and you have family, you want to spend more time with your family” (statement lines 26-31).

“I’m more flexible and I can decide when I want to work”, expressed Interviewee 4 (statement lines 26-34), while Interviewee 6 added, “the gig economy allows me to focus more on my passion for playing

music [...] I have more time now for my hobby” (statement lines 49-65).

On the other hand, there were two negative statements. Interviewee 5 mentioned “during vacations, sometimes I would prefer to be permanently employed. You cannot just switch off so well when you know that you won’t earn money while you enjoy life”. Interviewee 2 reflected his emotional stress shifting to the gig economy, stating, “it can be a bit depressing because you don’t have a separation of home and work anymore [...] and the loneliness is difficult [to stand]” (statement lines 47-61).

vi) Work that should be abolished

To ensure sustainability in the context of decent work, workers should not be exposed to forced work, child work, or any kind of work that indicates slavery. None of the interviewees mentioned any exposure of any of these types of work that should be abolished. This is not a surprise, given the reality of the Swiss society, characterized by high respect for human rights and a high level of legal protection for individuals.

vi) Stability and security of work

In a sustainable and decent work context, workers should not be exposed to precarious employment arrangements and the payment for work should cover life-related expenses. Regarding tenure, the interviewees only stated negative impressions of their shift to the gig economy. The perceived intensity of the negative changes varied by the respondent. For example, Interviewee

1 stated, “what I receive [in the gig economy] allows me to pay my phone bill easily, but it is not enough to enjoy a 3-week trip to Japan” (statement lines 180-199). Later, the same person mentioned, “once you become independent [from a fixed job] you have to reduce your fixed costs. You can have variable costs as much as you want [...] if you don’t do this when business declines, you’ll be lost” (statement lines 209-228).

Interviewee 6 summarized his situation as “It got harder to manage the income [...] now, from time to time, there are not many gig opportunities or they’re not well paid” (statement lines 158-172). Interviewee 3 explicitly described the perceived burden as “there is no financial security when I have something to do, I do it, otherwise, I have no money. When there is nothing, it is just a burden” (statement lines 80-86). Also, Interviewee 8 clearly stated that “in the gig area many things are precarious” (statement lines 106-113).

vii) Equal opportunity and treatment in employment

Interestingly, the interviewees didn’t make any statement in the context of the indicator on “equal opportunities and treatment in employment”. At least for the seven interviewees, gender, race, or any ethnic discrimination doesn’t seem to play an important role. Due to the fact that only seven interviews have been conducted, this finding may not be sufficiently robust. In fact, a couple of the studies supported by the Swiss

National Science Foundation found evidence that ethnic inequalities in access to jobs persist and discrimination plays a role in the formation of labor market disparities (Imdorf, 2010). Diekmann et al. (2014) asked in their research “How xenophobic is Switzerland?” finding evidence of foreigners being discriminated against in the city of Zurich. As far as we understand, no further studies have been conducted regarding discrimination in the gig economy.

viii) Safe work environment

No comment or statement has been recognized during the interviews regarding this element of work. This may be evidence that the interviewees seem to consider their work environment as safe and non-threatening to health, which may be explained by Switzerland’s high legal standards in this matter.

In Switzerland, the safe work environment is strictly regulated by the Accident Insurance Act (UVG). Workers’ health protection in Switzerland is also regulated by the labor law, aiming to protect workers from any kind of health risks. The law applies to all public and private companies, in particular industrial and commercial companies, and includes gig-related work conditions. Indeed, the OECD360 Report on Switzerland confirms the high effectiveness of health and safety regulations and the degree of social responsibility performed by employers, as compared to other OECD member states (OECD, 2015).

ix) Social Security

Swiss social security is not based on a working contract but mainly on the place of residence. Therefore, a shift from a traditional employment contract to a gig-related work arrangement would not show any changes. For example, healthcare is universal and regulated by the Swiss Federal Law on health insurance. There are no free state-provided health services, but private health insurance is compulsory for all residents in Switzerland, while the private insurers are also not allowed to discriminate or exclude any Swiss resident. Nevertheless, working in the gig economy excludes workers from the Federal Act on Occupational Retirement, Survivors, and Disability Pension Plans (BVG), which governs the mandatory employee’s insurance benefits, compulsorily offered by all Swiss employers.

Consequently, Interviewee 2 stated, “at the end of your life you have less retirement assets than those who worked their whole life in regular work conditions” (statement lines 114-125). Interviewee 4 also mentioned, “you don’t have BVG insurance as [gig contracts are] not a working agreement where you receive these benefits” (statement lines 29-34). Later, the same person concluded, “it is way better if you are employed, in case you need any insurance help or assistance whilst being self-employed or freelance” (statement lines 138-147). No further comments were made during the interviews regarding the social security indicator.

x) Social dialogue, workers' and employers' representation

No comment was made by the interviewees regarding the ability to organize themselves for bargaining and ensuring their working rights. As trade unions have already a long tradition in Switzerland and the first workers' associations date from the early 1860s (Erne and Schief, 2017), most likely the interviewees don't question the right guaranteed by law to organize in representations. Furthermore, the Swiss direct democracy political system allows the electorate to express their opinion on decisions taken by the Federal Parliament and to propose amendments to the Federal Constitution. This may offer a trusted legal framework by which individuals have the right to organize themselves for any kind of popular initiative and propose an amendment or addition to the Constitution (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2020). Nevertheless, future research may further confirm this potential perception of gig workers in Switzerland.

xi) Job satisfaction

Workers find more satisfaction with their jobs when they use their time and energy on what they consider meaningful, with a sense of purpose. From the interviews, there were nine clearly positive statements about improvements in job satisfaction and sense of purpose, when moving to gig-related work. For example, Interviewee 1 noted, "that very structured job, very regulated, was

just something that I didn't want to do" (statement lines 43-52).

Interviewee 5 emphasized, "I would not be happy in a fixed employment relationship because it offered me too little freedom (...) I was a person who needed his freedom and who likes to accept new challenges. [In the gig employment] I found a way to do the jobs I want" (statement lines 46-52). Likewise, Interviewee 7 declared, "I can choose my assignments myself, I have more freedom and can realign my daily work".

xii) Being part of a social network

Having access to a professional network may increase productivity by sharing and discussing ideas, as well as by peer motivation. There were only three references to this aspect of work experience, of which two were negative about their gig job. Interviewee 1 mentioned, "your social circle suddenly reduces [with gig economy], as well as your business circle. (...) You cannot simply replicate what you have done in your fixed-job" (statement lines 161-167). Interviewee 2 also declared, "the loneliness is difficult [to stand]" (statement lines 47-61). However, on the positive side, the same Interviewee 2 pointed out that co-working spaces allow a connection with other people, "I still do my activities alone, and I have the opportunity to do this together with others (...) if I find someone who has a similar project" (statement lines 62-68).

Considering this summary of the main experiences and feelings of the gig workers interviewed, it is possible to form conclusions on the overall changes in eight sustainable elements of work, associated with a gig-related job, as visualized in Table 2.

So far, all aspects analysed in terms of the gig working experiences of the respondents are either linked to the economic or the social dimensions. For the environmental dimension, a clear question about transportation and possible change in the mobility behaviour was asked during the interviews. The answers revealed that, contrary to what one

could initially expect, the gig work arrangements increased the mobility of the respondents, sometimes to perform their gig tasks, but mostly because in their private lives they were no longer restricted to working all day in an office. In that way, the research found evidence that changing to a gig working arrangement was not much associated to visible mobility savings and gains in environmental sustainability.

After the detailed analysis of the several sustainable elements of work, as well as the mobility aspect, it is possible to summarize the findings in terms of the three core dimensions of

Table 2 Overall perceived changes when moving from standard fixed employment to flexible gig work

Sustainable elements of work experience	Perceived change associated to a gig work
i) Employment opportunities	Positive (improvement)
ii) Adequate earnings and productive work	Mostly negative (degradation)
iii) Decent working time	Positive (improvement)
iv) Combining work, family, and personal life	Positive (improvement)
v) Work that should be abolished	--
vi) Stability and security of work	Mostly negative (degradation)
vii) Equal opportunities and treatment in employment	--
viii) Safe work environment	--
ix) Social security	Mostly negative (degradation)
x) Social dialogue, and employers' and workers' representation	--
xi) Job satisfaction	Positive (improvement)
xii) Being part of a social network	Mostly negative (degradation)

Source: authors.

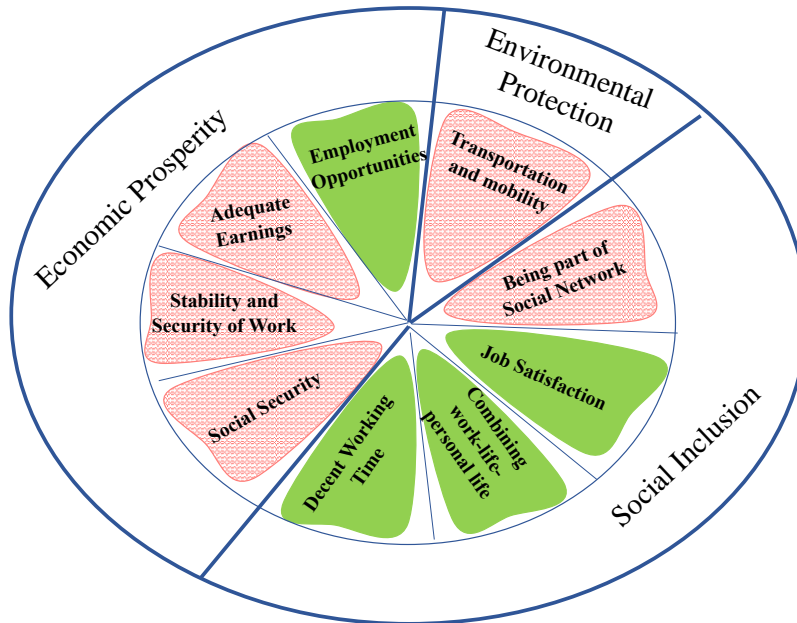


Figure 1 Perceived changes on the core social and economic dimensions of sustainable development

Note: Green colour means a positive perceived change; red coloured pattern means a negative perceived change.

Source: authors.

sustainable development. Figure 1 visually summarizes whether the changes towards new gig employment experiences were perceived by the interviewees as an improvement or degradation in terms of the sustainable development aspects.

5. DISCUSSION

The rising interest in the gig economy phenomenon, associated with the emergence of digital platforms since the 2000s, brings along significant changes in labor arrangements. Different researchers have targeted the gig economy, studying it from different angles. This

paper focuses on the relation between the gig economy and sustainability. The pivotal added value of this paper to the emerging literature in this area of knowledge (Ertz and Leblanc-Proulx, 2018) rests in the focus on concrete aspects in the sphere of labor, and in the study of first-hand information gathered from gig workers. Despite the small number of interviews, the collected in-depth information and its subsequent analysis through narrative data methodology allows for the identification of patterns in the relation between gig employment and the worldwide adopted frameworks of sustainable and decent work.

This study finds evidence that the respondents perceive an overall positive change in their working conditions, in particular the social development aspects, associated with their new gig-related job. In terms of “decent working hours” and “work-life balance indicators”, most of the statements are very positive; workers feel they have more autonomy in deciding the time allocation between tasks, either more meaningful job-related tasks or balancing professional and personal commitments. This finding is in line with what the OECD (2015, p. 27) concluded, when stating that the Swiss are around the average for perceived happiness regarding work-life balance, and the possibility of improvement that the gig economy can offer. In comparison with other European countries, Switzerland shows longer weekly working hours and fewer holidays per year. Therefore, the working environment of the gig economy offers more flexibility for individual adjustment regarding time management.

As far as earnings are concerned, the change to the gig economy is mostly negatively perceived. In general, the gig workers experience a reduction in earnings, but nevertheless, none of the negative statements could be named “precarious work conditions”. Switzerland is a high-income and high-wealth country (OECD, 2015), making it improbable for gig job offers to be paid “precariously”.

On the “stability and security of work” aspects, only negative statements have been made.

Interviewees perceive unsteadiness of the flow of income, leading to higher pressure while working in the gig economy.

All indicators describing the working conditions (equal opportunities, safe work environment, as well as social security and representation) are hardly mentioned and mostly omitted. These fields are the *classic* areas where sustainability is under pressure when workers switch to the gig economy. However, the well-established legal framework in Switzerland seems to provide a sense of protection to workers in any kind of work contract situation.

6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study focuses on the perceived improvement or degradation of sustainability in employment when moving from a fixed standard job towards a gig-related job. Two main important conclusions with policy implications can be drawn. *First*, and surprisingly, the perceived employment situation improved and seemed to become more socially sustainable, after the respondents moved into the gig economy. The surprise is particularly contrasting to what several other studies and reports advocate (e.g. OECD, 2015), arguing in favour of stricter regulation of fixed-term employment contracts. A key explanation for this contrasting conclusion is the important role that the work-life balance may play in an economically highly developed

society such as Switzerland, while at the same time the movement to the gig economy is not necessarily a change to a precarious income situation due to the existing basic safety net provided in the country.

Second, Switzerland with its protective legal framework and the systematic involvement of an individual's representation, may be a special country where workers benefit from the alternative work offered in the context of the gig economy. Having as starting conditions relatively highly qualified workers and their wealth situation, the additional gig offers come as an added benefit. Nevertheless, the findings may bring a policy message for other countries, such as Thailand, who aim to increase the level of digitalization-driven innovation in their economies. Having legal frameworks that allow for better safety nets would also increase the social benefits in the presence of different forms of labor employment. On the other hand, in countries with weaker social safety nets, a higher digitalization linked to blurred work relationships involving multiple geographic and jurisdictional areas may expose individuals to amplified risks and vulnerabilities. As such, protective legal frameworks ensuring basic, sound, and universal safety nets continue to be fundamental for more sustainable labor arrangements.

7. LIMITATIONS

While the conclusions drawn from this study may also be valid for

other countries, it is prudent to have a word of caution when attempting to generalize the results obtained. The fact that all interviewees were Swiss residents at the time of data collection poses an evident limitation, which can be overcome by conducting similar studies on a larger scale and including participants in the gig economy from other countries. The authors understand this study as an initial step of research investigating the links between the gig economy and sustainability. Furthermore, the research may help to encourage further research in countries where the gig economy is already more established, or where the individuals' shift may be based on necessity.

When interpreting the findings of this study, it is also important to notice that these are based on individual perceptions. Due to its subjective nature, the results depend on the individuals' backgrounds, their work conditions before moving to the gig economy, their expertise, and experience in cooperating with others. As the selection targeted gig workers who voluntarily moved away from standard fixed employment, future research could find out how (if) the patterns of the results would change, when replicating the research with participants who have been led by necessity to work in the gig economy.

Bearing in mind the limited number of conducted interviews, the ability to generalize findings is limited. However, as extensively discussed by other researchers (e.g., Baker and Edwards, 2012), qualitative research methods usually study fewer

people, but more in-depth, looking for subjective understanding of the phenomena being analyzed. Furthermore, as the gig economy becomes more and more a global phenomenon, it is likely that further research will have access to larger samples of individuals who work in such new forms of employment. Future research might contribute to overcome the limitation of the current research, developing the knowledge this paper has begun to expose.

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APPENDIX

Table A1 List and attributes of the sustainable elements of work experience

Sustainable elements of work experience	Attributes to code work experience
i) Employment opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labour demand: Workers who want to have a job can get a job • Workers are not harmed by unemployment • Workers are paid for their work • Job opportunities are independently available for workers willing to work no matter their personal attributes of age, gender, or level of education
ii) Adequate earnings and productive work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work is productive and provides workers with adequate earnings • Work is paid in a fair way and decently (“receive a share of the fruits of progress”) • Payment for work ensures a life participating the society and its activities while not living in poverty
iii) Decent working time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate working time arrangements: Workers aren’t exploited regarding working hours (per week) • Decent Working Time arrangement: Workers can limit their working hours per week/month/ year
iv) Combining work, family, and personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social protection: Workers don’t need to work at asocial/unusual working hours • Maternity leave (including weeks of leave, and rate of benefits) and parental leave opportunities
v) Work that should be abolished	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers are not exposed to forced work, child work ...
vi) Stability and security of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Permanence and soundness: Workers are not exposed to precarious employment arrangements • Tenure: Work is offered and paid which allows a worker to cover life-related expenses

Table A1. List and attributes of the sustainable elements of work experience (Continued)

Sustainable elements of work experience	Attributes to code work experience
vii) Equal opportunity and treatment in employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender equality and non-discrimination: Workers are offered equal opportunity and treatment • Equal remuneration of men and women for work of equal value • Workers are not discriminated against by race, ethnicity, or disabilities
viii) Safe work environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupational safety and health at work: Workers are doing their work in a safe and non-health threatening environment
ix) Social security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers have access to work insurances, like pension benefits, healthcare (and sick leave), government social security benefits • Workers are protected against (a) a lack of work-related income (or insufficient income) caused by sickness, disability, maternity, employment injury, unemployment, old age, or death of a family member; (b) lack of access or unaffordable access to health care; (c) insufficient family support, particularly for children and adult dependants; and (d) general poverty and social exclusion
x) Social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers can organize themselves in social dialogue structures and processes (e.g. unions) • Workers have a collective bargaining right and the freedom of association as well as the right to organize (e.g. for strike)
xi) Job satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers have freedom and autonomy to choose their job duties in the way they feel is meaningful
xii) Being part of a social network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workers feel they are part of a social network while at work, where they can find support for the development of ideas and when addressing challenges

Source: ILO (2013) and authors.