Understanding the Digital Platform Workforce in the U.S.: Evidence from the Entrepreneurship in the Population Survey*

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Abstract

The rise of digital platform technologies raised concerns, given their potential to fundamentally alter labor market arrangements by increasing the share of workers employed in the "gig economy." This paper uses data from a new nationally representative survey, the Entrepreneurship in the Population Survey, to examine these work arrangements, focusing on work coordinated through a digital platform. We estimate that roughly 1.6 percent of adults performed digital platform work as a primary job during the past week, and 4.4 percent performed digital platform work at some point over the past 6 months. In addition to understanding differences in the timing of platform work, we also estimate differences by type of platform, document the demographic characteristics of these workers, and explore the motivations leading workers to digital platform work.

JEL Codes: J21, J40, M13

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1 Introduction

The rise of digital platforms that coordinate the payment and provision of services has generated substantial attention in both the popular press and academic research. While these platforms might allow workers greater flexibility and provide a pathway to developing new skills, many observers worry that there is an exploitative effect, given the lower regulations and lack of benefits offered to these workers. Observers are also concerned that these potentially exploitative effects may impact categories of workers who are already among the most vulnerable in the labor market. Therefore, answering essential questions such as how much work is facilitated by digital platforms and who works for these platforms is essential for determining policy.

Obtaining an understanding of the characteristics of digital platform workers (DPWs) is itself challenging due to difficulties with measurement. In addition to differences in the legal structure of employment, digital platform work can also be distinguished based on factors such as the type of tasks being performed, whether it is a primary job, and the timing of the work. We attempt to address several measurement challenges using the Entrepreneurship in the Population (EPOP) Survey data. The EPOP Survey is a nationally representative survey that asks a series of questions related to platform work, including questions related to the timing of work and the name of the platform coordinating the work. This allows for a detailed investigation of different categories of digital platform work. We estimate the size of the digital platform workforce and document their characteristics as compared with individuals engaged in other work arrangements. We then investigate differences in digital platform work by platform type and timing of the work, including an examination of DPWs' demographic characteristics and motivations.

We estimate that roughly 1.6% of adults, or 2.2% of workers, performed digital platform work as their primary job in the past week. These workers were more likely to be Black or Hispanic than workers in other arrangements. DPWs engaged in selling activity were more likely to be female, while those performing service tasks had gender compositions similar to other types of workers. Looking over the past 6 months, we find that 4.4% of all adults performed digital platform work at some point. DPWs

also have differing motivations for pursuing this work. As expected, primary job platform workers were more likely to pursue this work as a primary source of income. Looking at digital platform work over a longer time period leads to more DPWs reporting engaging in this work for supplemental income or "for fun."

Our study makes several contributions to the literature and policy discussions by using unique nationally representative survey data to estimate the size of the digital platform workforce. Previous estimates have used survey-based measures conducted using online probability panels (e.g., Robles and McGee, 2016; Bracha and Burke, 2021; Osterman, 2022), or administrative data sources such as bank account records (Farrell et al., 2018), and tax records (Jackson et al., 2017; Garin et al., 2022). We add to this existing literature using nationally representative data from online panels and traditional address-based samples (ABS). This allows us to provide estimates of digital platform work using the same measurement approach but collected using multiple sample sources to examine whether the sample source affects the measurement of digital platform work. The EPOP survey also collects data on both platform type and the timeframe in which platform work was done, allowing for new detailed estimates characterizing the form and composition of the digital platform workforce.

Beyond measuring the size of the digital platform workforce, our study also examines platform workers' demographic characteristics and motivations. This is particularly relevant to policy discussions that raise concerns about the role of the digital platform economy in exacerbating inequality within the labor force in ways that may harm historically marginalized workers. While our study does not attempt to make causal claims about why workers engage in digital platform work, we can offer insights into the motivations of platform workers and variation in motivation by the type and frequency of work performed. These findings can help to inform policy discussions surrounding the extent to which workers are pushed or pulled into platform work by factors related to labor market conditions vs. personal preferences for autonomy and flexibility.

2 Literature Review

There is a growing corpus of literature estimating the size of the digital platform workforce. Much of this literature examines the broader category of independent contract work while also reporting estimates of DPWs as a subset of this work.[1] Estimates vary across studies, ranging from less than 1% to 16% of their referenced populations. The remainder of this section examines the source of variation among estimates, and the differences between survey- and administrative data-based estimates.

As shown in Table 1, studies using administrative data sources such as IRS tax data or bank transaction data tend to produce estimates of the DPW workforce that are lower than those from survey sources. This is particularly true for studies using IRS tax data. Jackson et al. (2017) report that DPWs comprised 0.7% of the tax filing workforce in 2014, while Collins et al. (2019) report an estimate of 1% using data from 2016. Garin et al. (2022) examine changes in the digital platform workforce over time, suggesting that this group, which comprised just 0.01% of tax filers in 2012, grew to 1.15% of filers by 2018. Because these studies use IRS data, they reflect work performed in the prior year, as that is the reporting period of tax forms.

As the authors acknowledge, there are several limitations in using IRS tax data to quantify the size of the digital platform workforce, the primary concern being that they must rely on a list of about 50 known platforms to identify DPWs. This likely biases their estimates downward since workers on lesser-known platforms were likely omitted. Second, their estimates can only identify workers who file taxes.[2] Finally, tax filings do not distinguish between primary and supplemental employment, nor do they include information on hours worked. This means that information about whether digital platform work is

[1] For example, Robles and McGee (2016) use data from the Enterprising and Informal Work Activities Survey to investigate informal work and report that 36% of respondents reported some informal work (including a broad set of digital and offline work activities). Similarly, Abramowitz and Joung (2024) find that in 2019 5.8% of workers engaged in informal self-employment as a main job but revise their estimate down to 5.3% when they exclude platform gig workers.

[2] There are also complications due to mandatory reporting thresholds, with mandatory reporting of 1099-K forms differing across years and states. Garin et al. (2022) provide more information on this, along with a methodology for addressing this gap using state-level data from states with lower reporting thresholds to impute national digital platform work estimates.

a primary or secondary job must be inferred based on whether 1099 workers report W2 earnings and the share of their earnings that come from 1099 versus W2 employment.

Separately, Farrell et al. (2019) use administrative data on all bank accounts from JP Morgan Chase. They found that 1.6% of accounts included transactions whose characteristics were consistent with digital platform work. Unlike the tax filing studies, their unit of analysis is bank accounts rather than workers, which makes it difficult to compare their results with other estimates. Additionally, it is unclear how representative the JPMC accounts are of all bank accounts held by workforce members. The time period over which the data are collected also differs from IRS-based estimates, as the bank account data only capture transactions from one quarter.

To summarize, administrative data is an attractive source for estimating DPWs as it allows researchers to more directly observe earnings or economic activity associated with digital platform work. It avoids many of the interpretation issues that arise from measuring this work using survey responses, as we will explain in the next section. However, researchers using administrative data likely underestimate the true digital platform workforce population since they miss workers who use platforms not included in their lists. Importantly, tax and bank account data do not contain the universe of workers, or they may not be representative of all workers, and therefore cannot produce precise estimates of DPWs as a share of the US workforce or labor force.

Survey data estimates of the digital platform workforce vary greatly across studies. For example, Katz and Krueger (2019) indicate that DPWs accounted for 0.5% of all workers in 2015, while Durante et al. (2018) reported that 16% of adults were paid for digital platform work, the highest estimate we found. Much of this variation can be attributed to the factors shown in Table 1, especially differences in timing and activities captured across the surveys.

Some of the variation among estimates likely reflects growth in digital platform work over time. The smallest of the survey estimates in Table 1 was from the earliest data collected, while the most recent estimate, 8% of the workforce (Dua et al., 2022), was derived from data collected in 2022. This aligns with results from administrative records as well as Garin et al. (2023), who examined growth in digital

platform work during the COVID-19 pandemic and presented evidence that digital platform work grew by 150% between 2019 and 2021.

Another way that timing contributes to differences in these survey estimates is that surveys ask respondents to report digital platform work performed over different lengths of time. For example, several surveys, including the Survey of Informal Work Participation (Bracha & Burke, 2021), the Current Population Survey (CPS) Contingent Worker Supplement (CPS Staff, 2018), and the American Training Survey (Osterman, 2022), each ask respondents about work performed in the prior week. By contrast, the Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking asks respondents to report on work over the past month, and the McKinsey Global Institute Survey (Manyika et al., 2016) asks about work performed in the past year. Given the flexible nature of platform work, DPWs may not have consistent work schedules over the course of several weeks. As a result, surveys designed to capture tasks performed within a larger time window will likely capture more DPWs.

Aside from timing, the type of activities captured by surveys drives important differences in digital platform work estimates. For example, several studies draw distinctions between more or less labor-intensive platform work. Some studies explicitly exclude less labor-intensive platform work, which often includes selling or renting owned goods (Bracha & Burke, 2021), while other studies report separate estimates for more and less labor-intensive work (Smith, 2016). In our results below, we attempt to provide separate estimates across more labor-intensive "services" and less labor-intensive work than to the selling or renting of goods.

Finally, an important point of differentiation is in the methodology used to capture digital platform work. Most surveys explicitly ask about the activity for which the respondent earned money, though there are a few exceptions. The American Training Survey identifies respondents who are self-employed and then asks if they use an online app to find jobs (Osterman, 2022); while the McKinsey American Opportunity Survey simply asks if survey takers consider themselves to be part of the gig economy (Dua et al., 2022). Studies also vary in whether they report digital platform work estimates only when the work constitutes a respondent's main job (Osterman, 2022) or if they report any platform work

beyond the worker's main job. As will be shown below, this leads to large differences in the prevalence of digital platform work. Finally, we note that the survey frame varies across surveys as well. While most surveys in the literature use a probability-based web panel, the CPS uses a robust address-based sample drawn from the Census Bureau's Master Address File. The EPOP survey measures we present below use both address-based sample and web panel survey frames, as discussed in Section 3.1. While other survey methodological factors, such as outreach frequency and mode, differ across EPOP and CPS, this still provides a useful lens to examine these different sources of data.

We build on this prior research by estimating the size of the digital platform workforce using data from the EPOP survey. The EPOP survey uses a series of questions designed to minimize respondent confusion and reduce false positive responses, which are issues of concern within prior literature using survey evidence (Abraham and Amaya 2019; Abraham et al., 2019; Abraham et al., 2021; Abraham et al, 2024). It also asks directly for platform name to verify self-reported digital platform work status. Rather than relying on an initial list of a limited number of platforms, we verify a large number of potential digital platforms to minimize false negatives. The EPOP survey also allow us to identify work performed in the past week and differentiate that work from tasks performed within the prior 6 months. This allows us to measure snapshots of the digital platform workforce over both shorter and longer time horizons. We can also use the reported platform to separate more and less labor-intensive digital platform work. Finally, we examine the characteristics and motivations of DPWs across these differing types of platform work. Existing research on the motivations driving workers to choose this type of work often focuses on a single platform or platform type (e.g., Allon et al. 2018, Churchill and Craig 2019, Doucette and Bradford 2019, Berger et al. 2019). We contribute to this literature by examining various financial and non-pecuniary motivations for choosing digital platform work and estimating differences by platform work timing.

3 Data and Measurement

The EPOP Survey was designed and conducted by the NORC at the University of Chicago with grant funding from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. As part of its focus on entrepreneurship, the

survey also includes a series of questions regarding engagement with "gig work," including motivations for this work and information on the name of the platform coordinating the subset of gig work designated as digital platform work.

3.1 The EPOP Survey

EPOP is designed to provide information on a range of entrepreneurial activities among non-institutionalized adults aged 18 years and older in the United States. Data collection ran from February to June of 2022.[3] The survey uses a stratified sample selected from three separate sources: (1) NORC's AmeriSpeak Panel, (2) an address-based sample (ABS) built from the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and (3) opt-in panels. AmeriSpeak is a probability-based panel where households are recruited into the panel and receive survey invitations periodically. Opt-in panels represent nonprobability samples with unknown coverage properties. Weights for a combined probability and nonprobability sample are derived using NORC's TrueNorth weighting method. The sample is designed to support the estimation of key entrepreneurial activities at the state and Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) level (for the top 50 MSAs), both overall and by gender and race/ethnicity subgroups.

Throughout the survey, many efforts were made to encourage participation from a wide range of potential respondents. Outreach materials emphasized the importance of responding to the survey even if an individual is not currently engaged in entrepreneurial activities. A telephone prompting operation was also used for the probability sample to encourage participation from individuals who did not respond to mail and email invitations. Finally, targeted incentive increases were enacted late in the fielding period to encourage participation from individuals in geographic areas with lagging response rates.[4]

[3] The same survey participant can respond to multiple waves of the EPOP Survey. Therefore, while estimates from EPOP waves can be compared to one another, microdata from separate waves cannot to be pooled into a single analysis. Because of this, we focus on EPOP:2022 only in the results below. As discussed in Section 5, a longitudinal release of the data is planned for 2026 and will allow for pooled analyses and longitudinal estimation.
[4] Appendix Table A.1 shows that across most demographic and labor market characteristics, the EPOP sample is similar to the February 2022 CPS. We note that employment rates are different, in part because of the multi-part prompting for employment in EPOP. There is also a modest divergence in educational attainment, attributable to weight trimming procedures in EPOP:2022.

3.2 Conceptual Definitions and Measurement Approach

The EPOP Survey first identifies "gig workers," defined as individuals engaged in short, paid tasks or jobs conducted through companies that coordinate payment for the service. This definition is broad in that it includes any respondent who considers their work to be tasks mediated through a company but is still narrower than some other measures of "gig work" as it focuses only on work where payment is coordinated by a company. In our results below, we focus on a subset of gig workers —DPWs, defined as individuals whose work is coordinated through a digital platform. We note that this general definition of platform work is broader than in other studies (e.g., Garin et al. 2023; Abramowitz and Joung 2024), as it includes not only service-based work but also the selling of goods and rental of property. However, we are able to separate out digital platform work involving the selling or renting of goods.

To improve measurement accuracy and allow for the separation of different forms of digital platform work, respondents were asked to name the platform through which they conducted their work. These platform names were then coded into categories, allowing us to create multiple confirmed platform types.

3.3 EPOP Screener Approach

To measure these conceptual definitions, the EPOP survey starts with a screener that first collects employment status, then asks about the type of employment and characteristics of the job.[5] Figure 1 provides a summary of this screening approach, which starts with determining if respondents worked in the past week. Respondents are asked if they worked for pay at a job or business in the last week. Those who did not work are then asked: "in the last week, did you do ANY work for pay, even for as little as one hour?" As part of this initial screening, respondents who report working are asked to classify their

[5] The full questionnaire for all rounds of the EPOP Survey may be found at https://epop.norc.org/us/en/epop/researchers/public-use-files.html. Specific questions most relevant to the analyses here are reproduced in Appendix B.

type of employment and select from a list of options including owning their own business and freelancing/independent contracting.[6] The survey also collects information on individuals who were temporarily absent from a job (i.e., had a job but were not at work), and respondents who report platform work are included in our digital platform work estimate below.

Any respondent whose first or second job is reported as freelance work or work for a company is asked a follow-up question related to platform-based work. Given the potential for lack of clarity in what counts as gig work, the survey includes extensive examples of gig work activities and includes a definition of gig work in the main text of the question:

> "Some people earn money through short, paid tasks or jobs online or in-person conducted through companies that coordinate payment for the service. This is sometimes referred to as 'gig work.'"

For respondents who do not classify as gig workers for either of their first two jobs, a final follow-up question asks if respondents are engaged in gig work regardless of the prior responses. This final follow-up asks respondents to consider all work conducted in the past 6 months to include more irregular work that may not have occurred in the past week. We note that regardless of the time frame, all questions are worded the same to ensure similar measurement of digital platform work across time frames.

The screening approach above provides an estimate of potential "gig workers," and the EPOP survey further asks about whether the work is coordinated through an online platform and the name of the platform. This digital platform name is then used to derive the final classification of digital platform workers. Below, we focus on three categories of "confirmed" digital platform work that are derived from the platform name:

[6] In this paper the term "freelancer" is used to refer to respondents who report being freelancers, independent contractors, or self-employed consultants.

1. *Services*. This is the largest category of digital platform work in EPOP data, encompassing any platform that coordinates relationships with customers and payment for services the worker provides (e.g., ride-share, task-based service work, food delivery).
2. *Selling/renting of goods*. Some respondents reported a platform that coordinates relationships with customers and payment for selling or renting goods/property. While renting is, in theory, different than selling, the sample size of respondents reporting platforms coordinating rentals is too small to warrant its own category.
3. *Online surveys*. Some respondents reported that a survey company was their platform. Given the circular nature of this being counted as platform work when taking an online survey, we classify this as its own category. As shown below, the number of respondents in this category is small enough to not qualitatively affect the results. Nonetheless, they are not considered part of our core digital platform work estimates.

In addition to these platforms, some respondents reported names of platforms that indicated confusion regarding the question (e.g., reported a major company or university as a "platform") or did not report a platform name. The results below do not consider these responses to be digital platform work.

3.4 Survey Questionnaire Development Process

The EPOP questionnaire was tested using a multistage process, including cognitive interviews, pretests, and debriefings. Cognitive interviews were conducted in the fall of 2021 with a sample of 15 participants purposefully selected to represent individuals involved in various entrepreneurial pursuits and demographic backgrounds. Respondents were recruited via email to participate in the study, and all participants were compensated for their participation. Cognitive interview participants successfully navigated the questionnaire, but based on responses to the interviews, additional examples of jobs classified as "gig work" were added to the survey to provide further clarification for respondents.

Following adjustments to the questionnaire during the cognitive interviews, a pretest survey was conducted in December 2021 with a random sample of roughly 2000 respondents using a sample design

that mirrored the design used in the primary EPOP survey. In addition to testing that the survey logic worked appropriately, a subsample of roughly 200 individuals was randomly selected to be debriefed using an interview protocol. This allowed for a qualitative understanding of whether respondents felt the survey classification aligned with their work activities. The results of this pretest were positive, with only 3.8% of debrief respondents classified as "gig workers" disagreeing with this classification.

4 Results

4.1 Measurement of Platform Work in the EPOP Survey

Table 2 shows estimates of job activities for the respondent's primary job last week by different sample types in the EPOP survey. The top four rows provide estimates of individuals who were not working last week, working as an employee, being a self-employed business owner, and doing freelance work that is not classified as platform work; the bottom rows provide estimates of different types of digital platform work. In the leftmost panel, Table 2 presents weighted estimates both for the total sample and the probability sample only. In the full sample, 1.64% of respondents report that their primary job involves digital platform work through platforms coordinating services or selling or renting goods. The full weighted estimates are very similar across all variables when comparing the total sample and the probability sample only. For example, restricted to the probability sample, 1.58% of respondents reported that their primary job involved platform work. This similarity is not surprising, given that the weighting procedure for the nonprobability sample explicitly attempts to match the coverage properties between the probability and nonprobability samples (Yang et al., 2022).

The right of Table 2 presents weighted estimates separately by sample type. These results show that the probability of platform work is similar in the ABS and AmeriSpeak samples (1.66% compared to 1.56%) but is substantially higher in the nonprobability sample (2.51%). Note that this estimate intentionally excludes individuals whose platform work involves taking online surveys, so while the proportion of individuals taking online surveys is higher in the nonprobability sample, this does not fully

explain the differences in platform work between these two samples. Instead, this reflects that individuals in the nonprobability sample are more likely to engage in all forms of platform work. This result is important given the differences in survey frames across studies examining platform work and suggests that probability samples provide important advantages for studying these questions. Because of the differences across sample type, the remainder of the paper focuses on estimates using only the probability sample.

To provide more background on the methodology used to measure digital platform work in the EPOP Survey, Table 3 presents statistics on the type of platform, which was coded based on the verbatim responses, for all respondents who initially responded yes to one the questions discussed in Section 3.3 (i.e., that their work involves "short, paid tasks or jobs online or in-person conducted through companies that coordinate payment for the service "). These results show substantial confusion for respondents who self-report that they are platform workers using these prompts above. Just over 20% of respondents who indicated that they performed platform work reported a confirmed digital platform when asked to list the name of the platform coordinating their work. Of the remaining 80% of respondents, most either did not list a platform or listed employers unlikely to be digital platform operators. This indicates the complicated nature of using survey measurement to capture digital platform work and reinforces the importance of recording verbatim information on the platform that coordinates payment and customer relationships.[7] Because we consider a respondent to be a DPW only if they report working for a confirmed digital platform, some of this discrepancy between the initial report and confirmed digital platform worker status could be the result of respondents reporting platforms. Nonetheless, our overall estimates of digital platform work are consistent with those shown in Table 1, suggesting that this is not a primary driver of this result.

To further explore how workers may have been misclassified if we only used their initial report of job type, Table 4 displays the percentage of respondents who engaged in platform work by their self-

[7] Appendix Table A.2 provides further demographic details on the respondents who exhibit this confusion.

reported primary job. Of all respondents who were eventually coded as DPWs engaged on a confirmed platform, 23.4% initially indicated that they worked for an employer. This implies that a nontrivial number of platform workers report working as an employee for a company rather than as an independent contractor when given the choice, a finding that is consistent with prior work suggesting that without thoughtful survey approaches, DPWs may be misclassified as being in traditional employee work arrangements on household surveys (Abraham et al., 2024).

Table 5 displays the percentage of respondents who report working for an employer, traditional self-employment, freelance work, and digital platform work as their primary job. Thirty percent of respondents reported not working in the prior week. The vast majority of respondents, over 93%, indicated that they performed no platform work in the last 6 months. Only 1.58% of adults report engaging in digital platform work as a primary job in the last week. Note that this is out of all U.S. adults, and restricting to only employed adults would increase the estimate. When including both primary and secondary jobs, this rate rises to 2.47%. Even more expansively, the final column of Table 5 considers all platform work considered in the past 6 months, showing that 4.44% of adults participated in platform work at some point in this period. Within platform workers for whom this work was their primary job last week, the majority of digital platform workers, 76% (1.21/1.58), perform service work. This includes driving for Uber, delivering for Doordash, or completing home repairs through Angi. A smaller share of these workers, roughly 20% (0.32/1.58), work on selling platforms such as Etsy, Mercado, or Airbnb. The final 4% of DPWs engage in online survey work through platforms such as Prolific. Focusing on any digital platform work over the past 6 months, 71% (3.16/4.44) were involved in service work, with 25.2% (1.12/4.44) involved in selling/renting goods.

While the majority of our analysis focuses solely on the first year of data collection for EPOP (EPOP:2022), there are two additional waves of data collection in 2023 and 2024 with similar batteries of questions. To examine changes over time, Figure 2 plots these key estimates from Table 4 across these three years. These results show no large changes over this period. There are modest increases across all estimates between 2022 and 2024, with the most noticeable increase being in the largest group of

platform workers (service platform workers). Nonetheless, these changes are minor in magnitude and within the margin for error.

4.2 Characteristics and Motivations of Digital Platform Workers in the United States

Table 6 compares the characteristics of DPWs to all other employed workers,[8] disaggregating digital platform workers based on whether they perform services or engage in selling. We report each of these categories by whether the work occurred in the last week or sometime over the past 6 months. Female workers comprised about half of service-based digital platform work regardless of timing, that is, whether the work was completed in the prior week or prior 6 months. However, female workers accounted for 70.9% of selling platform workers in the prior week and 73.1% of selling platform workers in the prior 6 months. Only the latter percentage was statistically different from the female share of all employed workers.

The racial composition of DPWs differed from all other employment with larger shares of Black and Hispanic workers. While Black workers account for 12% of all employment, they comprise 23.3% of workers who performed service-based digital platform work in the prior week and 21.7% of those performing this work in the prior 6 months. Both shares were statistically different from the Black share of employment. While the shares of Black workers were higher for selling-based digital platforms than for non-platform workers, the values were not statistically different from non-platform workers. White workers accounted for smaller shares of services-based digital platform work as compared with their share of all employment. Across all categories of digital platform work, the fraction of DPWs who are Hispanic is not statistically significant from all other employed workers.

Workers performing digital platform work in the prior week were less college-educated than other employed workers, with 32% of service workers holding at least a bachelor's degree. Forty-seven percent of other workers had a bachelor's degree, and the difference was statistically significant. DPWs

[8] Refer to Appendix Table A.3 for a more detailed table comparing the characteristics of all groups of workers included in Table 4 who had a job the primary week.

are also less likely to be married than all other workers, with only 38-42% of DPWs on services platforms being married (depending on timing of work) compared to 54.1% of all other workers. Differences in the number of children between DPWs and all other employed workers were not statistically significant.

Service-based DPWs tend to be younger than all other employed workers. Approximately 36% of those on service platforms in the prior week and 34% of those on service platforms in the prior 6 months were between the ages of 18 and 29. Among all other workers, this age bracket comprised just 18% of the total. Fifteen percent of service platform workers in the prior week were between age 50 and 64, a smaller share than the 27.5% of all other employed workers who fell into this age category.

The EPOP survey does not capture worker income disaggregated by source of income, so we cannot compare income derived only from platform work to income from other sources. However, we can observe where digital platform workers fall in the income distribution. Among workers not engaged in digital platform work, about 30% had household incomes of less than $50,000. By contrast, nearly 39% of workers on service platforms in the prior week reported household incomes of less than $50K. At the other end of the distribution, the share of workers reporting household incomes of $100K or more was much smaller for service-based DPWs in the prior week, 22.8%, as compared with all other employed workers, 36.8% . Roughly 27% of DPWs working for selling platforms in the prior 6 months reported income in this bracket.

Finally, we examine the motivations behind pursuing digital platform work, displayed in Table 7. Respondents were given the entire list of response options shown in Table 7 to choose from and could select all that apply. Therefore, the numbers shown are not mutually exclusive, and as shown in the table, there are many response options that tend to elicit similar responses. As expected, workers engaged in digital platform work last week are more likely to report that this was their primary source of income.

Autonomy was another major motivating factor behind digital platform workers' occupational choices, though this was more frequently cited as a motivation for DPWs working last week than for any workers who performed digital platform work over the past 6 months. Thirty-seven percent of those whose digital platform work was last week cited flexibility as a motivating factor. By contrast, when

examining any digital platform work over the past 6 months, this number drops to 29.2%. We also observe suggestive differences between DPWs based on the timing of work in their likelihood to report being motivated by a desire to work for themselves. Thirteen percent of DPWs performing work in the past week were motivated by a desire to work for themselves, as compared with 12% of those reporting work in the past month. These differences are statistically significant.

There is a gap between DPWs based on the timing of work in the share motivated by fun. Twenty-eight percent of all DPWs over the past 6 months reported fun as motivation, as compared with 18.4% who performed this work last week. A sizable share of workers from both categories indicated a desire to help family or friends through their digital platform work (19.2% of all DPWs in the past 6 months) or because of career transitions (11.5% of all DPWs in the past 6 months), but these results did not differ based on the timing of digital platform work.

5 Conclusion

As technological advances increase the extent to which digital platforms can coordinate non-standard work and tasks, a significant amount of interest has emerged seeking to understand the role of technology in the evolution of work arrangements. In this analysis, we use data from the EPOP survey to provide more evidence on the size of the digital platform workforce and how the size of the platform workforce changes based on the type and timing of the work. The survey includes a battery of questions to measure digital platform work and disaggregate it by the type of platform.

We show that DPWs comprise a small but meaningful percentage of the workforce. We further show that the timing of work is important, with the prevalence of digital platform work more than doubling when considering any work over the past 6 months as opposed to only work performed during the prior week. Regardless of timing, most work conducted via digital platforms is service-based work. Finally, characteristics such as race, gender, education, age, and income differ between DPWs based on the timing of the work. These differences are important to consider in light of ongoing discussions surrounding digital platform work. For instance, individuals who rely on digital platform work as their

primary source of income are more likely to be economically disadvantaged and from minority groups when compared to those who have engaged in such work at any point over the past six months. This highlights the need to pay close attention to the details of digital platform work arrangements, as the timing and frequency of engagement may reflect underlying instability in their labor market experiences.

More generally, these results contribute to ongoing debates about how to modernize labor market policies as work arrangements evolve. Our findings highlight the importance of differentiating between categories of DPWs since policy interventions may affect groups of workers with distinct characteristics in different ways. They also highlight the flexibility and autonomy these workers value so that policies are designed with these preferences in mind. While self-reported motivations shed light on why some workers choose digital platform work, more research is needed to understand how evolving labor market conditions impact these choices. Future work should explore whether workers rely on digital platforms for their primary income because they are pulled into this emerging sector or because they are pushed out of more traditional work arrangements. Similarly, for workers seeking supplemental pay, further study is needed to understand whether structural changes in the labor market push workers to seek additional income to finance necessities or if they are pulled in by opportunities to earn more income for expanded consumption or savings. These considerations have important implications for questions of how digital platforms are considered when designing labor market policy.

Our study also has implications for the measurement of non-standard work more generally. We show that asking for verbatim answers on platforms can be particularly important to resolve respondent confusion related to these various types of work. Moving forward, future research can explore how these measurements can be augmented to capture even more detailed characteristics of jobs to better understand the job arrangements faced by workers in the US.

Finally, we note that the EPOP data used in this analysis are freely available to researchers and present multiple other important research opportunities. In addition to the first year of EPOP data analyzed here, there are four annual waves of EPOP available and a planned fifth year to be fielded in 2026. This wave (EPOP:2026) will also include a longitudinal component, where most completed

interviews will consist of respondents who have completed prior waves of EPOP. This will allow researchers to use this data to examine the experiences of DPWs after their initial digital platform work and examine predictors of transitions between different forms of work.

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Figures

Figure 1: EPOP Digital Platform Work Screening

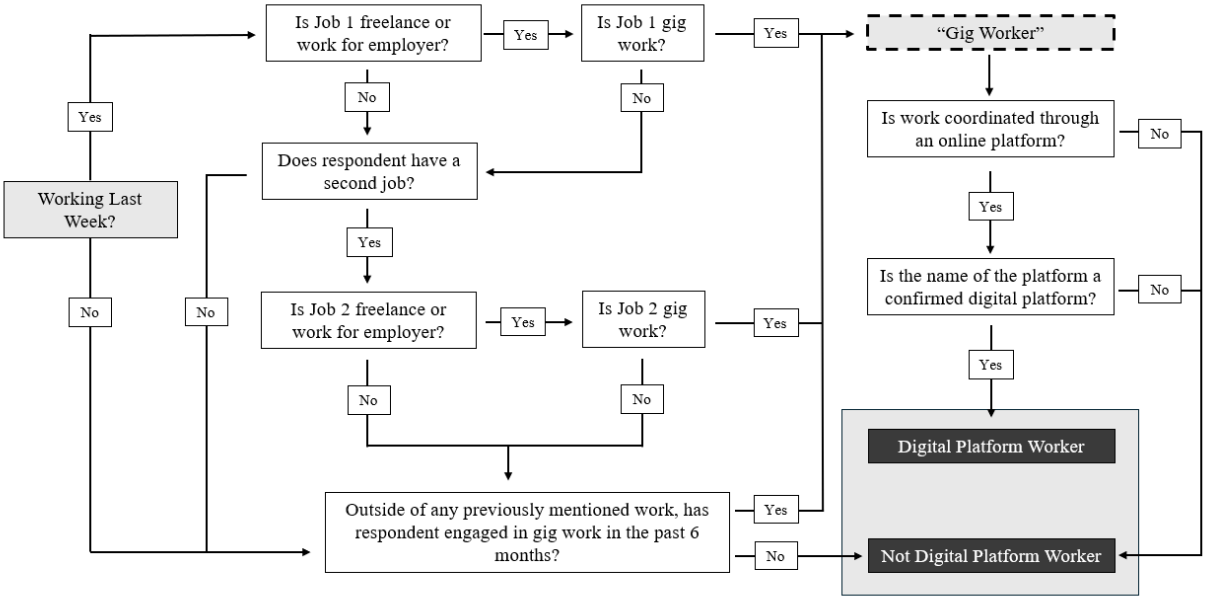
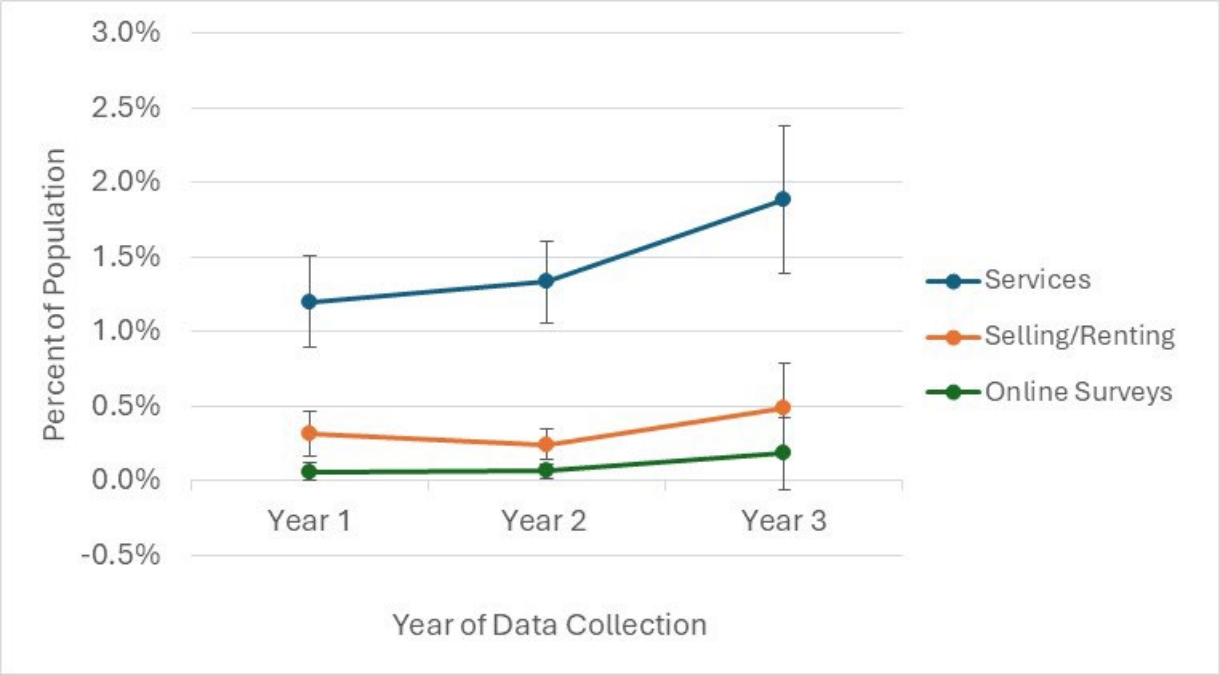


Figure 2: Key Platform Work Estimates by Year



Source: EPOP:2022, EPOP:2023, and EPOP:2024. Cells refer to the percentage of respondents categorized into a given type of employment for their primary job last week. All estimates use the probability sample only and are weighted to account for the complex sampling design of the EPOP survey.

Tables

Table 1: Prior Estimates of Digital Platform Work

Authors	Primary Estimate	Data Source	Sampling Frame (Surveys Only)	Time Frame	Definition of Gig Work
Jackson, Looney, and Ramnath (2017)	2014: 0.7% of the workforce in tax filings	IRS Tax Data	N/A	Past Tax Year	Individuals with 1099-reported contract earnings from online platform companies
Collins et al. (2019)	2016: 1.0% of the workforce in tax filings	IRS Tax Data	N/A	Past Tax Year	Individuals with 1099-reported contract earnings from online platform companies
Garin, Jackson, and Koustas (2022)	2012: 0.01% of the tax workforce 2018: 1.15% of the tax workforce	IRS Tax Data	N/A	Past Tax Year	Individuals with 1099-reported contract earnings from online platform companies
Farrell, Greig, and Hamoudi (2019)	2018 Q1: 1.6% of Chase checking account holders	JP Morgan Chase Institute	N/A	First Quarter	Account holders earning income through "digital marketplaces that connect independent suppliers to buyers of goods and services, with third parties (“platforms”) mediating payment"
Katz and Krueger (2019)	2015: 0.5% of all workers	RAND American Life Panel Survey	Probability Based Web Panel	Past Week	"Workers who provide services through online intermediaries, such as Uber or TaskRabbit"
Bracha and Burke (2021)	2015: 1% of employed household heads	Federal Reserve Bank of New York Survey of Consumer Expectations, Survey of Informal Work Participation Module	Subsample of Consumer Confidence Survey	Past Week	Labor-intensive online paid informal work or side jobs (excluding renting or selling)

Authors	Primary Estimate	Data Source	Sampling Frame (Surveys Only)	Time Frame	Definition of Gig Work
Manyika et al. (2016)	2016: 4% of the working-age population	McKinsey Global Institute Survey	Nonprobability Sample	Past Year	The worker is paid by the task, assignment, or sales; and the relationship between the worker and the customer or client is short-term and facilitated by a third party
Smith (2016)	2016: 8% of adults (labor) and 18% of adults (selling)	Pew Gig Work, Online Selling and Home Sharing Survey	Probability Based Web Panel	Past Year	The worker earned money from an online platform
CPS Staff (2018)	2017: 1% of total employment	Current Population Survey – Contingent Worker Supplement	Address Based Sample (Probability Sample)	Past Week	Short jobs or tasks that workers find through websites or mobile apps that both connect them with customers and arrange payment for the tasks
Durante, Kreiss, Larrimore, Park, and Sahm (2018)	2017: 16% of adults	Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking	Probability Based Web Panel	Past Month	Online services or sales, such as driving using a ride-sharing app or selling items online
Osterman (2022)	2020: 0.9% of the workforce	American Training Survey	Probability Based Web Panel	Past Week	Freelancers who find jobs via an online app
Dua et al. (2022)	2022: 8% of the workforce	McKinsey's American Opportunity Survey	Probability Based Web Panel	Current Job	Someone who pursues independent work that is provided via a tech platform (such as Airbnb, TaskRabbit, or Uber)

Table 2: Key Weighted EPOP Estimates by Sample Type, Primary Job Last Week

			Weighted Estimates		
Category	Overall	Probability-Based Samples Only	ABS	AmeriSpeak	Opt-In
Did not work last week	30.90 (.006)	29.99 (.006)	29.63 (.017)	30.02 (.007)	39.20 (.009)
Work as employee	53.97 (.007)	55.05 (.007)	55.76 (.018)	54.98 (.007)	43.74 (.009)
Business owner	5.61 (.004)	5.45 (.003)	5.23 (.008)	5.47 (.003)	6.45 (.003)
Freelance but not digital platform work	6.74 (.003)	6.79 (.004)	6.44 (.010)	6.82 (.004)	7.12 (.005)
Any digital platform work	**1.64** **(.002)**	**1.58** **(.002)**	**1.66** **(.005)**	**1.56** **(.002)**	**2.51** **(.002)**
Digital Platform Work - Services	1.24 (.002)	1.21 (.002)	1.59 (.005)	1.16 (.002)	1.78 (.001)
Digital Gig Platform Work - Selling/Renting	0.33 (.001)	0.32 (.001)	0.04 (.000)	0.34 (.001)	0.53 (.001)
Digital Gig Platform Work - Online survey	0.07 (.000)	0.05 (.000)	0.03 (.000)	0.06 (.000)	0.20 (.001)
N	32,021	11,174	1,551	9,623	20,847

Source: EPOP:2022. Cells refer to the percentage of respondents categorized into a given type of employment for their primary job last week. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Classification of DPWs is based on reporting working for a verified digital platform. ABS and AmeriSpeak samples are probability-based samples, the opt-in sample is a nonprobability sample.

Table 3 Respondent Confusion of Digital Platform Work

	Type of Platform Work	
	Primary Job Last week	Any Platform Work in Past 6 Months
Confirmed Digital Platform Work	**20.7%** **(0.021)**	**21.6%** **(0.013)**
Not Platform Work	**79.3%** **(0.021)**	**78.4%** **(0.013)**
Payment Provider	2.2% (.007)	2.1% (.004)
Reports platform, but unlikely gig work	32.9% (.024)	26.9% (.014)
Platform information is missing	44.3% (.026)	49.4% (.016)
Total	100%	100%
N	835	2,258

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample data. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Sample is restricted to only respondents who initially reported platform work. Classification of DPWs is based on reporting working for a verified digital platform. All estimates are weighted using EPOP probability sample weights.

Table 4: Initial Report of Type of Job for Digital Platform Workers

Type of Worker	N	Type of Job Reported Prior to Question about Digital Platform Work: Freelance/Independent Contractor	Type of Job Reported Prior to Question about Digital Platform Work: Work for Employer
Confirmed digital platform worker	167	76.6% (.053)	23.4% (.053)
Any worker reporting work is "coordinated through platform"	835	60.2% (.026)	39.8% (.026)

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample data. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Classification of DPWs is based on reporting working for a verified digital platform. Restricted to platform workers who report platform work as their primary job the past week.

Table 5: Measurement of Digital Platform Work in EPOP

Category	Examples	Digital Platform Work Last Week: Primary Job	Digital Platform Work Last Week: Primary or Secondary Job	Any Digital Platform Work in Past 6 Months
No digital platform work				**93.72%**
Confirmed Digital Platform Work		**1.58%**	**2.47%**	**4.44%**
		(0.178)	**(0.232)**	**(0.288)**
Services	Uber, Doordash, Angi	1.21%	1.85%	3.16%
		(0.159)	(0.194)	(0.244)
Selling/Renting	Etsy, Mercado, AirBnB	0.32%	0.56%	1.12%
		(0.077)	(0.126)	(0.151)
Online survey	Prolific	0.05%	0.06%	0.16%
		(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.045)
Total		**100%**	**100%**	**100%**

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample data. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Percentages refer to the percent out of the entire adult population over the age of 18. Classification of DPWs is based on reporting working for a verified digital platform. All estimates are weighted using EPOP probability sample weights.

Table 6: Characteristics of Digital Platform Workers by Time Period Observed

		Last Week		Last 6 Months	
	All Other Employed Workers	Digital Platform: Services	Digital Platform: Selling/Renting	Digital Platform: Services	Digital Platform: Selling/Renting
Demographics					
Female	52.3	50.1	70.9	51.4	73.1**
	(.009)	(.053)	(.102)	(.039)	(.060)
Black	12.0	23.3*	14.0	21.7**	14.6
	(.005)	(.048)	(.068)	(.032)	(.044)
White	59.1	43.3*	46.1	50.7*	47.8
	(.009)	(.051)	(.111)	(.039)	(.066)
Hispanic	18.7	20.3	34.2	16.4	29.5
	(.008)	(.048)	(.129)	(.033)	(.075)
HS Diploma or Less	22.6	35.3*	42.5	28.8	35.2
	(.008)	(.060)	(.124)	(.041)	(.073)
Some College	30.4	32.6	27.6	32.2	23.3
	(.008)	(.049)	(.097)	(.035)	(.054)
BA+	47.0	32.1**	30.0	39.0*	41.6
	(.009)	(.046)	(.095)	(.038)	(.064)
Immigrant	11.2	7.2	4.2*	5.9**	5.6*
	(.006)	(.024)	(.034)	(.015)	(.025)
Married	54.1	42.3*	52.1	38.8***	53.0
	(.009)	(.053)	(.116)	(.037)	(.068)
Has Children	35.9	45.9	37.8	41.0	33.0
	(.009)	(.054)	(.105)	(.039)	(.061)
Age 18-29	18.1	36.2**	13.8	33.7***	17.0
	(.008)	(.055)	(.057)	(.039)	(.047)
Age 30-49	44.4	42.1	59.2	41.6	44.9
	(.009)	(.053)	(.106)	(.038)	(.069)
Age 50-64	27.5	15.4***	13.2*	17.5**	22.5
	(.008)	(.029)	(.068)	(.029)	(.048)
Age 65+	10	6.3	13.9	7.2	15.6
	(.005)	(.018)	(.065)	(.017)	(.041)
HH Income <$50,000	29.5	39	39.7	39.9**	33.3
	(.008)	(.050)	(.103)	(.037)	(.058)
HH Income $50000-$99,999	33.7	38.2	32.1	33.2	40.3
	(.008)	(.054)	(.124)	(.038)	(.069)
HH Income $100,000+	36.8	22.8**	28.2	26.9*	26.3
	(.009)	(.047)	(.102)	(.038)	(.059)
N	7046	202	48	359	129

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample data. Standard errors are shown in parentheses. Cells refer to the percentage of workers in a column who are in a given demographic group. Restricted to confirmed DPWs based on reporting working for a verified digital platform. All estimates are weighted using EPOP probability sample weights, and significance testing refers to tests of the composition of a given column relative to all other employed workers.
*p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001.

Table 7: Motivations of Digital Platform Workers

	Timing of Digital Platform Work	
	Last Week	Last 6 Months
Primary Income Source	36.9**	28.7
	(.034)	(.023)
Supplement Pay	50.5	53.3
	(.035)	(.025)
Supplement Retirement	16.0	16.0
	(.026)	(.018)
Help Family or Friends	21.4	19.2
	(.029)	(.02)
Starting Own Business	12.6	9.7
	(.023)	(.015)
Career Transition	12.6	11.5
	(.023)	(.016)
Maintain Skills	7.8	5.5
	(.019)	(.011)
Obtain New Skills	5.3	4.0
	(.016)	(.010)
Working for Myself	13.1*	12.0
	(.024)	(.016)
Flexibility	37.4**	29.2
	(.034)	(.023)
Networking	11.7	10.5
	(.022)	(.015)
For Fun	18.4*	28.0
	(.027)	(.022)
N	206	400

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample data. Cells refer to the percentage of workers in a column who report a given motivation. Categories are not mutually exclusive, and respondents can select all motivations that apply. Restricted to confirmed DPWs based on reporting working for a verified digital platform. Stars in the second column refer to tests of if the estimates for primary job last week and last 6 months, not last week are equal. ** indicates significance at the 0.05 level and *** indicates significance at the 0.01 level. All estimates are weighted using EPOP probability sample weights.

Appendix A: Supplementary Tables

Table A.1: EPOP:2022 Weighted Means Compared to 2022 CPS

	EPOP 2022		
	N	Weighted Mean	2022 CPS Benchmark
Demographic Variables			
Female	11,149	0.537	0.514
Black	11,133	0.118	0.121
White	11,133	0.631	0.620
Hispanic	11,133	0.165	0.172
HS Diploma or Less	10,688	0.252	0.386
Some College	10,688	0.313	0.263
BA+	10,688	0.436	0.352
Age 18-29	11,109	0.153	0.198
Age 30-49	10,802	0.355	0.334
Age 50-64	11,106	0.260	0.248
Age 65+	11,162	0.233	0.220
Married	11,162	0.548	0.521
Has Children	11,162	0.302	0.247
HH Income <$50,000	10,976	0.330	0.355
HH Income $50,000-$99,999	10,976	0.334	0.313
HH Income $100,000+	10,976	0.337	0.332
Employed Prior Week	11,174	0.701	0.610

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample only (total N=11,174). CPS statistics taken from the February 2022 Monthly CPS (corresponding with the month fielding started for EPOP:2022).

Table A.2: Characteristics of Respondents with Confusion

	Primary Job Last Week			Any Digital Platform Work in Past 6 Months		
	Confirmed Digital Platform Work (No Confusion)	Not Digital Platform Work (Respondent Confusion)	Difference	Confirmed Digital Platform Work (No Confusion)	Not Digital Platform Work (Respondent Confusion)	Difference
Demographics						
Female	56.5	52.6	3.9	56.8	50.3	6.5
Black	24.5	14.4	10.1	19.8	14.5	5.3
White	40.8	49	-8.1	49.8	52.3	-2.5
Hispanic	23.1	29.5	-6.4	20.3	23.8	-3.5
HS Diploma or Less	35.3	32.8	2.5	28.9	28.6	0.3
Some College	35.7	33.2	2.5	28.8	30.6	-1.8
BA+	23.7	30.4	-6.6	37.5	36.7	0.8
Immigrant	3.3	13.7	-10.4***	5.8	12.4	-6.7***
Married	42.8	44.8	-1.9	41.4	43.7	-2.2
Children in Household	46.7	40	6.7	38.3	36	2.3
Age 18-29	30	27	3	28.9	25.6	3.3
Age 30-49	44.2	41	3.2	42	39.4	2.6
Age 50-64	14.7	19.8	-5.1	19.2	23.1	-3.9
Age 65+	11.1	12.2	-1.1	9.8	11.9	-2.1
HH Income <$50,000	48.4	44.7	3.8	37.3	38.8	-1.6
HH Income $50000-$99,999	32.8	31.2	1.6	35	33.6	1.5
HH Income $100,000+	17.2	21.8	-4.6	26.7	26.2	0.4
Motivations for Pursuing Gig Work						
Primary Income Source	51.2	48	3.3	31.5	33.1	-1.6
Supplement Pay	36.6	34.6	2	56	43.4	12.6**
Supplement Retirement	10.1	25.5	-15.4***	15.2	19.9	-4.7
Help Family or Friends	21.7	25	-3.3	22.7	22.1	0.5
Starting Own Business	16.9	12.9	4	15	10.4	4.7
Career Transition	21	11.1	9.8	14.7	9.1	5.6
Maintain Skills	8.8	10.1	-1.3	7.6	8.5	-0.9
Obtain New Skills	4.1	11.4	-7.3**	6.6	8.6	-2
Working for Myself	23.1	13.7	9.4	16	11.4	4.7
Flexibility	53.9	24	29.9***	34.2	19.5	14.8***
Networking	12.8	10.5	2.3	13	10.1	2.9
For Fun	19.4	21.7	-2.3	31	27.7	3.4
N	167	668		509	1,749	

Source: EPOP:2022 probability sample data. Sample is restricted to only respondents who initially reported digital platform work. All estimates are weighted using EPOP probability sample weights. *p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001.

Appendix B: EPOP:2022 Platform Work Questions

This appendix provides the exact language from the EPOP:2022 survey for the relevant platform work questions used in the above analyses. The full questionnaire for EPOP:2022 may be found at https://epop.norc.org/content/dam/epop/researchers/pdf/epop-2022-questionnaire.pdf.

Text that appears in black font was displayed to the respondent, and blue text shows variable names, skip logic, and instructions for programming the creation of variables and navigation through the instrument.

B.1 Gig Work for Primary Job

[SHOW IF S_JOB_1 = 2,3,4]
S_GIGCHECK_1.
Some people earn money through short, paid tasks or jobs online or in-person that are conducted through companies that coordinate payment for the service. This is sometimes referred to as "gig work."

Is your main job or work arrangement gig work?

These tasks might include driving for Uber or Lyft, selling goods through Etsy, completing online tasks on Mechanical Turk, providing graphic design, music, or other services via Fiverr or Upwork, or other activities.

[HOVER TEXT ON "other activities":
- Babysitting, childcare services, dog walking and/or house sitting
- Disabled adult and/or elder care services
- Providing personal services to individuals
- Renting out property, such as your car, your phone, your place of residence, or other items]

RESPONSE OPTIONS
1. Yes
2. No
77. Unsure

B.2 Gig Work for Secondary Job

[SHOW IF S_JOB_2 = 2,3,4]
S_GIGCHECK_2.
Some people earn money through short, paid tasks or jobs online or in-person that are conducted through companies that coordinate payment for the service. This is sometimes referred to as "gig work."

Is your second job/work arrangement gig work?

These tasks might include driving for Uber or Lyft, selling goods through Etsy, completing online tasks on Mechanical Turk, providing graphic design, music, or other services via Fiverr or Upwork, or other activities.

[HOVER TEXT ON "other activities":
- Babysitting, childcare services, dog walking and/or house sitting
- Disabled adult and/or elder care services
- Providing personal services to individuals
- Renting out property, such as your car, your phone, your place of residence, or other items]

RESPONSE OPTIONS
1. Yes
2. No
77. Unsure

B.3 Gig Work Over the Past 6 Months

[SHOW IF S_GIGCHECK_1 <> 1 AND S_GIGCHECK_2 <> 1]
S_GIGCHECK_3.
Some people earn money through short, paid tasks or jobs online or in-person that are conducted through companies that coordinate payment for the service. This is sometimes referred to as "gig work."

[IF JOBSTAT_1 = 1 OR JOBSTAT_2 = 1 OR JOBSTAT_5 = 1 OR JOBSTAT_6 = 1: Outside of the forms of employment you have already mentioned, in/ELSE: In] the last 6 months have you been paid for any gig work?

These tasks might include driving for Uber or Lyft, selling goods through Etsy, completing online tasks on Mechanical Turk, providing graphic design, music, or other services via Fiverr or Upwork, or other activities.

[HOVER TEXT ON "other activities":
- Babysitting, childcare services, dog walking and/or house sitting
- Disabled adult and/or elder care services
- Providing personal services to individuals
- Renting out property, such as your car, your phone, your place of residence, or other items]

RESPONSE OPTIONS
1. Yes
2. No
77. Unsure

B.4 Further Questions on Name of Platform

[SHOW IF DOV_CUR_FREE = 1 OR S_GIGCHECK_1 = 1 OR S_GIGCHECK_2 = 1 OR S_GIGCHECK_3 = 1]

S_GIGPLATFORM_1.
Is your [IF DOV_CUR_FREE = 1: freelance, consulting, or independent contract/ELSE: gig] work conducted through a company that coordinates payments or relationships with clients?

RESPONSE OPTIONS

1. Yes
2. No
77. Unsure

[SHOW IF S_GIGPLATFORM_1 = 1]
S_GIGPLATFORM_2.
Is the company that coordinates payments or relationships with clients for your [IF DOV_CUR_FREE = 1: freelance, consulting, or independent contract/ELSE: gig] work an online app?

RESPONSE OPTIONS

1. Yes
2. No
77. Unsure

[SHOW IF S_GIGPLATFORM_1 = 1]
S_GIGPLATFORM_3.
What is the name(s) of the company that coordinates payments or relationships with clients for your [IF DOV_CUR_FREE = 1: freelance, consulting, or independent contract/ELSE: gig] work?