



### **Briefing Note: Toward fairer and more sustainable gig work**

Summary: the FlipGig project (<http://www.flipgig.org>) has been researching the use of gig-economy couriers in the last-mile of logistics. We have been conducting fieldwork including interviews and workshops which has given us a rich picture of issues to address in promoting fairer work for gig economy workers.

For a business, it is important to retain skilled and experienced workers. Not only expensive to train new workers, but our work has shown that those with more experience care about doing better work (i.e., are more efficient, more dependable, polite etc.). As reports in the media have shown, one courier can impact the reputation of a company through poor work.

Our concern specifically is 1) the issues workers experience during their work and often through ill thought through user interfaces and systems, and extending beyond this to work allocation and the design of streets and lack of facilities; and 2) to be aware that algorithms and data quality do impact workers and may lead to more or less fair and sustainable logistics as a result.

We summarise our findings as follows:

*Last-mile logistics companies have the ability to deal with some of the worker issues we uncovered:*

- **Available work.** Fairness is connected to how much work is available, the dependability and predictability of pay. Issues to consider include zoning & how many workers are allowed a share of this work in a zone. The relationship between the distribution of work and pay. Familiarity with the round, where to go, where to drop and human relationships can make work more efficient and offer better service. But some rounds can be better than others in terms of terrain, drop density, high rises etc. A fundamental point is i) whether to limit the number of workers in a zone to avoid insufficient work being available; and ii) related to this, whether to offer a minimum number of jobs or floor to the pay structure so that income can more easily be predicted
- **Flexibility.** Gig workers often have to work around other commitments - and choose when to work appropriately. So flexibility of when to work or how to split shifts around e.g. family commitments will allow for a more diverse group of couriers – how does childcare, education or other forms of work fit into the working week
- **Support/ skilling up.** Workers often do form adhoc ways of supporting each other (e.g. when they have a problem with their bicycle); consider whether to provide tools to create community, mutual support and knowledge sharing
- **Prioritise sustainability.** Explicit prioritisation of sustainable vehicle choice (e.g., by workers) to enable lower carbon logistics. i.e., walking & cycling should take priority over scooters/vans/cars for delivery.

- **Feedback.** Listening and engaging/working with worker feedback (in relation to the work, and any systems that manage that work – e.g., how does the worker experience work allocation, what’s working well and what’s an issue that needs addressing)
- **Stamina.** Issues of pay vs. stamina and affordability of daily life in relation to the work conducted. Particularly where walking/cycling there is energy required in the work conducted, and personal energy levels need to be sustained for the rest of the day/ week. The physical demands of the job and to what extent a (e.g.) living wage can be practically earned are important, otherwise staff will not be retained and these sustainable modes will be too difficult, leading to a shift to motorised transport.
- **Ratings.** Transparency of rating systems/KPIs. Workers cited instant dismissal on some platforms due to erroneous customer ratings with little ability to have arbitration and more just processes mediated by the platform. We need to protect workers from unfair customer reviews, by thinking about rating systems; but also allow customers to legitimately flag issues with workers for follow up
- **Clear status in interfaces.** The worker is often ‘held responsible’ for slow service, but we found this may be due to hidden causes outside their control (e.g. backlog at restaurants). Think about visibility of any delays in the process, so that the blame is not shifted to workers by implication

*Last-mile logistics depends on the use of civic infrastructures (e.g., pavements, roads, cycle lanes, parking). Businesses could also recognise the power that they have to speak with local authorities around the management and provision of city infrastructures:*

- **Voice.** Local authorities are not typically engaging with independent last-mile couriers/gig workers – they’re difficult to reach – consider how to reach and work with them. They know a lot about how well cities function and what problems need addressing.
- **Facilities.** A lack of necessary infrastructure: toilets, cleaning and break facilities. Gaggles of waiting workers are not often appreciated by businesses/citizens, but there are seldom alternatives.
- **Congestion/ avoidance.** Danger that new uses of streets, pavements etc. for logistics are shifting congestion from streets to pavements and cycle lanes – this could be a barrier to wider population shift to cycling, walking and for accessibility. It’s worth speaking with city stakeholders, about how to adapt current infrastructures to allow for this use of the city.
- **Consolidation points.** Micro-consolidation/drop points are valuable in supporting this type of work. There’s an opportunity for rethinking civic building and space use, and lobbying for civic infrastructure that better meets the needs of this kind of hidden work (linked: how to pay for it... shared cost models for shared facilities?).

One model that could be considered and lobbied for:

- Commitment to better/fairer pay (e.g., minimum social and environmental standards, e.g., minimum levels of pay, prioritisation of sustainable transport) – see [fair.work principles](#) as a possible starting point, though further work will be required to understand what is really needed by gig workers in a given area
- Explicit and reasonable prioritisation of vehicle choice (e.g., by workers) to enable lower carbon logistics (i.e. not explicitly or accidentally prioritising motorised transport)

- Infrastructure and safety of workers – somewhere to get warm/clean-up/ lock up bikes/ charge phones or vehicles etc.
- Fair Working Zones and Models for last-mile logistics (for example, zones in which sustainable transport and fair pay/conditions for gig workers prevail, akin to low emissions and fair trade zones.

References:

1. Academics are trying to fix the last mile gig economy, 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2021, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/gig-economy-fix-academics>
2. O. Bates, C. Lord, H. Alter, A. Friday and B. Kirman, "Lessons From One Future of Work: Opportunities to Flip the Gig Economy," in IEEE Pervasive Computing, doi: [10.1109/MPRV.2021.3113825](https://doi.org/10.1109/MPRV.2021.3113825).

Also, available on our website:



<http://flipgig.org>