

Analysis of Workers' Perception and Demographic Factors - An Insight Into the Slovenian Gig Economy

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Abstract

This study examines the gig economy in Slovenia, with a particular emphasis on the perceived benefits and challenges for gig workers within this emerging labour model. The research aims to capture the implications of flexible, project-based employment in a smaller European context, as this trend becomes increasingly prevalent globally. A quantitative approach was employed to survey 34 gig workers in Slovenia. The survey analysed their demographic characteristics, reasons for engaging in gig work, and the benefits and challenges they experience. In the findings, 64% of respondents specifically identified schedule flexibility as a predominant benefit of gig work. However, it also uncovers substantial challenges, including increased market competition and a lack of social benefits. Moreover, the research suggests that perceptions of the gig work benefits are widely acknowledged across various age groups and educational levels, with no significant variation. Nevertheless, the findings indicate a gender disparity in gig work perceptions, with males perceiving higher levels of financial freedom and professional development than women. This research suggests the need for policies aimed at ensuring equity and further research into harmonizing gig work with supportive labour market policies.

Introduction

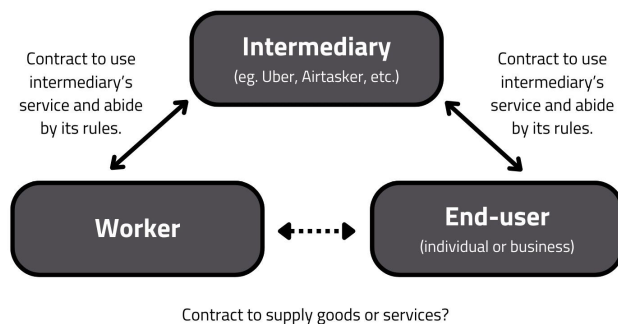
Self-employment is a growing trend that provides an alternative to traditional employment. As noted by Bögenhold & Klinglmair (2016), it is also known as *independent entrepreneurship* and enables individuals to pursue their desire for independence and achieve their entrepreneurial aspirations. Global trends indicate that an increasing number of self-employed individuals are joining the so-called gig economy, which is based on flexible, project-based work (Henley & Lang 2017; Karlsson & Wranne, 2019). As the gig economy allows

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individuals to focus on projects that best match their skills and interests, this trend demonstrates the growing popularity of the independent path (Poon, 2019). This working model not only supports the desire for autonomy and flexibility but also provides opportunities for innovation, professional development, and creativity within the labour market.

The gig economy is an economic model that connects independent workers with clients through an intermediary web platform or application (Figure 1). It is a labour market that offers short-term jobs, with workers engaged on a contractual basis or for specific projects (Hauben et al., 2020; Huđek & Širec, 2023). Independent workers in the gig economy rely on digital platforms to access a global market and connect with potential clients efficiently.

Figure 1
The gig economy model



Source: Stewart & Stanford, 2017

Independent workers in the gig economy are not affiliated with any company and have the freedom to arrange their working hours. This allows them to work whenever they want and on multiple projects simultaneously. The algorithms of digital platforms facilitate *matchmaking* between workers and clients, considering skills, ratings, availability, and workers' engagement history (Wood et al., 2019).

Statista's Research Department (2022) forecasts steady growth for the gig economy. From 2018 to 2022, its value nearly doubled from \$204 billion to \$401.4 billion, indicating its transition from a temporary trend to a staple in the modern work environment, offering alternatives to traditional employment. A study by Gómez-Rey et al. (2021) highlighted the substantial growth of the gig economy, attributing this expansion to technological advancements and changing work preferences among younger generations. It mentioned that by 2021, gig workers represented 35% of the workforce, amounting to 57 million workers and over 1

trillion USD in annual market size. Another study by Subbiah (2023) discussed the gig economy's scale and its potential to serve up to 90 million jobs in India, suggesting a global trend toward gig work.

Moreover, the influence of technology on the gig economy is significant. Nearly 80% of independent entrepreneurs state that technology makes it easier for them to find work (Upwork, 2022). According to data from the company Payoneer, over 70% of independent entrepreneurs primarily find work through online platforms. This new digital collaboration opens up an unexplored area in the field of employment, prompting companies to adapt rapidly to the new reality of gig work (Kulach, 2023).

Many experts believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly stimulative for this ecosystem. According to Umar et al. (2020), the gig economy has been significantly impacted by COVID-19, resulting in an increase in gig work due to economic disruptions. Additionally, the pandemic has created a greater need for flexibility and digitalization of business operations, leading to an increased demand for flexible and project-based work. Furthermore, the pandemic has brought about a change in perspective regarding remote work, which is now widely considered to be the future of work (Forbes et al., 2020). With an increasing number of gig workers operating from home or shared workspaces, a new concept of workspace and worktime organization is emerging (Malhotra, 2021).

Despite the growing trends in the gig economy and future work trends, there is currently no official register of gig workers, and uncertainties regarding the classification of this type of work remain. However, interest in gig work is gradually increasing. Therefore, our study aimed to explore the gig workers in Slovenia, including their sectors of activity, reasons for choosing this form of employment, significant advantages, and challenges faced. Furthermore, the research aimed to identify any demographic differences among gig workers who pursue this career path. The aim was to gain a more profound comprehension of the dynamics of the gig economy in Slovenia and to provide insights into the specifics that characterize this increasingly popular form of work. Addressing the question of who constitutes the gig workforce presents a complex challenge, as a variety of variables influence an individual's likelihood of engaging in gig work. However, according to demographic trends, younger individuals, seem to be more inclined towards gig work due to their preference for flexible employment and receptiveness to technology (Upwork, 2023).

According to Churchill & Craig (2019), there is also a gender disparity in the gig economy, with men outnumbering women. Women represent only around 30% of gig workers, while men represent 70%, and are less likely to engage in gig work. However, in recent years, there has been a notable increase in women's participation in the gig economy, contributing to greater gender equality. The flexibility and autonomy offered by gig work appeal to both genders, leading to a significant rise in mothers opting for freelance work. This flexibility enables workers to manage their work and personal responsibilities, including caregiving duties (Duggan, 2022).

Previous studies have shown a distinction between more and less educated individuals in gig work (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019). It is important to note that the gig economy is commonly associated with employment in sectors such as food delivery and transportation services, and can be linked to job precarity. However, it is important to note that the gig economy encompasses not only low-skilled labour, but also highly skilled professionals, so-called freelancers, or self-employed creatives. This diverse group includes independent consultants, IT specialists, translators, graphic designers, financial analysts, creative workers, engineers, marketing and communication experts, and even healthcare providers and lawyers. It is worth noting that while they may not be physically present on the streets, they offer their services to a global clientele. This segment has the potential to drive future economic development and innovation, which has yet to be fully realized (Upwork, 2023).

Accordingly, the paper evaluates various aspects of the gig economy, such as its occupations and reasons for choosing non-traditional employment. It focuses on assessing how gig workers in Slovenia perceive the benefits of this work and whether they outweigh potential drawbacks, such as income instability, lack of social and employment protection, and difficulties in acquiring clients and projects independently. The study used the Mann-Whitney U test to examine potential disparities in gender, age and educational attainment to confirm the inclusiveness of this new career path.

The purpose of this paper is to provide preliminary empirical evidence that could serve as a foundation for policy formulation and guide businesses about the current conditions and possible future trends of the gig economy in Slovenia.

The article is structured in a manner that initially

addresses theoretical starting points and research hypotheses, followed by a description of the methodology implemented in conducting the research. Subsequently, the research results are presented and discussed, and the conclusion encompasses the key findings, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research initiatives.

Theoretical starting points and research hypotheses

As mentioned in the introduction, the gig economy is a labour market where temporary and part-time roles are predominantly occupied by independent contractors or freelance entrepreneurs, as opposed to full-time, permanent employment positions. In addition, this structure enables employers to save money by avoiding expenses related to benefits like health insurance and paid leave. Some employers may offer specific benefits to gig workers while outsourcing administration and management responsibilities to external agencies (Vallas & Schor, 2020). The gig economy is driven by the desire for autonomy and flexibility. It offers a diverse range of opportunities for flexible work and entrepreneurship, which is highly attractive to many. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the trade-offs that come with it. Participants must navigate a flexible landscape that lacks job security (Rani, 2021).

Opportunities in the gig economy

In the gig economy, individuals have the opportunity to earn money either as their primary source of income or as a supplementary source without being bound to full-time hours (TeamStage, 2023). The job market has undergone significant changes since the pandemic in 2021, resulting in a shift in employment statistics. While full-time permanent positions were generally more valued than gig work in the past, the current job market offers a range of opportunities for individuals to pursue their career goals. The idea that gig economy work is always a secondary option is no longer accurate. Recent studies show that 61% of independent individuals consider it a choice rather than a necessity. As the number of self-employed workers continues to rise, the need for a collaborative workspace will become essential. Workers will seek comprehensive solutions for easy job searching, while employers will aim to connect with skilled professionals without barriers. The gig economy provides a greater space for each person to develop their talents and abilities, instead of expecting individuals to dedicate themselves to work during regular working hours (Horney, 2016).

Flexibility of life

The primary advantage of the gig economy lies in its unparalleled flexibility, empowering workers with the freedom to select their working hours, locations, and the volume of work they undertake. The gig economy not only provides flexibility and work-life balance but is also suitable for people looking for extra income or interested in different activities or projects without being constrained by full-time employment (Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2021). The survey's results indicate that the main reasons for choosing gig work are flexibility and autonomy (Manyika et al., 2016; Malt & BCD, 2021). Consequently, people have a high level of control over the workload and the set of tasks they perform, which undoubtedly affects the flexibility of their lives. They have the opportunity to choose which task to perform, based on factors such as fees and customer, or timing, and can change their decision later on. Moreover, the gig economy presents new opportunities for women by enhancing their flexibility in terms of work-life balance. According to Roy and Shrivastava (2020), companies are incentivized to hire gig workers for their high flexibility, the digital explosion, and the overwhelming transition towards remote work. Hence, the gig economy offers an opportunity for individuals to *custom design* their careers depending on personal goals, lifestyle choices and needs at different life stages and provides a level of individualized control and independence that the traditional work environment cannot offer.

Financial freedom

Online labour platforms provide a low barrier to entry into the gig economy. They enable anyone to, regardless of their skill level, join the gig economy and determine how, where, for whom, when, and how long they work. For instance, business entities are attracted to gig workers because they obtain immediate access to suitable experts, reduce operating costs, and find solutions faster (ILO & OECD, 2021). Also, individuals with either a part-time or full-time job or students seeking extra money to fund their studies can join the gig economy (Herrmann, 2023). Additionally, the gig economy provides individuals with the chance to diversify their income sources, reducing reliance on a single job or employer. With the growing popularity of gig economy platforms and marketplaces, individuals can easily find gig opportunities that align with their skills and interests (Heeks, 2022). Consequently, supplementary income for individuals living paycheck to paycheck with outstanding expenses or living expenses, extra income might mean a ticket to financial freedom.

For example, a survey by Upwork (2021) found that 44% of gig workers reported earning more than they would in a traditional job in 2021, compared to 39% in 2020 and 32% in 2019. Furthermore, the gig economy allows individuals to explore different types of work and gain experience in various industries. This can lead to personal and professional growth, as well as the development of new skills.

Professional development and advancement

In the gig economy, firms (clients) seek to leverage the knowledge, skills and abilities of gig workers to improve firm performance (Burke & Cowling, 2015). Due to the high level of competition and self-reliance inherent in gig work, workers are constantly engaged in learning, gaining new experiences, and improving their skills, thereby uncovering and utilizing hidden capabilities (Barnes et al., 2015). This pursuit of professional development and advancement encourages workers to develop new skills and facilitates the formation of new contacts (Malik et al., 2017) and the maintenance of relationships with previous clients. Professionals aiming for career growth and ongoing learning often see gig work as a chance for professional development. They choose gigs to diversify their skills and experiences, favouring this approach to quickly gain insight into various roles and sectors. This strategy helps them widen their career scope and boost their job prospects. At the same time, this approach often leads to greater job satisfaction and fulfilment in their chosen career path (Taylor, 2017).

Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis H1: Slovenian gig workers primarily perceive flexibility as the most significant reason for engaging in the gig economy.

Diversity of Inclusion

The gig economy offers opportunities for a diverse range of individuals, including those working outside their home country, without formal qualifications, with domestic responsibilities, or facing disabilities or health limitations. The gig economy is attractive because it allows for control over work schedules, making it easier to balance professional and personal commitments (Graham et al., 2017).

Remote work through online platforms can reduce discrimination cues present in traditional physical work environments, such as those related to disability, accent, dress style, and age, thus promoting a more inclusive

work environment. Dettlaff (2023) emphasizes the potential of the gig economy to increase women's professional activity, proposing it as a way to break the cycle of professional passivity on a macroeconomic scale. Kaine and Josserand (2019) examine the organization and experience of work in the gig economy, highlighting how it is especially attractive to students, stay-at-home parents, and full-time employees seeking additional income sources.

Herrmann et al. (2023) examine the impact of the gig economy on the traditional education-income paradigm. This paradigm typically associates higher educational attainment with higher income levels. The study focuses on jobs facilitated by online platforms where educational certificates are not a requirement for job access. The authors utilize a mixed-method approach. The study analysed 1,607 gig workers across 14 Western economies through quantitative analysis and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews. It was found that educational attainment did not have a statistically significant correlation with wage levels within the gig economy. Instead, the platform's review system and the gig workers' level of previous job experience were identified as major signalling mechanisms for reducing information asymmetry between gig workers and employers.

These insights highlight the gig economy's role in promoting a diverse and inclusive labour market, providing employment options flexible enough to meet various needs and preferences. Based on the above considerations and focusing on Slovenian gig workers, we assume the following hypotheses:

H2: There are statistical differences in perceptions of financial freedom, flexibility of life, and personal development and advancement among Slovenian gig workers regarding gender.

H3: There are statistical differences in perceptions of financial development, life flexibility, and personal development and advancement among Slovenian gig workers regarding age.

H4: There are statistical differences in perceptions of financial development, life flexibility, and personal development and advancement among Slovenian gig workers regarding educational level.

Challenges in the gig economy

The gig economy, while offering flexibility and diverse job opportunities, presents significant challenges for workers, including a lack of social benefits, income unpredictability and increasing competition.

Inequality of social benefits and unpredictability of success and payment

The employment status of gig workers differs from that of traditional employees. Gig economy workers are employed for a specific period and on a contract basis, which means they are deprived of many rights that come with traditional employment relationships. They do not receive additional financial benefits, pension contributions, or social security (Kajwang, 2022). Consequently, gig economy workers do not receive assistance from the online work platform but must obtain it themselves. Individuals are required to pay taxes and obtain insurance. Additionally, there may be obstacles to entry related to technical and digital skills, as well as the necessary technical infrastructure and knowledge.

It is important to note that self-employment in the gig economy may not always result in success in a chosen job. As a result, the workflow and payment structure can be uncertain, and there may be instances where payments are delayed or perceived as unfair concerning the effort or knowledge invested. In comparison to employees in companies who typically receive a fixed and predictable salary, gig workers must persistently manage their projects with multiple clients and employers to ensure a consistent and dependable stream of income that is sufficient to cover their living expenses. Additionally, they must exert significant effort to acquire clients and market themselves to secure work (Huđek, 2022). Moreover, Muldoon and Raekstad (2022) examine the notion of algorithmic domination, whereby gig workers are subjected to novel forms of managerial control through algorithms. This may impact work conditions and add to the uncertainty of gig work, especially about job assignments and payments.

Increasing competition on platforms

The growth of the gig economy has led to an increase in competition among gig workers on online platforms. As a result, there is now greater competition for each job or project. This has led to employers and clients often selecting providers who offer lower prices for their work, which in turn has resulted in a reduction in payments. Therefore, to remain competitive, workers need to distinguish themselves through high-quality work, special skills, or lower prices. This trend not only increases the pressure on gig workers to continuously

improve their skills and efficiency but also reduces their bargaining power about payments and working

conditions (Schwellnus, 2019). According to Tan et al. (2020), the ethical challenges posed by the gig economy, particularly those concerning algorithmic control and worker rights. The authors propose that the future of the gig economy will be determined by regulatory issues.

Overload and exploitation of free time

According to Yang (2023), the gig economy provides greater flexibility but also presents challenges such as inadequate welfare protection and unstable income, which can lead to job burnout. This can happen when workers take on too many tasks due to financial pressures, intense competition on platforms, or concerns about future job opportunities. According to Ideas (2021), this situation may lead to a shortage of time for personal life, which could potentially affect family relationships and mental well-being.

Based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis H5: Slovenian gig workers predominantly perceive a lack of social benefits as the most significant challenge of engaging in the gig economy.

This fundamental problem underlies many of the other challenges described, including the need for self-promotion, competition for work, and the potential for job burnout. The issue of gig workers not having traditional employment protections, such as a fixed income, pension contributions, and social security, has a significant impact on workers' ability to plan for their future and maintain a stable livelihood and is therefore a major concern within the structure of the gig economy (Berg, 2016).

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, a survey using a structured questionnaire was conducted among a small sample of 34 respondents from the Republic of Slovenia. The survey was disseminated via the social network Facebook, in groups where self-employed professionals or gig workers congregate. Due to the absence of an official register of gig workers in Slovenia, the survey included explicit guidelines to specify eligibility for participation: respondents had to be self-employed, not in traditional employment, responsible for their benefits, in charge of their tax declarations, free to choose their clients, and committed to undertaking a minimum amount of project work annually. Additionally, to achieve better diversity among respondent profiles, the survey was distributed to business incubators with coworking spaces, which

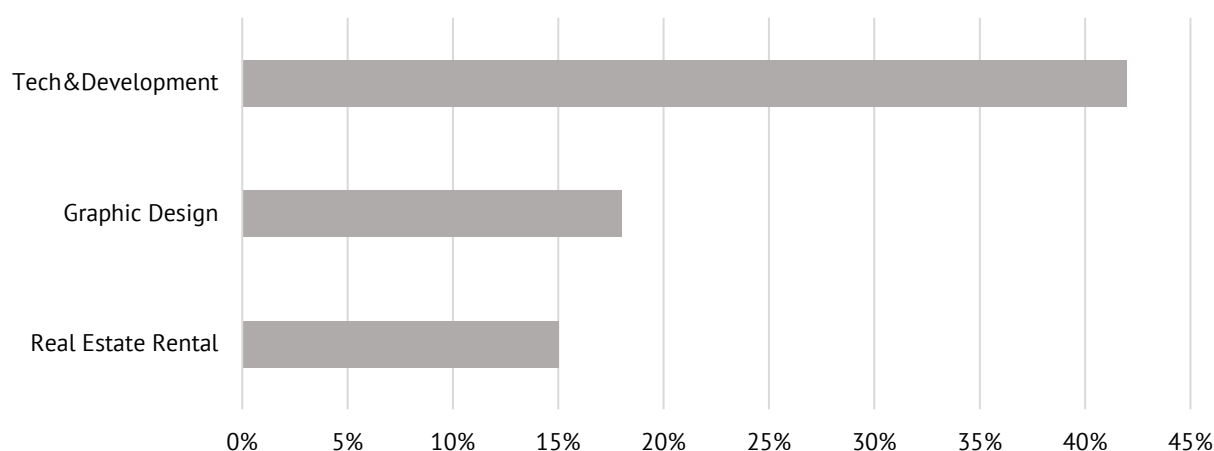
circulated among their members active in the gig economy. The survey was conducted over the course of one month, from July 2023 to August 2023. Although 46 participants initially engaged with the survey, only 34 respondents completed it in its entirety. The questionnaire consisted of structured closed questions. The first set of questions pertained to the sample characteristics, while the subsequent sets aimed to examine the reasons for choosing gig work and to capture perceptions about the benefits and challenges associated with this type of work. For the questions on opportunities and challenges, multiple-choice questions were employed. Meanwhile, questions regarding perceptions utilized a 4-point Likert Scale, a survey methodology that offers four response options to assess opinions or attitudes. Participants express their degree of agreement or disagreement with given statements by selecting one of four choices: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - agree, or 4 - strongly agree. In addition, to assess Hypotheses 1 – 3, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed for several reasons. Firstly, the non-normal distribution of our data precluded the use of parametric tests like the t-test. Given its non-parametric nature, the Mann-Whitney U test is well-suited for analyzing such data types, ensuring robustness and reliability even with small sample sizes. The test enables analysis without requiring equality of variances or normality of distribution, making it suitable for small sample sizes and categorical data, as encountered in our study. It should also be noted that our samples are independent, which is a fundamental requirement for the application of the Mann-Whitney U test in the research (Denis, 2021).

As presented in Table 1, 59% of respondents were male, while 41% were female. Of all the respondents, 18% were aged 18 to 24, 29% were between the ages of 25 and 34, 44% respondents were aged between 35-44, only 3% were aged between 45 and 54, and 6% were between 55 and 64 years old. In terms of their education level, most of them (44%) have an undergraduate degree, followed by a high school diploma (29%), a master's degree (21%), an elementary school (3%) and a PhD (3%).

According to Helling (2023), who identified the most common activities in the gig economy, and our examination of the various job categories on online labour platforms such as Upwork (2023), we have determined the categories in which Slovenian gig workers are most active. The results show that the three most common categories are Tech & Development (44%), Graphic Design (18%), and Real Estate Rental (15%) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Most common gig economy job categories distribution according to Slovenian gig workers



Source: Authors

Table 1

Sample characteristics

Characteristic	Frequency (n=34)	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	20	59%
Female	14	41%
<i>Age</i>		
18-24	6	18%
25-34	10	29%
35-44	15	44%
45-54	1	3%
55-64	2	6%
<i>Education</i>		
Elementary school	1	3%
High school	10	29%
Undergraduate degree	15	44%
Master degree	7	21%
PhD	1	3%

Source: Authors

Results

To test Hypothesis 1, we investigated participants' reasons for choosing the gig economy. The data, presented in Figure 3, shows that 64% of respondents valued schedule flexibility as the most commonly selected reason. This underscores the high regard many hold for the adaptability the gig economy offers (Lehdonvirta, 2018; Malt & BDC, 2021; Malt, 2024). Following this, *Greater freedom in choosing projects* was chosen by 48% of respondents, highlighting the importance of personal interest and the perceived benefits of project selection. *The ability to work from home*

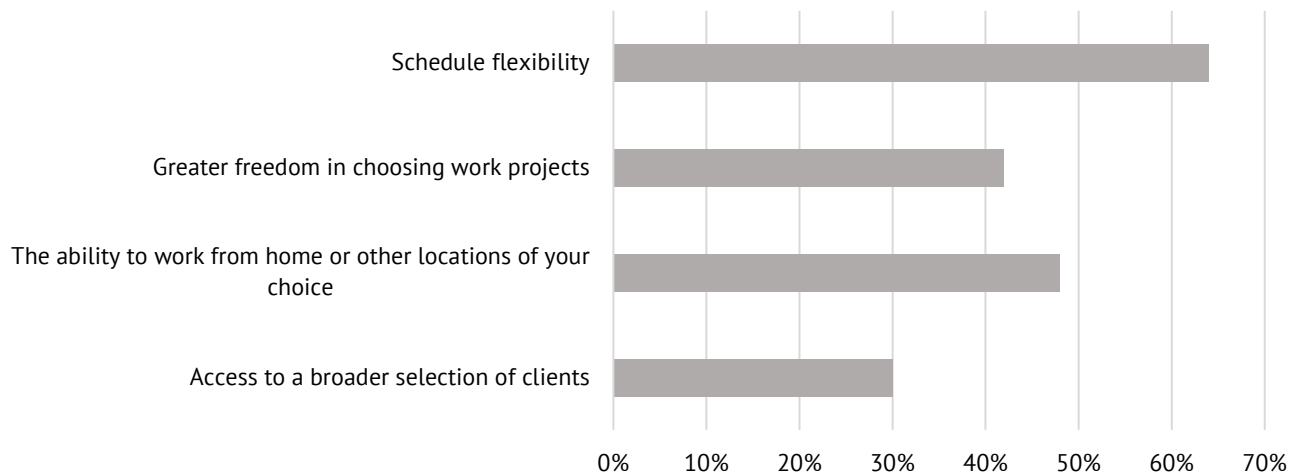
or any preferred location was chosen by 42%, reflecting the value placed on location independence. The least popular response, chosen by 30% of respondents, was *Access to a broader selection of clients*, indicating this aspect is less critical for those surveyed. Accordingly, we confirm *Hypothesis 1*, that Slovenian gig workers primarily perceive flexibility as the most significant reason for engaging in the gig economy.

Furthermore, to obtain more detailed insights, we asked gig workers on a Likert scale (from 1 to 4) to express their perception of the outcomes of working in such a business market. Specifically, they were asked to evaluate whether this alternative form of work provides them with financial freedom, flexibility in life, and opportunities for professional development and career advancement. The results are displayed in Figure 4.

In Figure 4, it is evident that 29% of respondents strongly agree and 59% agree that gig work offers opportunities for professional development and advancement. This means that overall, 88% of respondents see gig work as positive for their professional development. Furthermore, 26% strongly agree and 62% agree with the statement that gig work enables a flexible life. This shows a high level of agreement, as 88% of respondents agree with the statement that gig work enables a flexible life, while 50% strongly agree and 35% agree with the statement that gig work offers financial freedom. The responses collectively reflect a positive perception of gig work, particularly noting its contributions to professional development and the flexibility it allows in one's life.

Figure 3

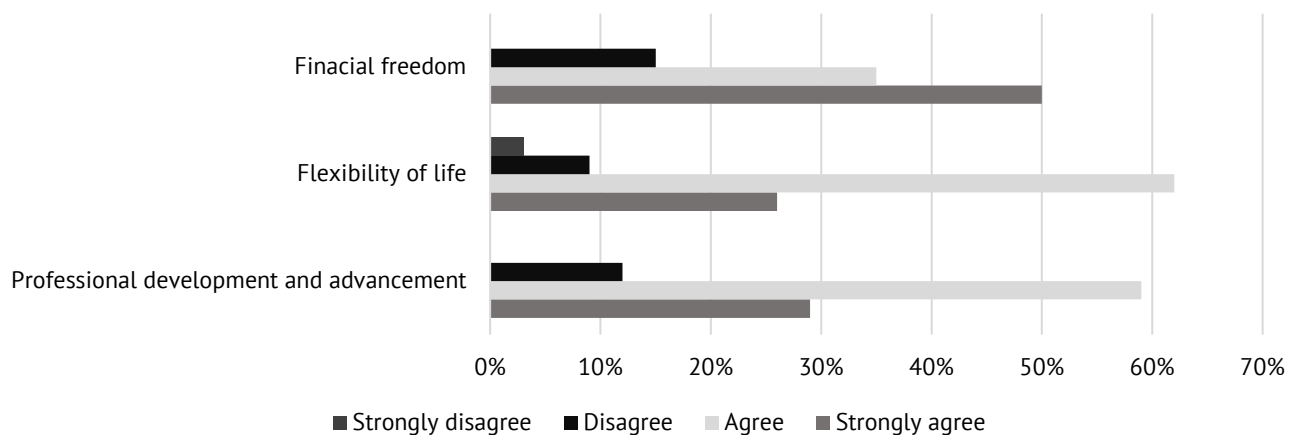
The main reasons for choosing work in the gig economy



Source: Authors

Figure 4

Perception of gig work benefits



Source: Authors

Additionally, we aimed to examine whether disparities exist within the demographics of the sample. Specifically, we wanted to determine if there are statistical differences in perceptions of gig economy outcomes of personal development and advancement, life flexibility, and financial freedom concerning gender, age, and education levels. Therefore, we examined the differences in perceptions between males and females. Regarding age, we categorized it into two groups: the young demographic (18-34 years) and the older demographic (35-64 years). For educational attainment, we grouped participants into two categories: those with at most a high school diploma and those with more than a high school education.

To achieve these goals, we initially considered employing the independent samples t-test, a common statistical method for comparing means between two groups (Hair et al., 2008). Regarding the assumptions for such a test, the data fulfils the requirements for independence. The observations in each sample should be independent and collected using a random sampling method (Bobbitt, 2021). Upon conducting a preliminary data analysis, which included Shapiro-Wilk tests for normality, it became evident that the assumption of a normal distribution was not met for the satisfaction measures across the groups defined by gender, age, and education. Thus, to ensure the robustness and reliability of our statistical analysis, we opted for the Mann-Whitney U

test, a non-parametric alternative that does not assume normality in the data distributions. It is used to determine whether two independent samples differ significantly from each other (Denis, 2021). The test's applicability to ordinal data, such as responses on a Likert scale, and its robustness in the face of non-normal distributions made it the ideal choice for assessing the differences in our case (Hollander, 2013). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for each gender group and Mann-Whitney U test results.

The results indicate that there is a significant difference in the levels of perception of financial freedom and opportunities for professional development and advancement between males and females ($p < 0.001$). Males had a higher mean score compared to females, as

evidenced by the notably low Mann-Whitney U values and highly significant p-values. However, it is worth noting that both genders tend to agree on the level of flexibility in life. This is supported by a larger Mann-Whitney U value and a non-significant p-value ($p = 0.656$), indicating no statistical difference between genders in this aspect. These results confirm *Hypothesis 2*, which suggests a statistically significant difference between gender groups regarding the perception of gig work arrangement benefits.

Furthermore, the Mann-Whitney U test was employed to assess the distribution of responses between two age groups – youth (18-34) and older individuals (35-64). The outcomes of this analysis, along with descriptive statistics, are presented in Table 3.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U test results by gender

Measure	Gender	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
Financial freedom	Male	3.85	0.37	4.00	12.000	<0.001
	Female	2.57	0.51	3.00		
Flexibility of life	Male	3.10	0.64	3.00	151.000	0.656
	Female	3.14	0.77	3.00		
Professional development and advancement	Male	3.50	0.51	3.50	50.000	<0.001
	Female	2.71	0.47	3.00		

Source: Authors

Table 3

Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U test results by age

Measure	Age group	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
Financial freedom	18-34	3.25	0.68	3.00	165.000	0.428
	35-64	3.39	0.85	4.00		
Flexibility of life	18-34	3.19	0.54	3.00	136.000	0.749
	35-64	3.06	0.80	3.00		
Professional development and advancement	18-34	3.06	0.25	3.00	177.000	0.194
	35-64	3.28	0.83	3.50		

Source: Authors

The data suggests that there is a slight difference in the level of perception regarding financial freedom between the younger group (mean = 3.25) and the older group (mean = 3.39). On the other hand, for flexibility of life, the levels of agreement are somewhat higher in the younger group (mean = 3.19) compared to the older group (mean = 3.06), indicating a consistent perception of flexibility provided by gig work across age groups, but with the older group displaying a broader range of views (as shown by a higher SD = 0.80). With regards to opportunities for professional development and

advancement, it appears that the older group (mean = 3.28) expressed a slightly higher level of agreement compared to the younger group (mean = 3.06), suggesting that gig work is perceived as offering better opportunities for professional growth by older participants. Although there were some differences in the levels of agreement between the younger (18-34) and older (35-64) age groups across all aspects, the Mann-Whitney U test results indicate that these differences are not statistically significant (with p-values of 0.428 for financial freedom, 0.749 for flexibility of life, and 0.194 for professional

development and advancement, respectively). Therefore, the data suggest that there are comparable perceptions across age groups in these domains. Therefore, we reject *Hypothesis 3*, which suggests significant differences between age groups regarding their perceptions of the gig work arrangement benefits.

In addition, to test *Hypothesis 4*, we also employed the Mann-Whitney U test, to assess the distribution of responses between two educational attainments to compare the *Up to high school* group with the *More than high school*. The results are shown in Table 4. The descriptive statistics suggest that individuals with education beyond high school tend to report higher levels of agreement across all measures compared to those with education up to high school. Specifically,

although the mean satisfaction scores are higher for those with more education, the differences do not reach statistical significance for financial freedom and flexibility of life. Therefore, *Hypothesis 4* cannot be supported. However, it is worth noting that there appears to be a noticeable difference in professional development and advancement. Only the perceptions of professional development and advancement approach statistical significance ($p = 0.059$). The p-value is 0.059, which is in proximity to the conventional significance threshold of 0.05. The analysis provides insights into the potential influence of education level on perceptions of professional development opportunities, with a notable trend suggesting that higher educational attainment may be associated with more positive perceptions.

Table 4

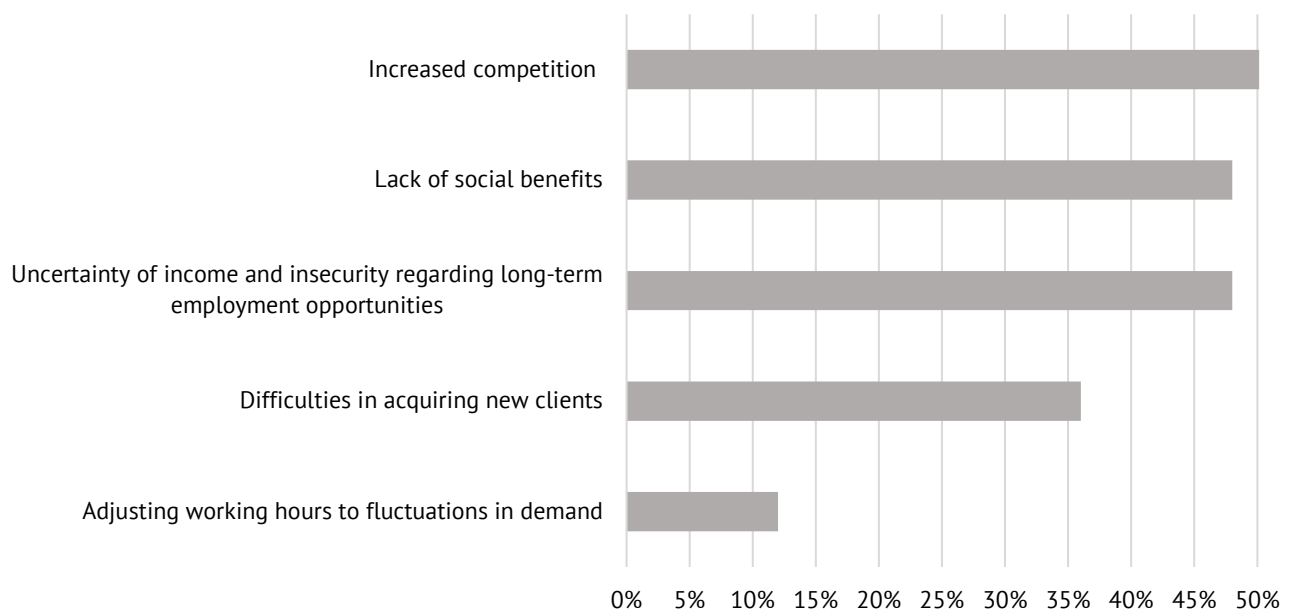
Descriptive statistics and Mann-Whitney U test results by education

Measure	Education Group	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Mann-Whitney U	p-value
Financial freedom	Up to high school	3.18	0.75	3.00	148.000	0.445
	More than high school	3.39	0.78	4.00		
Flexibility of life	Up to high school	3.00	0.63	3.00	148.000	0.445
	More than high school	3.17	0.72	3.00		
Professional development and advancement	Up to high school	2.91	0.30	3.00	171.500	0.059
	More than high school	3.30	0.70	3.00		

Source: Authors

Figure 5

Challenges that pose the greatest concerns to gig workers



Source: Authors

Finally, we have examined the challenges that present the greatest concerns for respondents to test *Hypothesis 5*. Respondents were provided with a range of possible answers to choose from. The most frequently selected challenge, chosen by 52% of respondents, was increased competition. Our findings indicate that self-employed individuals in the gig economy often face competition, which necessitates them to adjust their service prices. According to the survey, 48% of respondents expressed concern about the lack of social benefits, including health insurance, pension, and sick leave. An equal percentage of respondents (48%) identified income unpredictability and uncertainty about long-term job prospects as significant issues. Acquiring new clients was a challenge for 36% of respondents, while only 12% reported adjusting their work hours based on fluctuating demand. Figure 5 displays the data. Based on the results, *Hypothesis 5* is rejected, which assumes that the biggest challenge is the lack of social benefits.

Discussion

The pronounced valuation of flexibility and professional development by Slovenian gig workers aligns with global trends where flexibility is hailed as a prime benefit of gig employment (Malt, 2024; Upwork, 2023). This preference underscores a universal shift towards work-life integration, where individuals prioritize control over their schedules and the nature of their work. However, this study also brings to light the inherent challenges such as increased competition and lack of social benefits (Balakrishnan, 2022). These challenges arise primarily due to the very nature of gig work, which is project-based and lacks the continuity and security associated with traditional employment.

Examining demographic differences reveals nuanced insights into how different groups experience gig work. In particular, gender differences in perceptions of financial freedom and opportunities for career advancement underscore existing literature on gendered labour market experiences favouring men (Florisson & Mandl, 2018).

In addition, the lack of significant differences in perceptions based on age and education within the gig economy context is particularly intriguing, challenging prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about gig work. Conventionally, it is assumed that younger, technologically adept individuals are more inclined towards gig work, valuing its flexibility and autonomy (Shaw et al., 2022). Additionally, Farrell & Greig (2016) noted that people, especially those young and financially

unstable, participate in the gig economy to supplement income from traditional jobs, suggesting that many use the platform as a secondary income source. Despite these considerations, our findings did not support the hypothesis that age significantly influences perceptions of the gig economy. This suggests a broader, more nuanced understanding, where traditional demographic factors do not necessarily determine participation or perception.

The finding that educational attainment does not significantly impact perceptions of the gig economy challenges another set of assumptions about this form of work. Traditional views might suggest that individuals with higher education would view gig work less favourably, due to expectations of stable, traditional career paths, or more favourably, because of a perceived ability to leverage the flexibility of gig work for professional development and higher earnings. However, the research indicates a uniformity in perception across different education levels, underlying the findings by Herrmann et al. (2023) and suggesting several implications. These findings highlight the accessibility of gig work, implying that opportunities within the gig economy are not limited by one's level of formal education. This inclusivity is crucial in economies with saturated traditional job markets, offering a valuable avenue for individuals to utilize their skills in non-conventional roles. Furthermore, the uniform perceptions across educational backgrounds suggest a revaluation of which skills are deemed valuable in today's economy, expanding the definition to include a broader range of competencies and experiences.

Therefore, the importance of flexibility and career development expressed by Slovenian gig workers suggests that policy makers should consider measures such as promoting opportunities to work from home, encouraging the public sector and businesses to offer flexible working hours and supporting continuous learning and training initiatives. This could improve the job satisfaction and productivity of gig workers while meeting the changing needs of the labour market. The challenges identified, such as increased competition and the lack of social benefits, point to the need for policy interventions to provide gig workers with social protections and benefits, such as access to health care, minimum wage standards, or regulation of gig economy platforms, which could help address some of the challenges. Furthermore, gender differences in the perception of financial freedom and career advancement opportunities highlight the existing inequalities in the labour market and call for policy makers to make

additional efforts in the implementation of measures to promote gender equality in the labour market. Also, the findings promote skill requirements, prompting a need for policymakers and industry stakeholders to reassess education and training programs. This could include investing in programs that teach relevant digital skills, entrepreneurship, and adaptability, regardless of formal education level, supporting lifelong learning to enhance individuals' competitiveness in the gig economy.

Therefore, for gig workers, the insights underscore the importance of prioritizing skill development, advocating for rights and better working conditions, and striving for work-life balance. Policymakers can utilize the findings to inform regulatory reforms aimed at addressing challenges such as precarious employment conditions and disparities in financial freedom. Platform companies have the opportunity to enhance worker support and prioritize transparency and fairness in their practices. Labour organizations and community groups can leverage the evidence to advocate for legislative reforms, negotiate with platform companies, and provide support services for gig workers. Overall, these implications highlight the potential for systemic changes that can improve the quality of work and life in the gig economy, creating a more equitable and sustainable ecosystem for all stakeholders.

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations for future research

Throughout our research, we discovered that flexibility remains one of the main advantages perceived by gig workers in Slovenia. However, our study also highlighted concerns faced by gig workers. The increased competition and lack of social benefits are among the most common challenges. These challenges underscore the need for the development of stable and sustainable models within the gig economy, as well as the overhaul of legislation to more effectively support and protect gig workers.

As the gig economy continues to grow, there is a need for rapidly evolving regulation of this form of work. There is potential for the development of regulations that will impact the future of self-employment in the gig economy. According to Bestinfohub (2023), this includes definition of the employment relationship, workers' rights and benefits, data privacy, ensuring health and safety.

In response to growing concerns over the working conditions of platform workers, particularly in the European Union (EU), legislative measures are being

proposed and implemented to address these issues. The European Commission introduced a directive in December 2021 aimed at improving the working conditions of gig workers, potentially reclassifying them as employees under certain criteria (European Commission, 2021).

Recognizing demographic diversity necessitates targeted interventions, like skill development programs, to ensure gig work is inclusive and beneficial for all, regardless of gender, age, or education. Such strategic adjustments are key to fostering a supportive environment for gig workers, making this evolving sector more sustainable and rewarding for a wide range of participants.

One of the main limitations of this study is the small sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Our study analysed a small group of 34 participants from Slovenia, which may not fully represent the diverse range of experiences associated with gig work in the country and may limit the generalizability of the results. However, the limited sample size provides a preliminary insight into the state and diversity of gig work, which emphasizes the need for further investigation to improve the representativeness of the findings and relevance. Moreover, the chosen methodology utilized a cross-sectional survey design, which captured a singular temporal snapshot of gig workers' experiences and perceptions.

Thus, to enhance the generalizability of the findings, future research should aim for larger, more diverse participant pools and increase the sample size. Additionally, applying stratified sampling can ensure adequate representation of different segments of the gig worker population. Exploring differences in gig worker experiences across various sectors can provide deeper insights. Conducting longitudinal studies would also offer comprehension of the dynamics of the gig economy and an understanding the long-term effects of gig work, tracking changes in employment conditions, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. Qualitative methods like detailed interviews or focus groups can also offer a deeper insight into gig work's complexities, enriching the quantitative data.

Accordingly, the study suggests the need for refined policies and strategies in the gig economy. In today's rapidly changing world, where traditional employment no longer meets modern expectations, gig work or project-based work presents both challenges and significant opportunities that can profoundly transform our society and the way we work. Hence, it is crucial for

policymakers, local communities, and academic circles to recognize the characteristics of gig work and new career paths, and to create conditions that promote the growth and development of new values in the digital market while ensuring adequate support and security for those opting for independent professional paths.

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Analiza zaznav delavcev in demografskih dejavnikov - vpogled v slovensko gig ekonomijo

Izveček

Ta študija obravnava gig ekonomijo v Sloveniji, s posebnim poudarkom na zaznanih prednostih in izzivih za gig delavce v tem nastajajočem modelu dela. Namen raziskave je zajeti posledice prožnega, projektnega zaposlovanja v manjšem evropskem kontekstu, saj ta trend postaja vse bolj razširjen v svetovnem merilu. S kvantitativnim pristopom je bila izvedena raziskava med 34 gig delavci v Sloveniji. Namen raziskave je bil analizirati njihove demografske značilnosti, razloge za vključitev v gig delo ter koristi in izzive, ki jih doživljajo. V ugotovitvah je 64 % anketirancev kot prevladujočo prednost gig dela izrecno navedlo fleksibilnost urnika. Vendar pa je raziskava razkrila tudi precejšnje izzive, vključno z večjo konkurenco na trgu in pomanjkanjem socialnih ugodnosti. Poleg tega raziskava kaže, da je dojemanje prednosti gig dela splošno priznано v različnih starostnih skupinah in na različnih ravneh izobrazbe, pri čemer ni bistvenih razlik. Kljub temu pa ugotovitve kažejo na razlike med spoloma pri zaznavanju gig dela, saj moški zaznavajo višjo raven finančne svobode in poklicnega razvoja kot ženske. Raziskava poudarja zapleteno naravo gig ekonomije, ki usklajuje avtonomijo s pripadajočimi tveganji. Nakazuje potrebo po politikah, katerih cilj je zagotavljanje enakosti, in nadaljnjih raziskavah o usklajevanju gig dela s podpornimi politikami trga dela.

Ključne besede: gig ekonomija, fleksibilnost, profesionalni razvoj, socialne ugodnosti, demografske razlike