



THE EXPERIENCE OF SOUTH AFRICAN GIG WORKERS IN ACQUIRING AND TRANSFERRING SKILLS

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own original work and that it has not been previously submitted for a degree or examination at any other university. This thesis does not contain other persons' data, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where their exact words have been used, their writing has been placed inside quotation marks and referenced.

Sudhika Palhad

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly investigation into the gig economy has multiplied since the era of COVID-19. Digital labour has provided a key source of income for people globally and in South Africa. However, narratives surrounding gig work has thus far, been primarily centred on worker protection, and worker rights'. This study shifts this narrative towards a developmental perspective of gig work. The study explores the potential for the gig economy to be a conduit for skills acquisition, expansion and transfer. In doing so, some key questions around attaining developmental value via the gig economy is reflected on.

The study is primarily exploratory in nature and employs a qualitative methodology to inductively analyse the cases of selected South African freelancers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 South African freelancers (gig workers) to understand how their experiences in terms of skill acquisition, expansion, transfer, career pathways and upskilling can better frame their developmental value. The data was recorded and transcribed to ensure credibility. The results were interpreted and analysed against existing literature using thematic content analysis.

The overarching finding was skills acquisition, expansion and transfer and other developmental gains can be attained from gig work. However, these gains are highly dependent upon the type of work being conducted. Significantly, the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations behind the uptake of such work is also a determining factor in whether developmental value is achieved through gig work. More so, this study contests the dominant discourses around gig work, by exploring subjective experiences of South African freelancers who highlight both the pros and cons of such work. Thus, the complexity of gig work is acknowledged in this study. Whilst the gig economy has opened up doors of opportunity, especially for those who have been at the periphery in terms of employment opportunities, underemployment, and a lack of opportunities for upskilling are serious skills-related challenges that gig workers must confront. Finally, this study recommends a conceptual framework that enables a collaborative approach for the upskilling of gig workers.

KEYWORDS:

Gig work, gig economy, skills acquisition, skills transfer, skills expansion, developmental value, career pathway, underemployment, upskilling, digital labour, digital economy

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AV	:	Autonomy Value
DV	:	Development Value
EV	:	Economic Value
FVP	:	Freelancer Value Proposition
FWP	:	Fair Work Framework
HE	:	Hedonic Value
JCM	:	Job Characteristic Model
JD-R	:	Job Demand Resources
OLP	:	Online Labour Platforms
SDT	:	Self-Determination Theory
SV	:	Social Value

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview of the Gig Economy

The gig economy, as described by the Fairwork Project, *“is a labour market comprised of freelance and short-term contracts, or ‘gigs,’ in which organizations contract with independent workers on a non-permanent basis rather than traditionally hiring full-time employees”*, (Fairwork, 2019: 03). This description is accompanied by the assertion that, *“the common denominator in the gig economy is the presence of a mediator - the platform - that enables the meeting between a “hirer” and a worker, and by doing so establishes a nonstandard employment relation with the latter, on a self-employed basis”* (Gandini, 2019: 1044-1045). The gig economy today includes employment requiring highly specialised talents provided by valued and scarce knowledge workers, in contrast to the past when it was thought to just involve *“generic or low-value”* abilities, (Barlage, Born and Wittleloostuijn, 2019: 03). Basak (2020) makes a distinction between white-collar gig workers and blue-collar gig workers. Low-skilled or semi-skilled work is performed by blue collar gig workers, whilst higher skilled work is done by white collar gig workers. This study examines this group of professionals who carry out tasks related to white-collar gig work. Ashford, Caza and Reid (2018: 33) further point out that those in low skilled areas of gig work (such as drivers or delivery workers) will have differing views, perceptions and experiences of their work as opposed to those *“independent knowledge workers such as consultants and scientists”*.

As this study moves through the various chapters, the above statement will gain increasing relevance as, the experiences of entry-level, mid-level and senior level gig workers in various professional fields are elucidated. This study develops numerous insights into the professional skills offered by gig workers; the transferrable skills that can be gained from gig work; the potential for gig workers to build their career paths via gig work and the upskilling mechanisms that gig workers use. The findings emanating from this study contribute to an understanding of how gig workers can acquire and transfer skills through gig work, thereby influencing their developmental value. The findings also uncover the upskilling mechanisms if gig workers and the potential for platforms to contribute to upskilling of gig workers. In this study, the terms

'gig workers' and 'freelancers' are used interchangeably as many of the gig workers interviewed identified themselves as freelancers.

The emergence and rise of the gig economy can be partly traced to the global financial crisis of 2007- 2008 (Myhill, Richards and Sang, 2021; Popiel, 2017). This period, which included high interest rates, low investor interest and mass retrenchments, convinced many people to turn to temporary work solutions from which they could derive an income, albeit intermittently, (Healy, Nicholson and Pekarek, 2017). The economic volatility of this period, coupled with broader trends towards atypical employment and non-standard hiring practices, has influenced the uptake of gig work. Healy *et al.* (2017) elaborates on this by advising that since the 1980's there has been general shift towards non-traditional working arrangements. This has been partly motivated by the need to cut-back on finances in relation to hiring and employment practices. This general trend impacted workers in the sense that they were left with less stable options in terms of employment. Consequently, these workers now had to adopt multiple ways of earning an income. In particular, the career paths of workers became more fragmented as a result of this shifting work practices.

In spite of the continued shift towards atypical forms of employment, the gig economy is regarded as having a marginal effect on employment. Scholars have noted that gig work often functions as a secondary or supplemental source of income (Eichhorst, Hinte, Rinne and Tobsch, 2017; Healy *et al.*, 2017). In addition, Healy *et al.* (2017) gives considerable attention to whether the gig economy is sustainable and whether it will withstand favourable labour market conditions. The growth of platform companies and the demand side of the gig economy suggests that gig work will become more entrenched in labour market patterns in the coming years.

The supply-side of the gig economy, is highly dispersed, and people from all skills levels are contributing towards the influx of online digital labour supply. Kassi, Lehdonvirta and Stephany (2021) provide some estimates to quantify the growth of the gig economy. Their statistics encompasses gig workers registered on online freelancing platforms but excludes food delivery and ride hailing. They estimate that there are a 163 million registered profiles on online freelancing platforms. Of this figure, 19 million were estimated to be actually active on the platform. An estimate of 5 million people were earning over \$1000 or had over 10 projects - these cases were

treated as “full-time” gig workers. The study by Kassi *et al.* (2021:07) acknowledges the “*fairly big error bands*” in their data which is due to the difficulties in measuring online digital labour. Nevertheless, they also assert that even at the lower end of their estimates, significant growth is observed on online freelancing platforms compared with figures estimated in 2015. This growth is noted both in terms of the registered users and those who have actively worked on these platforms. This demonstrates that labour in the gig economy is becoming more popular throughout the world.

1.2 Definitions

The following are definitions of the main concepts applicable in this study.

1.2.1 Gig workers

Vallas and Schor (2020: 275-276) provides the following definitions for the five types of gig workers in terms of their role on the platform.

- The first type of platform workers are the engineers behind the platform, specifically the people who work for the platforms to design and develop the platform digital infrastructure such as mechanisms, features and operating systems. These people are referred to as “*architects and technologists*” behind the platform.
- The second type of platform workers are “*cloud-based consultants or freelancers who offer professional services*” on online digital labour platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr or PeoplePerHour. These type of consultants and freelancers are people who bid directly on the platform to source work. Such consultants or freelancers possess highly specialised and technical skill sets. This category is the chief concern of this study.
- The third type of platform workers are ride-hailing, delivery services such as food or groceries, home repair or care services. This work differs from the above types as it is usually performed offline.
- The fourth type are representative of micro-tasking or crowdsourcing workers. This work involves gig workers who sit online and bid for micro-task or segments of a large project or tasks.

- The fifth type of platform workers includes social media influencers, and video and content creators who seek to leverage of social media platforms for gaining followers, in hope of gaining attention and where possible, generating passive income from these sites. Influencers and content creators are not paid for any posts unless they are funded or sponsored by a particular brand or by the social media platform itself.

Watson, Kistler, Graham and Sinclair (2021) deconstruct gig workers into primary and secondary traits. This approach proves more comprehensive for research purposes as it enables the categorisation of the different types of gig workers. The primary characteristics are defined as: “*project-based compensation, temporary nature of work and an element of flexibility*” (Watson *et al.*, 2021: 334). These features are noted as common to all gig workers. The secondary characteristics, however, are not represented in all types of gig workers. These include: “*technology-enabled networks, remote work, and the presence of an intermediary and agency-based work*” (Watson *et al.*, 2021: 337). The aforementioned study further clusters these traits into six different categories of gig worker profiles, that is, Gig Service Providers, Gig Goods Providers, Gig Data Providers, Agency Gig Workers and Traditional Gig workers. According to de Ruyter *et al.* (2018) gig workers are highly independent, work without specific schedules, and can freely determine their work duration and period. This common assumption surrounding gig workers has led to terms such as “*solopreneur*” (Mizrahi, 2018), “*on-demand workers*” (Poon, 2019), and “*self-employed*” professionals (Pichault and McKeown, 2019).

1.2.2 Gig platforms

Platforms facilitate the sharing of labour processes using algorithm matching. Leading firms in this sector include Airbnb and Uber, which represent the sharing economy, or the pooling of assets through a platform for financial gain. Companies such as Upwork and TaskRabbit make provision for skilled labour to be exchanged and transacted on a global scale for economic benefit (Anani, 2018: 168).

Financial indicators point to the fact that platforms are highly profitable. “*The gig economy was valued at \$204 billion in annual gross value in 2018 and is expected to reach \$347 billion by the end of 2021. Of this two thirds is dispersed to freelancers*

who are registered as gig workers on various platforms. The remaining amount is commission that platforms collect or distribute to third parties,” (Dash, 2021). The scale and reach of these platforms is also significant. “Freelancers.com, upwork.com, fiverr.com, guru.com, peopleperhour.com and 99designs.com are major e-lancing platforms which connect millions of freelancers and clients daily”, (Nawaz, Zhang, Mansoor, and Ilumdeen, 2019: 52). Healy et al. (2017: 238) notes that such platforms can be considered “multinational corporations”, because they are globally pervasive.

Examples of prominent platforms for freelancers include: Upwork, PeoplePerHour, Task Rabbit, and Skillshare, (Mizrahi, 2018). In addition to this, a list of platforms specifically for those in the creative and professional services are mentioned in Table 1.1 below. Although some platforms do restrict their members to one or two nationalities the majority are global and do not limit the people that can join their websites. This table captures those platforms that assist skilled professionals in finding work opportunities.

Table 1. 1: Types of Gig platforms available to professional and creative gig workers

Platform	Area/ Industry
Fiverr.com https://www.fiverr.com/	Creative Software Dev Business
Freelancer.com https://www.freelancer.com/	Creative Software Dev Business
Hubstaff Talent https://talent.hubstaff.com	All industries / sectors
NoSweat Work www.nosweat.work	Marketing and Media Advertising Film IT and Software Development
Nomad Now www.nomadnow.com	Professional services IT, Software Dev, Data analytics, etc. Financial services Legal / Compliance

Source: Western Cape Government (2020: 01-02)

1.2.3 Developmental value

The term '*developmental value*' describes the various opportunities for skills development, portfolio-building and career growth which an individual (employee or freelancer) can be exposed to through their work (Nawaz *et al.*, 2019). Nawaz *et al.* (2019: 58) note that, "*freelancing offers a variety of projects, exposure and challenges which help freelancer's to develop their knowledge, skills and capabilities*". Opportunities for skills acquisition, skills expansion, skills transfer and upskilling/re-skilling can therefore be encapsulated under the term 'developmental value'.

Significantly, developmental value contributes to job satisfaction and motivation. For freelancers or gig workers however, achieving developmental value is not as straightforward as with traditional employees in an organisation. The empirical study by Arifianto and Vallentino (2022) for example, reveals that whilst freelancers are able to gain new skills and more experience, they are challenged in terms of developing sustainable career paths due to the fluid nature of gig work. In order to achieve developmental value through gig work, gig workers must deploy a wide range of competencies, skills and abilities as they are solely responsible for their own skills development and career progression. This is discussed in detail in the latter chapters.

1.3 Background to the study

Concerns about the future of work, employability and how workforces should shield themselves against automation have been foregrounded by international institutions, academics and practitioners (WEF, 2016; IBM, 2019; Deloitte, 2018). Many scenarios have been painted about the future of work. One of these scenarios highlights the future of work in the post-industrial economy as being increasingly characterised by gig work (Mahnkopf 2019).

Adding to this understanding of gig work, de Ruyter *et al.* (2018: 38) notes that gig work is representative of the many features stemming from the 4th industrial revolution in that it is "*platform-based; driven by mobile and digital technology; containing conditions of easy entry for providers and workers*". For example, digitalisation has been the backbone to the gig economy, in the sense that digital platforms function primarily through digital means and manage their operations through algorithms and

online surveillance. As such, outlining gig work as one of likely scenarios that would define future work arrangements is plausible and necessitates further research.

A key emergent pattern emanating through digitalisation, is the priority towards upskilling and reskilling. For both traditional and atypical workforces, this is an important shift that workers in general, have had to confront in order to remain relevant and indispensable in today's labour market. This study focuses on gig workers, as a branch of atypical workforces. Given the inherently competitive nature of gig work, it is presumed that even greater precedence is placed on *"developing on-demand skills in an on-demand economy"* (Anani, 2018: 174). The focus on skills transfer and skills acquisition is therefore an important part of the research agenda for gig economy scholars. This study demonstrates how gig workers acquire skills, transfer skills and how this process adds to their developmental value.

From a labour market viewpoint, the demand for gig work from established, prominent companies, and organisations legitimises gig work as a branch of atypical employment. According to Poon (2017), as the corporate world increasingly seeks more diversified workforces and on-demand skills for specific projects, gig workers have become the more attractive hiring option. Furthermore, platforms provide access to *"highly specialised skills"*; *"the start-up costs are lower than traditional outsourcing"*; and *"the administrative, geographical and informational barriers to hiring are reduced"* (Corporaal, 2017: 10). Organisations are outsourcing "peripheral" labour to third parties in order to save time and money as they attempt to harness the usage of technology while reducing their core workforces. This is bolstering the white-collar gig economy, (Bhattacharya & Raghuvanshi, 2018).

Statistics and trends on the supply-side of gig work reveals an increased uptake of freelancer opportunities in developed and developing countries. Populations from the Global South, such as India Pakistan, and Ukraine have high numbers of freelancers that support are number of sectors globally. *"Covering occupations from interpreters, consultants, trainers, interim managers to IT specialists, artists and creative workers, there is a consistent pattern across the developed world that such 'self-employed professionals' are the fastest growing segment of the workforce"*, (Pichault and McKeown 2019: 60)

According to Payoneer (2019: 07), a global payment company for freelancers, the increase of freelancers in various sectors of developing economies can be partly attributed to government investment in appropriate skills investment and training that have empowered the population with a marketable skill sets to work in the gig economy. For example, in Pakistan, “*government investment in technically-oriented education*” and the widespread roll-out of 4G across the country has resulted in a “*skilled freelancer workforce*” (Payoneer, 2019: 07) The Payoneer study, as shown in figure 1.1 below indicates that in terms of age group, higher earnings are concentrated amongst the 35-44 age group, despite this group representing lower numbers of freelancers. This may be attributed to skills and experience being more “mature” in this age group as opposed to the 18-24 and 25-34 categories.

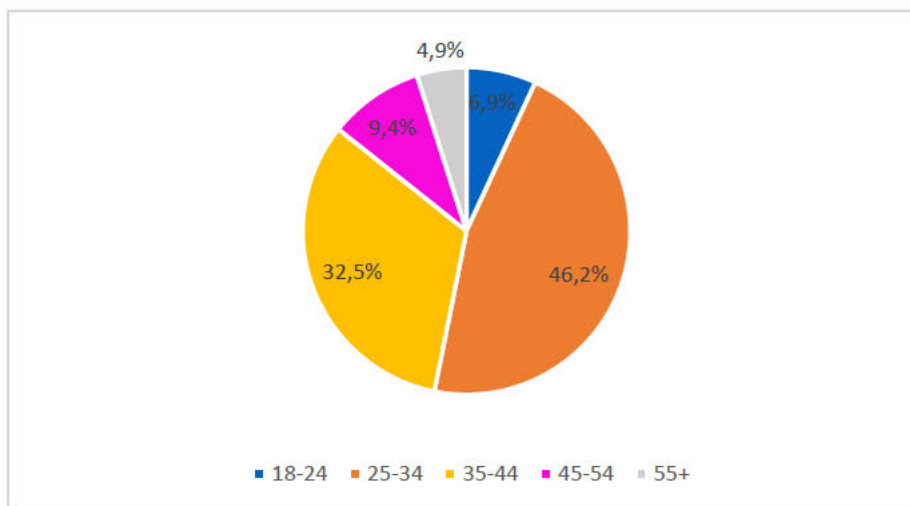


Figure 1. 1: Global Earnings amongst Freelancers

Source: Payoneer (2019: 04)

It is therefore, widely acknowledged that platforms do more than just contribute to the supply and demand of labour. Rather, platforms are important sites of skills acquisition and transfer, which often occurs under a transnational milieu.

Gig work within the South African context is also expanding, most ostensibly through an increased usage of mobile and internet technologies. According to a study by Insight2Impact (2020: 06) on gig platforms in Africa, “*South Africa boasts the highest number of platform users and highest number of platforms in operation*” followed closely by Kenya and Nigeria. As such, the growth in online gig platforms in South

Africa and the demand stemming from industry in relation to sourcing skills via gig platforms, demonstrates the growing significance of digital labour within South Africa.

Being a developing country with high structural unemployment, discussions around gig work in South Africa is inevitably tied to the broader context of unemployment, education and poverty alleviation. As more people are absorbed into online digital labour, it is asserted that the gig economy will have a positive effect on alleviating unemployment in South Africa and internationally (Pienaar 2020). Statistics on unemployment in South Africa in the second quarter of 2021 show that 34.4% of the population is unemployed. These dire figures have prompted many academics and HR analysts to advocate for work in the gig economy. It is underlined that South Africans should consider opportunities in the gig economy which may be highly advantageous not only in terms of gaining work but also in terms of international work opportunities which may foster the growth of new capabilities and skills (Malinga and Mungadze, 2021). Some studies conducted in South Africa have investigated the impact of the gig economy in South Africa. The study by Roomaney, van Belle and Tsibolane (2018) on mobile-macro work in South Africa shows evidence that young, educated professionals see this type of work as positively impacting unemployment and poverty alleviation.

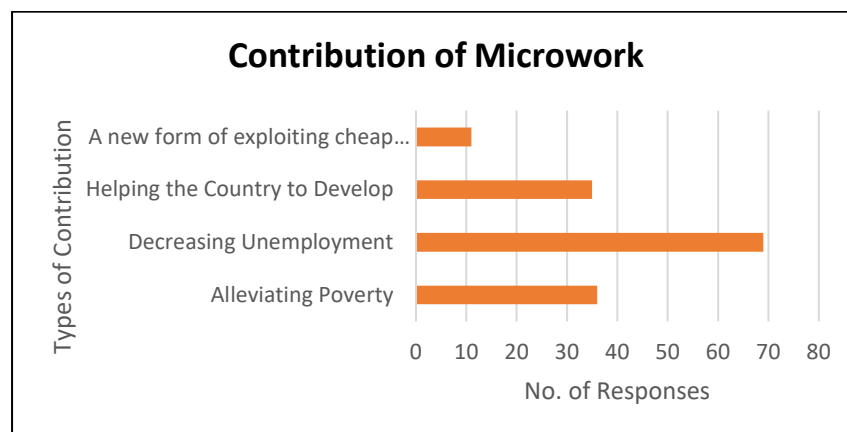


Figure 1. 2: Perceptions of mobile macro-work in South Africa

Source: Roomaney *et al.* (2018: 06)

As shown in Figure 1.2 above, 50% of responses from the study of Roomaney *et al.* (2018) perceived gig work as reducing unemployment. Notwithstanding this optimistic viewpoint, the reality is that possessing the right skills and competencies are key to being a gig worker or freelancer. Thus, assertions around gig work as an answer to

unemployment are highly contentious, given the broad, heterogeneous nature of gig work. Those who have such skills and are able to access the right opportunities via the gig economy, will likely have a positive perception of such work. However, what is generally under-investigated in the context of gig work, is who possesses the right types of skills, what are the right skills and competencies needed for gig work, what skills and competencies can be obtained for gig work and finally, what dynamics affect how workers acquire skills? To this end, there are no South African studies - to the best of the author's knowledge - which assesses or explore the skills-related dynamics of gig work in the South African context. Hence, this study explores the skills experiences of South African gig workers as a means of understanding in what ways gig work can be better leveraged for creating more impactful work through the gig economy.

1.4 Preliminary literature review

As is discussed more extensively in Chapter 2, an examination of literature, reveals important debates on upskilling, skills networking and possibilities for career upgrading through gig work. The study of Seppanen, Spinuzzi, Poutanen, Alasoini (2021:93) for example, illustrates how freelancers can extract value from collaborative creative projects, thereby upgrading their work opportunities and augmenting their existing skills sets. Furthermore, the study by Healy *et al.* (2017:240) argues that gig work serves both positive and negative ends for entry-level professionals or graduates seeking to leverage gig work for portfolio building or career development purposes. Gig work can either be a “*bridge*” or a “*trap*”, for the early career segment of the workforce. In particular, it is argued that where gig work can provide pathways to gain more experience, or act as apprenticeships, it can be bridge to further opportunities. However, the risk of gig work being a “*trap*”, wherein it isolates and alienates entry level professionals or graduates from mainstream employment or expanding their skills can also be a possibility. Brown (2017) also underlines the potential hindrance that gig work may present in term of skills development, with specific reference to millennials. The study raises significant concerns as to whether millennials will have the leadership, collaboration, and communication skills needed to thrive in a more traditional business setting, if they decide to make that shift. These criticisms of gig

work elevate the need for exploring the developmental value that can be attained from gig work and freelancing.

In so far as theoretical studies are concerned; many scholars have explored gig work using job quality and job satisfaction theories. These approaches, which are rooted in organisational psychology, add an important facet to the exploration of gig workers and their motivations to pursue this career path. Thus, the literature provides useful frameworks for examining white-collar gig work. Myhill *et al.* (2021: 07) associates job quality with the Scotland's Fair Work Framework. This framework highlights the principles of Effective Voice, Respect, Opportunity, Fulfilment and Security as the six principles of Fairwork. Significantly, the principles of Opportunity and Fulfilment are aspects which consider skills opportunities and the "*ability to use and develop skills*" important to work in general.

Competencies and capabilities in relation to gig labour is another theoretical underpinning that has an important effect on this research study. Of particular relevance is the work of Defillippi and Arthur (1994) which proposes three career competencies (know-how, know-whom and know-why) needed to achieve boundaryless careers. These career-related competencies are further applied to the context of gig work by several scholars, including Kost, Fieseler and Wong (2019) and Duggan, Sherman, Carbery and MacDonnell (2021). In addition, the Capabilities based Approach, is a conceptual framework outlined by Ashford, Caza and Reid (2018) which proposes a set of necessary, relational, emotional and cognitive capabilities that gig workers must develop and project in order to survive or thrive in the gig economy.

The rationale for platforms to augment the skills opportunities available on their sites is supported through numerous perspectives. Nawaz *et al.* (2019) developed the concept of Freelancer Value Proposition (FVP). Amongst the factors of value is Development Value (DV) which is considered to be a crucial component towards elevating the value that freelancers derive from platforms. It is noted that DV should be a key dimension to increase FVP through, for example, including professional certifications on platforms and listing whether freelancers are certified or not as part of their profile. This study adopts the concept of developmental value from the work of Nawaz *et al.* (2019). By exploring skills acquisition, expansion and transfer; the

upskilling opportunities available to gig workers, and the career pathways of gig workers, the developmental value opportunities emanating from gig work can be better understood.

1.5 Research problem

Case studies on gig workers mainly focus on low-skilled workforces such as delivery or driver gig workers. For example, Duggan *et al.* (2021) examines the transferable career competencies of gig workers in the domains of rideshare and delivery food delivery services. Duggan *et al.* (2021) applies boundaryless career theory to their work. Vaclavik *et al.* (2021) examine the effects of agency, time and context in gig worker careers. Their study also uses Brazilian app-based drivers as their primary sample. Myhill *et al.* (2021) also focuses their study on gig workers on the taxi, courier and hospitality categories. In contrast, this study focuses on white-collar gig workers as its primary sample. There is also a gap in the research due to the fact that the concept of gig work has received a great deal of attention from international researchers; however, only a limited number of South African studies have attempted to comprehend white-collar gig work or certain types of gig labour. Additionally, many empirical studies tend to focus on the demand-side of the gig economy, that is, organisations or companies that use gig workers, or the platforms that enable gig work. Limited studies have provided an understanding of gig work from the supply-side, that is, the freelancers performing the work. In response to this gap, this study focused on white-collar gig workers performing freelance work via gig platforms such as Upwork, PeoplePerHour, and Rev.com and conducted qualitative interviews with 11 South African freelancers.

Freelancing in an online digital labour market demands unique skills sets, capabilities and competencies. Currently, little knowledge exists on how gig workers expand their skills, how they acquire new skills and how they market and portray themselves to the global market. Speaking from the perspective of crowd-work, which is a branch of gig work, Lehdonvirta, Margaryan and Davies (2019: 12) also emphasises the gap in the literature with reference to the linkage between skills and crowd-work:

“Following on from the lack of research about skills development, learning processes are also a neglected area of research that needs to be addressed. This includes both, formal and informal as well as individual and social practices involves in crowd workers’ learning processes”.

This study, therefore, makes a key contribution to knowledge in terms of understanding how gig workers acquire skills, expand skills and upskill. Moreover, little knowledge exists as to how freelancers can navigate and build career paths through gig work or whether opportunities to enhance their developmental value is achievable via gig work. Ashford *et al.* (2018: 27) corroborate this view by stating that: *“a third structural characteristic of the gig economy is the lack of clear, available and relevant career paths”*. This study examines this issue by exploring the perceptions of gig workers in terms whether career paths are achievable through gig work.

Gig workers or freelancers also need to be able to exploit opportunities for upskilling, training and portfolio-building that can either contribute to their longevity in the market or assist them in gaining more work. However, gig workers do not have the organisational support structures nor surplus training funds available to their disposal to accommodate upskilling demands of their professions. The flexibility of gig work has also meant that freelancers are now placed with an added obligation to ensure that their skills up to date (Pienaar, 2020). International studies have alluded to platform directed mechanisms (in-built training courses) or career upgrading or upskilling opportunities that are available through some platforms, such as the studies of Donner, Dean, Osbourne and Schiff (2020), and Soriano and Panaligan (2019). Such mechanisms may enable gig workers to exercise newly acquired skills in order to perform contractual tasks more optimally. However, knowledge on direct experiences with these mechanisms is limited, particularly in the case of South African gig workers. Understanding how and if gig platforms can be leveraged for upskilling and reskilling purposes will contribute to developing skills-centric solutions for gig workers. It may also assist platforms in re-constructing the platform business model to include appropriate skills interventions for gig workers.

By responding to key gaps in knowledge around the skills aspects of gig work, this study will firstly, contribute to knowledge that can be beneficial to younger graduates or entry level gig workers seeking to build their portfolios or career paths through the

gig economy. Secondly, this study also provides recommendations on how platforms can be co-opted into the agenda for upskilling within the gig economy.

1.6 Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study is to analyse the gig economy by focusing on the developmental value of such work.

The objectives of this study are:

- To explore skills, capabilities and competencies commonly used by gig workers/ freelancers in white collar categories of work;
- To explore how gig workers, in skilled categories of online digital labour acquire further skills, expand skills and transfer skills and how this influences their developmental value;
- To explore current upskilling mechanisms that is used by gig workers;
- To explore the methods gig workers use to build their portfolios and market themselves;
- To explore ways that gig work can assist in career path building for entry-level gig workers;
- To assess ways or methods that platforms can assist gig workers with building their developmental value by offering of appropriate skills interventions.

The research questions of this study are:

1. What skills are needed by gig workers in white collar categories of gig work?
2. How do gig workers acquire skills, expand skills and transfer skills and how does this influence developmental value?
3. What mechanisms do gig workers use to upskill themselves?
4. How do gig workers build their portfolios and market themselves?
5. How can gig work assist in experience and career-path building for entry-level gig workers?
6. What is an optimal way to use online digital labour platforms for upskilling?

1.7 The rationale for the study

Whilst acknowledging the key debates surrounding the gig economy, as explicated in the literature review chapters, this study assesses the implications of the gig economy as a conduit for skills acquisition and skills transfer. In doing so, the study aims to advance analyses of the gig economy to consider the developmental value of such work. The rationale for this study is therefore multifaceted yet interrelated. It is primarily underpinned by the impetus to better understand a global economy and one that may increasingly dominate future work arrangements. As discussed earlier, digitalisation is at the core of digital labour. Some scholars are already expressing the need for skills mechanisms for gig workers. A case in point is the study of Chiang, Kasunic and Savage (2018: 11) who predict that platforms are going to be the “*employment hubs*” of the future. They thus argue that it is of paramount importance to design skills-centric solutions for gig workers that will incorporate developmental opportunities. Such a perspective is supported by this study.

This study responds to three gaps in the scholarly literature. Firstly, the study sought to underline the perspective of the white-collar gig workers in order to contribute to a first-hand account of the workers and their experiences of skills acquisition and transfer, portfolio-building and upskilling through online digital labour platforms. In this way, the study contributes to knowledge expansion which prioritises the freelancer perspective as opposed to the organisational perspective. The studies of Barlage *et al.* (2019); Myhill *et al.* (2021); and Seppanen *et al.* (2021) adopt a similar approach to exploring gig work from the perspective of freelancers as opposed to the platforms’ or organisations’ perspective. The second gap identified, relates to insufficient knowledge about the skills acquisition and transfer as it contributes to the developmental value of the freelancer/ gig worker. This study explores the skills experiences of South African gig workers in terms of acquiring skills, transferring skills and upskilling in order to assess whether gig work enables or disables gig workers from achieving developmental value through their work. Significantly, this study highlights that each case is very different in terms of developmental value outcomes. This study argues that achieving developmental value is important because it can

facilitate more sustainable livelihood outcomes for gig workers, especially in the context of a developing country such as South Africa where unemployment is high.

Thirdly, the rationale to explore upskilling mechanisms on platforms contribute to knowledge on how such mechanisms can be or should be used to the benefit of freelancers. The study describes some explicit ways in which the platform itself can co-create developmental value through the provision of upskilling courses and related skills opportunities. A conceptual framework is designed as part of this study, which deconstructs developmental value so that it can serve as a roadmap for gig workers/freelancers and platforms.

1.8 Research methodology

The study is primarily exploratory in nature and employs a qualitative methodology. The study uses multiple case study design (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009) to inductively analyse the cases of selected South African freelancers. This is to proffer a new conceptual framework for understanding how the experiences of gig workers in terms of skill acquisition, expansion, transfer, portfolio building, and upskilling can better frame their developmental value. Semi-structured interviews were designed to elicit the responses of the participants to highlight their personal experiences as gig workers. Thus, the attitudes, experiences, and behaviours of 11 South African freelancers (gig workers) were inductively analysed. The exploratory research design was deemed appropriate due to the relatively ‘unchartered’ terrain of skills acquisition and transfer as it relates to gig work.

1.9 Structure of the study

This study comprises seven chapters which is organised as follows:

Chapter 1: This chapter provides the background to the study and discusses the problem statement. The aim and the objectives of the study are outlined, as well as the research methodology adopted.

Chapter 2: A literature review of empirical studies is contextualised and critically discussed.

Chapter 3: A review of theoretical studies is discussed and some the main theoretical frameworks that guided this study are reviewed.

Chapter 4: The research methodology is presented, and the research paradigm is justified.

Chapter 5: This chapter analyses the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. The themes are reviewed and identified.

Chapter 6: A discussion of the findings is undertaken by linking the themes to the research objectives. It also outlines recommendations for gig workers, and gig platforms in terms of skills acquisition, expansion, transfer, portfolio-building and platform mechanisms for upskilling. This chapter concludes the study.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the background of the area of study. Both the research questions and the study objectives have been determined. The research design, as well as the methodology, which was applied for the study, was described in brief detail, as was the structure of the study's chapters.

The literature review of the study's primary variables is presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review - Empirical Studies

This chapter examines the empirical studies that relate to the core objectives of this study. Skills aspects of gig work, in particular, skills transfer and acquisition processes, and the challenges associated with gaining, utilising and deploying skills is analysed. This study has identified a significant gap in the literature whereby the knowledge of how gig workers acquire skills, transfer skills and how gig work contributes to developmental value is lacking. In addition, this chapter outlines some key debates surrounding the gig economy. The controversies and arguments for and against online digital labour, in particular, are captured in this review of the literature.

2.1 Introduction

Any discussion of the gig economy will be incomplete without acknowledging the pivotal technological, economic, legal, political and social issues presented by gig work and digital capitalism (Mahnkopf, 2019). These issues have been subject to lengthy empirical inquiry in the seminal literature. The studies by Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2019); Kost *et al.* (2020); Duggan *et al.* (2021); Myhill *et al.* (2020); Sepannen *et al.* (2021); Barlage *et al.* (2019); Stephany *et al.* (2021) all contribute to the extant literature by examining the developmental opportunities, knowledge construction, knowledge sharing and career competencies aligned to gig work. All these studies introduce perspectives that are aligned to skills acquisition and transfer in the gig economy thereby adding to the previous dearth of knowledge in this area.

The impetus for this study is based on the rationale that empirical analysis of skills acquisition and transfer in the gig economy is underexplored. Huang *et al.* (2019) assert that knowledge relating to the skills provision and skills expansion in the gig economy is currently limited. As discussed earlier, Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2019) likewise makes observations about the general gap in terms of skills development processes amongst gig workers. Such perspectives relays an important gap in the literature which this study addresses.

2.2 Digitalisation perspectives

The literature presents a persuasive account of how digitalisation has restructured the marketplace for jobs in terms of supply and demand. Importantly these accounts demonstrate key linkages between the adoption of new emerging technologies and the strengthening of the platform economy. Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2019: 05) explores the skills development and skills formation processes of crowd-workers. This study demonstrates how the various phases of technological advancement, including major investments in telecommunications infrastructure dating back to the 1990's enabled "*fibre-optic and submarine cables*" to be laid out. Such developments facilitated the redesign of traditional work structures by "*accelerating*" the global shift towards outsourcing. As the perspective of Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2019) demonstrates the antecedents to the gig economy as it is known today, were advancements in telecommunications and the digitalisation of industrial economies. Numerous studies have further contextualised and analysed the impact of the 4th industrial revolution and digitalisation on the gig economy, such as the work of Mahnkopf (2019); Eichhorst *et al.* (2017), Bhattacharya and Rughuvansi (2018) and Anani (2018).

Mahnkopf (2019: 08) emphasises the risks and challenges of digitalisation from an ecological and societal stance. Digital capitalism is described as the context in which work is supplied in an "*on-demand*" fashion. The fragmentation of work into tasks and micro-tasks represent a key feature of the gig economy. As alluded to by Mahnkopf, the themes of decentralisation of work and the on-demand nature of gig work is frequently referred to in much of the literature. With reference to emerging 4IR technologies and gig work, Anani (2018) observes that these technologies encapsulate the same principles espoused by the gig economy, which is that work will be detached from the organisation and be procured when the need arises.

In the context of the German labor market, Eichhorst *et al.* (2017: 298) investigate the potential effects of digitalisation. The author notes that the probable short- and long-term implications of digitalisation will be represented by:

- "*the dualisation of the labor market via atypical or 'precarious' employment*";
- "*the substitutability of human labor by robots and machines; and*"

- *“and newly emerging forms of work in the platform or gig economy”.*

Eichhorst *et al.* (2017: 303) further observes that some predictions about the impact of digitalisation on employment is already evident in the German labour market, including an *“increase towards ‘atypical forms of employment’ such as part-time, fixed-term, temporary work and marginal employment in almost all the occupational groups”.*

Anani (2018: 167) highlights the labour market shifts in Canada. The study mentions five emerging technologies, namely: 3D Printing, Augmented and Virtual Reality (AR-VR), Artificial Intelligence, 5G wireless and Block-chain technology. The study lays out a critical analysis of the possibilities such technology can drive within the gig economy. For example, whilst these technologies may erase traditional employment in some areas, many other jobs may be re-constructed around such technologies. However, such jobs will amass in the gig economy rather than in traditional employment. Companies will have no need to hire such people on a full-time basis, rather they will use the services of gig workers to fulfil these tasks. Linked to this, the work of Anwar and Graham (2020) uncovers ample evidence around such trends whereby technology firms are using gig workers in Africa to ‘train’ computers, specifically for technologies such as machine learning and Artificial Intelligence.

Bhattacharya and Rughuvansi (2018: 354) examines the white-collar gig economy that has emerged through technological infusion and job market changes with reference to India. The paper looks at the *“merits and demerits of the gig economy”*. Their research shows that as businesses are converting to *“leaner”* workforces, telecom service providers are boosting the roll-out of fibre-optic cables in India. Again, the on-demand nature of labour is outlined by Bhattacharya and Rughuvansi (2018). The challenges associated with gig work however cannot be ignored. Of interest, the lack of pay scales in gig work means that only those with high expertise will be able to demand high pay, whereas other gig workers may be subject to unfair and unjustifiable pay rates. In addition, it is mentioned that issues of credibility may arise whereby companies may not always source the right person to fulfil the job. On a macro-level, it is raised that countries have large amounts of the population involved in gig work may lead to higher unemployment rates and protests because people are not involved in stable employment, (Bhattacharya and Rughuvansi, 2018). Thus, the transition to the gig

economy, and the attendant effects of digitalisation, on skills supply and demand is shaping the labour market significantly.

These technological change perspectives also underscore the changing skills needs associated with digitalisation. For instance, Anani (2018) analyses occupations in the Canadian industrial sector which are changing as a result of 4IR technologies. For instance, in the manufacturing sector, the impact of 3D printing is recognized as changing the job profiles of labourers from one of manual labour to skilled individuals that are competent in 3D design and fixing 3D machines. Changes in job profiles are also noted for healthcare, finance, retail and transportation sectors. Similarly, Bhattacharya and Rughuvansi (2018) asserts that in general, the job opportunities within this new digital ecosystem, will be for people with “*strong domain knowledge*” and also for people in sectors that cannot easily be automated- such as the artistic and services sector.

Changing skills requirements as a result of digitalisation affect a wide range of professions and categories of work. These changes are apparent in, for example, in the inclusion of software in creative industries which imposes on professionals the need to learn these skills. (Lehdonvirta, 2019). These micro-level changes depict the skills modifications experienced by both gig economy and traditional economy workers alike. Although, a key difference is that a full-time employee will likely have organisational support to help him/her up-skill into the required skillset whereas a gig worker must independently find the resources to do this.

Ultimately, digitalisation is intercepting the traditional job market and creating opportunities for current and future generations in the gig and sharing economies. The demand for skilled labour through gig work will ultimately be shaped through digitalisation. Digitalisation is a key driver of change that has propelled the rise of digital capitalism (Mahnkopf, 2017) and the commodification of labour (DeStefano, 2017). Literature reviewed in this section demonstrates that the 4th Industrial Revolution and its accompanying technologies will have both positive and negative consequences on gig workers and workforces in general. In terms of the skills implications: those with the necessary skills sets will be able to command higher pay.

This is especially evident in the gig economy, where competition is superfluous. Those without the necessary skills sets will need to re-skill or upskill.

These perspectives above provided a macro-level account of digitalisation and the 4th Industrial Revolution as contributory factors in the escalation of the gig economy. The next section will highlight other eminent concerns, as foregrounded in the literature, relating to the economic perspectives of digital work.

2.3 Economic perspectives

The economic aspects of the gig economy are tackled from various standpoints. The literature acknowledges the role of economic structures that has led to the rise of unorthodox forms of employment. Gig work is recognised as a form of neoliberalism wherein state intervention and regulation is minimal. Therefore, platforms and companies can easily evade “*labour-market safety-nets and regulations*”, (Fleming, 2019: 491). Furthermore, there are key contradictions inherent to the modus operandi of platforms’. For example, their ability to promote de-regulation under the guise of free market principles, whilst simultaneously controlling key aspects of work performed, is a prime example of neoliberalism (Arcidiacono, Borghi, and Ciarini, 2019).

Neoliberal economics is also considered an important factor for Anwar and Graham (2020: 02) as they explore the “*discourses of freedom and flexibility*”, against “*precarity and vulnerability*” as analytical dimensions of job quality in the gig economy. Their study conducts interviews with 65 African gig workers and they find that workers experience exhaustion and stress in their work which is unstable. These conditions contrast the “*freedom and flexibility discourse of gig work*” with the reality of *vulnerability and precariousness*. With reference to neoliberalism, Anwar and Graham (2020: 04) point out that “*gig work exemplifies new market-based principles where contingent employment relations along with algorithmic controls of the labour process are used to great effect in shifting risks from capital to labour*”. Agreeing with this sentiment, Vallas and Schor (2020) state that platforms have been able to circumvent the risks and some fundamental responsibilities normally associated with the employer-employee relationship. As such these responsibilities have cascaded onto

the gig workers performing the work. The resulting effect, as described by Fleming *et al.* (2017: 691), is the “*radical responsabilization of the workforce*”, which is characterised by “*growing economic insecurity, low productivity, diminished autonomy and worrying levels of personal debt*”.

More so, Fleming *et al.* (2017: 693) offers some theoretical insight towards the global competitiveness on platforms by drawing linkages between human capital theory, neoliberalism and the “*uberization*” of the workforce. Fleming (2017: 692) further explains that human capital theory alters our understanding of people as “*highly competitive individuals preoccupied with investing and enhancing their own economic value*”. Aligning this to the gig economy, it is evident that gig workers are themselves considered an economic good. The super-competition on platforms and other exploitive labour practices mentioned below by (Drahokoupil and Piasna, 2017; Wood *et al.* 2019; and Popiel, 2017) are indicative of Fleming’s interpretation of gig work through the lens of human capital theory.

In the literature, platforms have been accused - within justifiable grounds of exercising ingenuity in relinquishing ‘control’ to individual gig workers and clients whilst still withholding power over key aspects. Examples of this include the shifting responsibilities: gig workers are responsible for their own work times and need to ensure that they are given feedback in the form of ratings by clients. However pay rates, the dispersing of work and bids and user data are all governed by the platform itself, (Vallas and Schor, 2020). Research conducted on the worldwide platform Upwork showed that the platform was ‘double-dipping’ in the sense that a 10% fee for the platform was paid by freelancers however clients also has this fee embedded in their costing for using the freelancers. (Popiel, 2017). Interestingly, platforms it is acknowledged by the Popiel that platforms cannot control or minimise the “*larger economic risks in terms of shifting demand for particular skills, the precarity of the work, the instability and limited availability of client funding, and the competitiveness of the international market*” (Popiel, 2017: 229). Thus, Popiel (2017) also reflect on the extent to which of free market principles (neoliberalism) are embedded in the risk management structure, obscured contractual obligations and wage disparities of platform work. Furthermore, these economic uncertainties elevates Fleming’s (2017: 691) notion of the “*radical responsabilization*” of the workforce.

The precarious, vulnerable and subordinate position of platform workers are also induced by macro-economic conditions affecting employment. Healy *et al.* (2017: 238) assert that the gig economy depends on “*weak economic conditions*” to thrive, as this is when organisations are reluctant to hire and workers are most vulnerable. Supporting this view, Bhattacharya and Rughavansi (2018: 356) predicts that “*gig workers can be easily exploited in times of economic downturn when jobs are less available and workers are struggling to find their means of livelihood*”. In her examination of Upwork, Popiel (2017: 230) notes that the high presence of millennials on the platform can be partly attributed to the global economic recession of 2008. The economic volatility of this period would have caused many people to lose their jobs and find alternative means of work, most ostensibly, through the “*online marketplace*”. This perspective ties into the view of Healy *et al.* (2017) which considers economic volatility to be a prime factor in increasing the uptake of atypical work or platform work.

As seen above, changes in the global economy impacts the gig economy. This can translate into further entrenching exploitative patterns in informal labour or gig work. In the case of developing and developed countries, the balance of power dynamics between gig workers and platforms become even more acute. With reference to African gig workers, Anwar and Graham (2020: 96- 103) find that this work is characterised by long working hours and online monitoring and non-payment is threatened if work is deemed unsatisfactory. Their study on African gig workers reveal that many gig workers are from marginalised communities but the work they do is connected to multinational technology firms that seek their labour as “*low-cost workforces*”. In fact, the work of African gig workers is linked to the testing of emerging 4IR technology such as machine learning, artificial intelligence. As pointed out, these products are worth billions in developed world but their development is underpinned by cheap labour enabled through the gig economy. The elements of global outsourcing are thus prevalent in the gig economy. Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, and Hjorth, (2019) therefore note that platforms have commercialised the outsourcing and offshoring by industries in a cost-effective manner. The rates of exchange in the Global South as compared to the Global North enables gig workers from Africa and Asia to be paid low rates for their labour.

Wage disparities, induced by super-competition is considered a sore point in platform work. Popiel (2017) highlights that competitive workforces, such as in India, often acquire the highest earnings because they are willing to work at the cheapest prices, which attract clients, especially start-ups. Drahokoupil and Piasna (2017: 336) point out that the super or hyper-competition that gig workers are exposed to is considered to have an impact on low-skilled work in terms of pushing down pay rates due to “*over-supply of workers*” and “*sub-contracting relationships*”. The findings of Wood *et al.* (2019: 60) corroborate the above through the examination of digital work platform, Upwork. It is noted that “*the competitive work organisation, whereby all workers can view each other’s bids, was also found to be a source of downward pressure on pay rates*”. The issue of algorithm-matching and pay determination extends the complications of digital platforms as intermediaries in assigning work. To this end, a point raised is that the agency of gig workers is further compromised as they do not have the power to challenge the decision-making power of platform companies who “*are in full control of the coordination platforms and the algorithms used in the process of distributing work for matching workers with the orders*” (Poon, 2017: 67). Other studies have validated this viewpoint by examining the various mechanisms of control and supervision as instituted by platforms.

Platforms have invested in highly sophisticated forms of supervision. Gandini (2019) uses the framework of labour process theory to examine the unique mechanisms of control and management utilised by gig platforms. He identifies the rankings and ratings that are embedded in many platforms as method of emotional labour and control for gig work. Strategies such as gamification and surge pricing are commonly utilised on platforms such as Uber to get drivers to work longer hours. For online freelancing platforms such as Upwork, clients are allowed to track freelancers work through TeamApp. Freelancers have to upload screenshots of their work in 10-minute intervals. Popiel asserts that “*minutely monitoring work progress, hourly-based contract work implies precise micromanagement*” as part of Upwork management strategy”. Popiel (2017) and Gandini (2019) both identify the digitalised methods of labour control on platforms. The scientific management embedded in the work relationship by platforms can be traced to scientific theory of Taylorism. The study of McGaughey (2018) shows how the theory of Taylorism has advanced into the 21st century to justify the use of technology in matching supply with demand in the gig

economy. McGaughey (2018: 464) likens the control and management practices of platforms to Taylorism by stating:

“Like Taylorism, employees are invasively monitored and controlled. Their tasks are set in minute detail, generated by algorithms behind the data that drives their work...This is Taylorism: the vapid position that a gig economy employee is no longer part of a society or a democracy and is really by-her-self-employed.”

McGaughey's assertion that Taylorist means of production and work organisation is a distinctive feature of the gig economy is apparent in the status quo maintained between platforms and gig workers. The ability of platforms to control all aspects of the labour distribution process means that they are in a position of exploiting gig workers.

Vallas and Schor (2020: 277-282) critique the dominant portrayals of the platform economy in the scholarly literature. In their paper, they highlight the limitations of these portrayals by outlining some fundamental aspects of the gig economy which cannot be ignored. They summarise the key debates in around the gig economy in 4 metaphors: *“entrepreneurial incubators, digital cages, accelerants of precarity, and institutional chameleons”*. In the image (entrepreneurial incubators), platforms are portrayed as powerful entities which challenge the *“traditional corporation”*, by allowing anyone with an asset or skill to transact in the gig economy. Thus the status quo of traditional capitalism is challenged by *“crowd-based capitalism”* under this model which promotes utopian ideal whereby ordinary people now have economic power. The metaphors of the digital cage and accelerants of precarity is prevalent to this review of the literature. The second image (digital cage) challenges the perspectives of Gandini (2019) and McGaughey (2018) discussed above. The digital cage metaphor encompasses such critical perspectives which demonstrate that platforms exercise technocratic mechanisms of control through the use of algorithms. Although such studies are valid and explain the reality of work on some platforms, Vallas and Schor (2020) assert that this image is exaggerated to a certain extent. They note that algorithms can control workers, however gig workers have found ways to circumvent this type of monitoring through other means. Equally important here, is that not all

workers are faced with algorithm surveillance that constricts their freedom or autonomy.

The third image which is accelerants of precarity includes critiques such as those discussed earlier by Anwar and Graham (2020) and Fleming (2019). The portrayal of gig workers as precarious subordinates, vulnerable to the exploitation of platforms has merit and certainly represents the reality for some gig workers. However, as Vallas and Schor (2020) point out, this image fails to account for gig workers that are not dependant on this type of work as a sole source of income and rather use it for additional income. Further to this, this image does not account for gig workers who are high earners and have greater autonomy to choose their projects, and therefore do not conform to this precarious typecast. The identified limitations of the above metaphors lead Vallas and Schor (2020: 282) to propose a final metaphor referred to as “*permissive potentates*”. The kernel of their conceptualisation is that platforms represent a distinctly new form of economic activity that is described as “*nascent*”, “*dynamic*”. As discussed earlier, platforms employ unique tactics of control and relinquish power which provides the façade of economic empowerment to gig workers. In doing so, they have created a new version of capitalism which is generally regarded as platform capitalism or digital capitalism (Mahnkopf, 2019).

It is evident from the above perspectives that gig work is a highly debatable aspect of our new digital economy. Although gig work is regarded as an extension of previous industrial eras, whereby firms manipulated cheap labour for maximising profits, the perspective of Vallas and Schor (2020) demonstrates how even these views are limited. Thus new conceptualisations of the gig work and the gig economy will help us to better understand this economic model. Gig work represents a much-needed source of income and contingent employment for people in many countries, especially in Africa. The themes of economic vulnerability, precariousness and exploitation, as discussed in this section, are nevertheless serious bottlenecks with actors in the gig economy must seek to resolve. The next section therefore looks at social protection and social reform strategies for platform workers.

2.4 Politico-legal and social perspectives

The political and legal aspects of gig work is interwoven with recommendation for social policy and labour policy to be adjusted in favour of gig workers. The categorisation of gig workers as self-employed (De Ruyter *et al.*, 2018; De Stefano, (2017) is a key issue which exemplifies the connectedness of legal and social challenges associated with the gig economy. This is discussed in further detail below.

Gig workers and their associated rights; the position of platforms in determining gig benefits; and the role of government and institutional entities in regulating gig work, is a cross-cutting theme amongst scholars. A major point of concern with reference to the gig economy is the “*potential for exploitation*” and the associated “*implications on other forms of employment*” (Wright, Wailes, Bamber and Lanbury, 2017: 254). Labour market perspectives argue that digital work has subverted traditional employment and industrial relations. Eichhorst *et al.* (2017) notes that:

“This is because platforms such as Uber do not consider themselves employers, only intermediaries. Workers for platform-based exchanges are therefore no longer ‘classic’ employees, rather they are self-employed,”

The misclassification of gig workers as self-employed or independent contractors has also disadvantaged gig workers from receiving other social employment benefits such as sick pay, and workplace benefits associated with occupational health and safety (Wright *et al.* 2017).

These views are further iterated in the work of De Stefano (2017) and De Ruyter *et al.* (2018) who evaluate the implications for gig workers who are categorised as “self-employed”. The ultimate conclusion of the authors is that gig workers are at the periphery in terms of social protection because of their misclassification as “self-employed” (De Stefano, 2017:12). Sound solutions for updated models of social protection and reform of social policy to provide better legal and social protection for gig workers are thus abundant in the literature.

Stewart and Stanford (2017: 429) examine options for extending regulation in the context of Australian employment law and gig work. They offer suggestions for regulation in this area, which ranges from conventional to radical. The first option considers the ways in which existing regulation can be enforced in the context of the gig economy. On the more radical side, it is proposed that various legal labour systems must revisit, re-imagine and redefine conceptions of work and employment thereby expanding the pool of those that can receive benefits to those that 'work' rather than those that are just 'employed'. Such revised legislation must also allow gig workers to have multiple employers for "*different purposes*", (Stewart and Stanford, 2017: 432).

De Stefano (2017: 02) review the labour issues surrounding the gig economy. It is argued that the very term 'gig economy' undermines the real and authentic process of work that take places via platforms. The notion of digitally mediated "*gigs*", "*tasks*", "*favours*", "*services*", "*rides*" all contribute to the "*dehumanisation*" of work. De Stefano (2017: 05) explains that such terms have contributed to the general disregard around "*labour protection*" and "*employment regulation*" for gig workers. An assessment of labour policies to be adjusted to include gig workers in also undertaken in this paper. De Stefano (2017) critiques recommendations for creating a new intermediate category of worker, by stating that such category would further complicate matters especially under different legal apparatuses in various national contexts. Significantly, this work highlights that the recognition of jobs in the gig economy as actual work is a critical starting point to avoiding inhumane actions towards such workers. It is also recommended that the gig economy should be treated one of many categories of non-standard work forms. In this regard, the gig economy is not only a technologically driven phenomenon but one that reflects a continuation of broader trends towards the "*casualization*" of labour and employment relationships (De Stefano, 2017: 02). Solutions towards accommodating gig workers under labour protection laws could then be addressed from a broader outlook.

Arcidiacono *et al.* (2019) focuses on the platform model and its disruption on the organisation as well as work and labour rights. Their study also iterates the need of a universal tax welfare scheme which can benefit gig workers. Further it is advised that "*minimum wage and minimum income can contribute to counter-balance inequalities*

and low wage” (Arcidiacono *et al.* 2019: 620). Another noteworthy suggestion emanating from their review is that local government and state intervention is needed to ensure that initiatives outside of social welfare are developed to afford crowd-workers with *“new service, training and opportunities for local development”* (Pulignano, 2019 in Arcidiacono *et al.* 2019: 620). This recommendation is of high relevance to this study as is later discussed.

The nature of gig work results in it being not only difficult to measure, but also difficult to regulate. The lack of unions to protect gig workers also reduces their bargaining power (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the legal and policy conundrums that the gig economy presents means that revolutionary effort amongst actors in the ambit of regulation is required. This includes collaboration amongst local, national and international and especially gig workers themselves.

Eichhorst *et al.* (2017: 300) postulates that a universal social insurance system may well be developed in response to the increase in ‘*atypical*’ forms of employment. This study also proposes that researchers and policy-makers revisit the concept of social insurance, which should be opened up to include all aspects of employment. Of significance, is the recommendation by Eichhorst *et al.*, (2017: 311):

“A contribution-based pension scheme for retirement as well as for occupational disability and unemployment regardless of formal employment status would close the gaps in insurance, accommodate changing forms of employment, and reduce competition over labor costs between dependent employees and those who are self-employed”.

Katiyatiya and Lubisi (2020) investigate how a substantive definition of equality might help toward re-structuring social protection in South Africa for the improvement of digital work. They base their investigation on the South African literature that has been published on gig work. Their study argues that a broader conceptual understanding of substantive equality should encompassed in transforming social protection. They importantly note that: *“a typical platform worker in South Africa is a “gig” payment away from living beyond the poverty line thus social protection should be extended to such*

a worker". As such, they should be afforded rights of social protection so that they can be paid even when they are unable to work. This recommendation is noteworthy and parallels can be drawn from De Stefano's (2017: 04) earlier recommendation towards recognising gig workers as humans rather than "*invisible workers*". Relating this to the work of Katiyatiya and Lubisi (2020), the concept of substantive equality would facilitate the transition towards a more humane treatment of gig workers

In their study of the economic impact of COVID-19 on gig workers, the Fairwork project outlines that within many contexts, including South Africa, gig workers are solely dependent on platforms for income. This is in contrast to the perception that gig work functions mostly as a source of supplementary income (Fairwork, 2020: 02). Again, the need to consider measures to protect gig workers through social policy measures such as healthcare assistance, physical protection and sick pay is outlined by the report.

The vulnerable position of gig workers from developing countries reinforces the need for social reform measures. Ngweni and Porteous, (2018: 07) emphasise that:

"In African countries, it's probably realistic to ask governments to recognize that gig work is the main source of livelihoods for most and then mandate that platform providers open their systems to allow workers to register for government benefits and private services rather than creating a whole range of poorly enforced regulations".

This recommendation is tied to the work of Katiyatiya and Lubisi (2020) and the Fairwork Project (2020) as it underscores the developmental implications of gig work and the need to adjust social policy measures to cater for gig workers. As more South Africans, and other populations internationally, turn toward gig work as a source of income and the perception of gig work changes, these questions will become more prominent and will require credible responses.

In spite of the widespread call for an improved social benefits framework for gig workers, some scholarly work in the African context have argued that gig-type work is no worse and no better than the conventional informal work structures that many people from developing countries are accustomed to. For example, more than 80% of

African youth are involved in informal work whilst making the school-to-work transition. A study tracking the financial diaries of people living in African countries (Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa) showed that many people derived an income from numerous income sources per year. Further, like with gig work, informal work provides no health insurance, pension and no labour protections, (Ngweno and Porteous, 2018: 04). This again relates to De Stefano's (2019: 02) earlier point that the gig economy is a continuation of broader trend towards the "*informalisation and casualization*" of work.

The fact that parallels can be drawn between jobs in the informal economy, particularly in Africa, does not excuse the international community and national regimes from addressing the challenges of the gig economy as laid out in this review of the literature. Regulation should also not be the only answer to addressing some of the issues surrounding the gig economy. Regulation of the gig economy can prove counter-productive if it is not carried out correctly, thus it requires sensitive processes that incorporate bottom-up approaches. As the findings of Anwar and Graham (2020) highlight with specific reference to African gig workers, the general perception amongst many African gig workers that they interviewed is that they risk losing these opportunities in the gig economy if regulation occurs. Platforms or other organisations not amenable to stricter regulations could move their operations to other countries with more relaxed regulation. In a similar vein, the perspective of Ngweno and Porteous (2018) outlines that although protection and regulation is a sore point of the gig point, the reality on the ground remains different because the formal economy, in many African countries, cannot absorb the youth. Thus, African youth and other disenfranchised parts of the population will end up working in the gig economy, irrespective of whether platforms are compliant or not with the generally accepted standards of labour across the world.

2.5 Skills acquisition and skills transfer in the Gig economy

Three key thematic areas are identified in this section which speaks to the objectives of this study. This study explores how gig workers acquire, expand transfer skills, the upskilling mechanisms of gig workers, the career paths possible for gig workers and

whether platforms can assist in upskilling. These aspects are tied to an assessment of whether gig workers can extract developmental value from gig work. Skills acquisition, expansion and transfer is the first major theme as it is recognised to be crucial for the development of both professional and entrant gig workers/freelancers. Knowledge sharing and knowledge exchange is a sub-theme interwoven with the broader aspect of how gig workers acquire and transfer skills. The second theme is skills progression and portfolio building which is linked towards the developmental aspects of gig work, especially for younger gig workers or freelancers. A sub-theme here is platforms approaches to upskilling or training of gig workers to adequately fulfil their roles on the sites. Finally, the third theme is techno-centric approaches to upskilling, which looks at how the platforms can engender new types of upskilling or reskilling initiatives driven by algorithms, and other technology driven solutions.

2.5.1 Skills Dynamics of online digital labour and Developmental Value

Many freelancers are highly educated and possess professional accreditations and skills. According to Popiel (2017: 227), *“more than two thirds of freelancers on Upwork hold a college degree, and 28% hold a graduate degree. On Upwork, more than half of the freelancers listed have more than 6 years of experience and a third have a decade of experience”*. These high levels of education and experience may imply that freelancers/ gig workers are fully qualified and do not need to pursue further upskilling or developmental pathways. Some empirical studies, however, prove otherwise, demonstrating that gig workers may often target projects that are interconnected with developmental opportunities and skills progression pathways. In fact, Barlage *et al.* (2019: 04) refer to the concept of ‘*stretchwork*’ which alludes to the tacit manner of approaching projects in which elements or parts of the project is new to the freelancer, thus enabling him/her to expand existing skills. Thus, despite their qualified status, freelancers may prefer projects of this nature that facilitate their own skills progression. Popiel (2017) also mentions that the success on Upwork depends on providing highly experienced and specialised or niche skills via the platform. This certainly underlines the motivation for freelancers to engage in continual learning and developmental opportunities. In order to secure projects, gig workers must project an attractive portfolio on the platform and high levels of experience. In addition, it is acknowledged

that freelancers have to undertake new learning ventures in order to increase the skills and ultimately remain competitive in their bid for work (Popiel, 2017).

Another perspective which is interlaced with the skills patterns outlined above is that of Huang *et al.* (2019) which identifies an important distinction between traditional employees and gig economy workers. Traditional economy workers are generally thought to exercise the same skill set in their jobs which is *“often predefined in the job requirement”*. However, gig economy workers *“can work on gigs that fit their skillsets, enjoy more freedom in expanding their skills based on interests and demand, and even practise the newly learned skills through the gig work”* (Huang *et al.*, 2019: 02). Thus, the overarching idea about how skills are provided in the gig economy is that gig workers often oscillate between existing and new skillsets and regularly engage in skills expansion. These distinctions are important to mapping out processes of skills provision in the gig economy.

Wood *et al.* (2019: 944) investigate the networked (dis) embeddedness of platforms and the interpersonal networks of trust that are developed through gig work. They explain that learning new skills and expanding on skills is perceived as a priority in terms of acquiring work because workers saw themselves as *“competing globally against workers whose cost of living was presumed to be lower than their own”*. Skills, education and experience are central to acquiring work in this highly competitive environment. Wood *et al.* (2019: 944) also note that through the process of *“competing”* for work on platforms, gig workers confirmed that they had developed *“new skills”*. This perspective underscores that skills acquisition, expansion and transfer processes by gig workers may be influenced by the broader environment of online competition on digital labour platforms which includes workers from the Global South, Asia and the Global North. Anwar and Graham (2020) speak of the competition on platforms in the findings of their study, and they find that the bargaining position of African gig workers were significantly ‘weakened’ when competing against Filipino and Indian gig workers.

Broughton *et al.* (2018) examine the experiences of those in the gig economy. This study touches on a range of issues relating to gig work including employment rights, skills development and career progression. Broughton *et al.* (2018) draw some

distinctions between low-skilled and high-skilled labour in the gig economy. They find that low-skilled workers had the perception that they could not progress further in their fields. With reference to high-skilled work however, gig workers are *“hopeful”* about opportunities for progression, mainly related to the securing of a reputable client. In particular, it is noted that respondents could not always access the right jobs that could *“support their career progression in the way they wanted, but many felt they were able to access enough of the right sort of work to grow their career”* (Broughton et al, 2018: 83). Lehdonvirta et al. (2019: 17) highlights a gap in the literature in terms of skills development of gig work. It is noted that, although ample research has discussed broadly, the occupations or professions involved in crowd-work, *“they do not address the question of what skills these workers actually develop through their work”*. The findings of this study fulfils a significant gap in this regard, as will be seen later on.

The work of Graham, Hjorth and Lehdonvirta (2017: 138) examines that impact of digital labour and raises four concerns surrounding such work, that is, *“bargaining power, economic exclusion, intermediation and skills and capability development”*. In terms of skills and capability development, it is outlined that the process of *“disintermediation”* afford workers with the opportunity to expand their functions linked to particular occupation which enables them to build on their skills and capabilities (Graham et al. 2017: 151). However, this study finds that the gig workers are cut off from the process of ‘disintermediation’, deliberately in some instances, because organisations/clients provide only parts of information, in order to prevent the worker from learning more about the broader functions, purpose and context in which the tasks they undertake are situated. Thus, the authors argue that the *“theoretical potential”* for disintermediation to occur between digital labourers and clients is not realised as a result of information asymmetries perpetuated by the client. In these instances, *“information asymmetries enforced by clients inhibit workers’ ability to upgrade skills: something that is only possible if knowledge is available about the end-uses to which their labour is put”* (Graham et al., 2017: 152). Evidently, such findings reveal the underlying obstacles to skills progression, and development of gig workers.

The sub-theme of knowledge sharing, collaboration and knowledge exchange is identified as an important framework in the literature. Seppanen et al. (2021) contributes to an understanding of macro-task projects undertaken by Nordic gig

workers. Interestingly this study draws on educational learning theories to examine the co-creation of macro-task projects through Learning Activity theory developed by Engestrom (1999). Seppanen *et al.* (2021: 91-93) finds that through co-creation, freelancers shape the *“contents, organisation and division of labour of projects”*. In addition, Seppanen *et al.* (2021: 93) find that co-creation can open up opportunities for *“work upgrading”* and be *“skills enhancing”* because of the *“task-complexity”* and collaborative nature of such macro-tasks. Similarly, Barlage *et al.* (2019: 03) investigate the potential for knowledge sharing and engagement between freelancers and their clients (organisations). They conclude that knowledge sharing is indeed possible on the proviso that ‘gigs’ (projects or tasks) are constructed to *“not only suit the task requirements at hand and fit with the acquired skills of the freelancer, but that these gigs also leave ample room for the freelancers’ individual growth and development of new skills”*. Their overarching finding is that the need for individual growth and freelancer development is a crucial aspect in forging mutually beneficial relations between the hiring organisation and freelancer/gig worker. Seppanen *et al.* (2021) also make explicit how gig workers can use their skills, competencies and capabilities to contribute to an ecosystem of knowledge. Evidently, these scholarly works elevate our understanding of how gig workers can use projects for the purposes of skills acquisition, expansion and transfer. The possibility of skills acquisition, expansion and transfer through gig work is therefore substantiated by the literature from numerous standpoints.

2.5.2 Skills mechanisms on platforms

The existing approaches of platforms towards skills acquisition and transfer is explored and assessed to some extent by a few scholars. The platform model has engendered various forms of normative constructs around skills efficacy on platforms. These mechanisms cater for both entrant and professional freelancers. Some of these tools take the form of skills signalling. Kassi and Lehdonvirta (2018) examine the effectiveness of digital skills certificates for signalling clients. The intended purpose of skills certificates was for gig workers to demonstrate their skills to potential clients prior to them gaining their first ‘gig’ on a platform. This was recognized as a need because clients are often doubtful about the credibility of skills that gig workers possess. Further to this, in general, landing a first ‘gig’ on platforms is extremely challenging. However, the findings of the study reveal that digital skill certificates demonstrate the technical

skills of freelancers however uncertainty around work experience and other soft skills is only determined through other indicators such as work history, ratings and feedback scores. This leads the authors to conclude that digital certificates are not effective for their intended purpose and only assist those with existing experience and not those who have not already won at least one 'gig' on the platform (Kassi and Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Some skills provision trends that is linked to gig work are highly contentious. According to stats on gig work, the Philippines is second to India in the number on platform workers *"actively involved in the market"*, (Soriano *et al.*, 2019: 01). Soriano *et al.* (2019: 02) investigates skill-makers in the Philippines that have emerged as a category of 'skills coaches' to train gig workers. This is, however, not a platform-driven initiative but rather the work of skill-makers who are current or former gig workers. These people set up Facebook groups which are used to market 'training packages'. These training packages involve coaches train 'new-comers' with the core aspects of how to navigate gig work. Soriano *et al.* (2019) point out that this development has emerged as a result the uncertainty and ambiguity that new gig workers face as entrants to gig platforms. This has subsequently led skill-makers to construct training around *"how to begin as an online freelancer", 'how to sell one's skills', coaching on specific skills, that is, website development, social media management, web design, or virtual assistance)*. The prices of these training packages range from P3,000 (US\$55) to P15,000 (US\$300)" (Soriano *et al.* 2019: 07). Whilst advice around how to navigate the gig economy is certainly useful, the high rates of packages may introduce additional economic uncertainty into the lives of gig workers, especially for those who are beginners and are not yet certain when they will start earning substantial income. Such trends increases our understanding of the routes some gig workers may take to make a successful career in the gig economy.

Other skills courses and certificates are designed with the focus on upskilling rather than signalling clients. These include self-assessments and courses that act as pathways for gig workers to broaden their expertise and develop meta-competencies. Gonzalez (2018) reviews consumer experiences of gig work and mentions that platforms such as Upwork provide free skill tests to gig workers to enable them to be aware of their skills levels. Donner *et al.* (2020) explores how upskilling through

training is taking place via some platforms to train gig workers in specific areas where skills gaps are evident. This training facilitates a skills transfer process, in this instance from the platform to the gig worker. In this regard, some platforms are found to be extending their strategic objectives to ensure that workers listed on their platforms are competent in core aspects of their work. Donner *et al.* (2020:06) finds that training includes “*vocation-specific content, basic digital literacy, financial literacy and even social media marketing*”. They note that a skill such as social media marketing is a transferrable skill that empowers gig workers. These mechanisms may also lead to positive developmental outcomes, in terms of providing young people, especially from developing economies, “*with the skills they need to participate in digital economies*”, (Donner *et al.* 2020: 01). Lehdonvirta (2019) point out a similar example of a micro-task platform (Samasource) that is based in Africa, and South Asia. This platform’s aim is to upskill specifically those gig workers who are at the periphery in terms of work and training opportunities in their countries. Thus, *Samasource* sets up regional work centres and trains gig workers on fundamental, generic and technical skills needed to be a crowd-worker. This is done through a “train-the-trainer” approach. Such examples point to amalgamation of functions between work and training which can be realised through the platform model.

The triangulation between skills acquisition, upskilling and gig work has also proved highly relevant for entrant gig workers or graduates who may be seeking traditional career paths and want to gain experience. Popiel (2017) identifies freelance work on Upwork to be pathway for experience-building amongst youth and graduates. The merging of work and portfolio-building activities in the form of internships is postulated by Popiel (2017) as a model that can be realised through the gig economy and would suit both the needs of universities and young people. In line with Popiel’s connection between higher education and gig work, the study of Gonzalez (2018) advises that institutions should prepare students for the sought-after skills needed for digital labour. This could assist in increasing their (the students’) chances of gaining employment. Healy *et al.* (2017: 239-240) speculates the possible long-term influence of gig work by stating that such work may impart “*skills that help inexperienced workers move into subsequent higher-paid or more secure jobs*”, or that gig work functions as “*bridge*” for graduates seeking to gain experience and enter traditional employment. Chiang *et al.*

(2018) also note that one of the reasons for crowd workers engaging in this type of work is to assist them in career progression.

2.5.3 Techno-centric approaches to skills acquisition

Advancing the analyses discussed above, the study of Huang *et al.* (2019: 03) explores the supply-side of gig work on gig economy platform, Fiverr.com. They adopt a techno-centric approach to understanding how gig workers supply skills. They use the network perspective for their assessment and construct the concept of a “*skill space*” to illustrate a network of skills on the platform. Their findings reveal that workers who provide skills with a high degree of relatedness are associated with better overall performance in the gig economy. This is exemplified by a larger fraction of reviews and higher average rating scores amongst workers that provide closely related skills. These findings lead Huang *et al.* (2019: 20) to recommend that gig platforms also function as a “digital skills advisor” to enhance its role as a job matching intermediary. They note that platforms could for instance “*adopt algorithmic approaches to provide strategic guidance to workers which both help workers to develop successful ‘career paths’ in online labour markets and nudge workers into areas that are in shortage of labour*”. The work of a few other scholars is congruent with the broader theme of techno-centric approaches towards the skills development, career development and upskilling of gig workers.

Chiang *et al.* (2018) examine crowd coaching and the associated tools for improving crowd sourcing platforms as offered on Amazon Mechanical Turk. They assert that crowd workers desire opportunities for upskilling and coaching to be able to increase their salary and provide quality. However due to low pay and the high cost of experts, crowd workers cannot afford to fund such training personally. Chiang *et al.* (2018: 02) therefore propose “*Crowd Coach*”, a tool devised as a plugin in Google Chrome that enables peer coaching via the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform. Such tools may contribute to improving crowd workers job performance. It is noted that such a mechanism can enable workers to issue advice and also gain peer advice to improve their abilities, (Chiang *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the work of Chiang *et al.* (2018) is useful in offering a pragmatic tool that is inexpensive and harnesses the experience and expertise of peers on crowd platforms.

The study by Stephany (2021) proposes a platform-driven approach to re-skilling for gig workers. The study identifies online labour platforms (OLP's) to be "*early laboratories*" in the *de-bundling and re-bundling of incremental skills*" (Stephany, 2021: 02). This is based on evidence which shows that gig workers offer their skills in unique, informal ways on platforms that is often detached from its original or associated skills or occupation. For example, it is noted that the role of a data scientist is 'de-bundled' on platforms where trends show that gig workers offer skills related to the role, such as Python, but not in its entirety. Thus, the study proposes that OLP's should capitalise on platform-generated data which could aid in suggesting reskilling pathways to other gig workers.

The above studies indicate a highly technologically-driven direction in response to upskilling and reskilling via platforms. Digital work platforms can enrich the skills-oriented experience for freelancers by drawing on such mechanisms. Such recommendations will be taken forward in this study in the latter chapters, when considering how platforms can be optimally designed to influence the skills acquisition, expansion and transfer patterns and upskilling methods of gig workers.

2.6 Conclusion

The literature has provided insight into how skills acquisition, expansion transfer can be realised through gig work. It is evident that gig workers have to be crafty in the ways through which they choose to acquire and transfer skills thereby contributing to their own developmental value. Platforms are making provision for skills upgrading, and expansion opportunities for gig workers. Techno-centric responses to skills provision is also emerging with skills upgrading mechanisms based on the algorithms. As opposed to the earlier observations about how algorithms are used to subjugate workers to platform rules, these perspectives contribute to an understanding of how algorithms can be used to support gig workers' development and in so doing, can lead to career-path building and developmental value.

The next chapter presents a discussion of current theoretical frameworks that lend itself to this study's analyses of gig work.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Frameworks in Gig Work

In this chapter, gig work is further dissected in terms of theory with specific focus on skills acquisition, expansion and transfer, upskilling mechanisms and the career pathways that can be developed through gig work. In particular, the specific skills sets that gig workers should possess is outlined as a core theme in the literature. A theoretical analysis of gig work outlines both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Bottom-up analyses of gig work examine the aptitude, competencies of individuals and how this translates into being successful gig workers/ freelancers. Top-down analyses demonstrate that external factors including the institutional environment, can significantly affect the benefits that gig workers can accumulate from gig work. The second part of this chapter looks at some key theories emanating from organisational psychology that inform the analyses of gig work in this study.

3.1 Competency-based theories

The studies of Defillippi and Arthur (1994), and Ashford *et al.* (2018) are pivotal in highlighting theories that are useful in assessing individual competencies and aptitudes for gig work. The concept of boundaryless careers refers to the career paths that involves sequences of job opportunities that go beyond one employment setting (Defillippi and Arthur, 1994: 307). Boundaryless careers are characterised by a high degree of intra-organisational and inter-organisational mobility which can be achieved through career competencies, specifically: “*know-how*”, “*know-why*” and “*know-whom*” competencies, (Kost *et al.* 2019: 101).

According to Defillippi and Arthur (1994: 308-309), each of the competencies are delineated as follows:

- Know-why competencies relate to the underlying motivations personal attributes and career goals that a person identifies with and uses to direct and guide his or her career path.
- Know-how competencies relates to “*job-related competencies*”, specifically the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to perform a specific occupation

or job function.

- Know-whom competencies relate to the ability to build inter-firm networks and relationships that can benefit either the employee or the firm itself, that is, through the generation of new business or through the opening of alternative career opportunities for the individual.

Kost *et al.* (2019) critically examine the extent to which gig work is representative of boundaryless careers. They contend that although gig work appears to support unrestrained career mobility; the conditions that gig workers sometimes face via platforms can actually limit career competencies. Importantly, Kost *et al.* (2019) assert that gig work is limiting on all three competencies necessary to develop and sustain boundaryless careers:

- Know why competencies are constricted in a gig work environment because gig workers are often isolated from direct contact with clients and perform project-based or task-based work which can affect their knowing-why competencies.
- Know-whom competencies are impacted because gig workers can often have less contact with clients and this alienates them from networking opportunities. As such, this may impact them in finding new clients.
- Know-how competencies are easier to develop through an organisation's resources but a gig worker is instantly cut off from such opportunities and is solely responsible from their own upskilling.

In essence, gig work is often obscured as a boundaryless career. However, Kost *et al.* (2019) shows that gig work can be an inhibiting career path as it can lead to financial stress and insecurity; and also impede career development. Kost *et al.* (2019: 103) criticises gig work as a boundaryless career noting that other studies have shown that the positive rhetoric surrounding the boundaryless career perspective only reflects the reality for certain highly educated and highly skilled professionals. It is further argued that minorities and marginalised communities, including women and youth, with minimum education levels find boundaryless careers onerous because of the lack of resources and support structures. Despite these criticisms of the boundaryless career,

career competencies: *know-how, know-whom, know-why*, that is related here, is important for our understanding of how gig workers apply their skills to this virtual work setting. Duggan *et al.* (2021: 03) for example note that “*an understanding of these competencies allows individuals to evaluate which skills, competencies or networks can facilitate mobility in the future and identify which skills may become obsolete*”. Thus, the usage of such career competencies by gig workers is considered relevant in the context of this study.

The work of Ashford *et al.* (2018) focuses on the behavioural competencies that can contribute to how people experience and cope with gig work, that is, how do they survive or thrive in the new world of work. The study provides some key conceptual orientations for understanding how gig workers mentally and psychologically navigate platform work. Specifically, they highlight necessary and relational behaviours, and cognitive and emotional capabilities that are crucial to coping with gig work. Of interest are the critical underlying capabilities and necessary behaviours that is highlighted in figure 3.1 below. Significantly, Ashford *et al.* (2018) outline some key capabilities that should be projected by gig workers. In particular, learning agility is recognized as of paramount importance to gig workers who constantly need to adapt their current skills set to different contexts. The notion of skills expansion proposed by Huang *et al.* (2019), discussed earlier, is linked to concept of learning agility. The idea that gig workers often engage in upskilling and expand their skills based on demand means that they require a high-degree of learning agility.

Another capability which may be particularly challenging for gig workers is ‘cognitive flexibility’. Due to project or task-based nature of gig work, gig workers need to be able to oscillate roles, tasks and identities often and need to manage this process seamlessly.

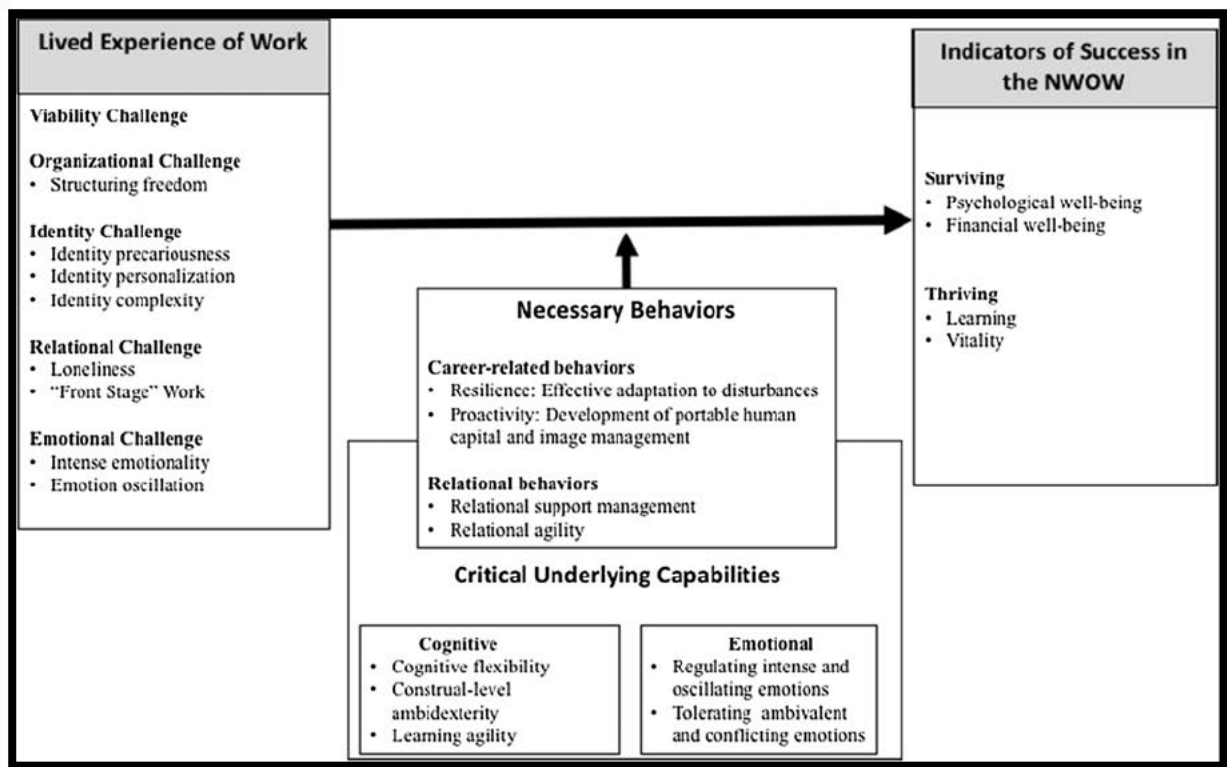


Figure 3. 1: Capabilities based approach to surviving and thriving in the gig economy

Source: Ashford *et al.* (2018: 29)

In addition, meta-skills and competencies are just as important as core skills, given that gig workers are expected to build and manage themselves as an individual brand. Gig workers must be adaptable enough to perform work in different contexts and also be prepared to work with technically different systems, tools and software from project to project. This is reflected under the aspect of 'resilience' which is part of the 'career-related behaviours', as shown in figure 3.1 above. Ashford *et al.* (2018:30) note that developing "*key qualities, generic and digital skills*" will enable gig workers to be 'well-resourced' in order to carry out tasks for a diverse ranges of clients.

The theory of Flexible Careers is another framework which illustrates the external factors that contribute to and influence people's career choices. Tomlinson, Baird, Berg and Cooper (2018: 06) define flexible careers as "*one that meets the individual's needs and preferences for flexibility and sustainability as life circumstances change, and is influenced by the institutional environment, organizational factors, as well as individual career decisions*". Most ostensibly, Tomlinson *et al.* (2018: 06) note that career competencies are not the only bearing upon which people choose flexible or

boundaryless careers. Rather, they outline a framework to illustrate the institutional environment, organisational dynamics and individual career decisions which shape flexible careers. By adopting a life course approach, Tomlinson *et al.* (2018) further demonstrate that social and economic factors including gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status coupled with personal circumstances, such as family care responsibilities, shape decisions towards flexible careers.

The context in which the work of Tomlinson *et al.* (2018) is situated is in direct reference to organisation-based employment. In this regard, the model they propose does not speak directly to gig workers per se. Nevertheless, their examination highlight aspects of flexible careers which deserve greater attention in analyses of gig work. For example, the life-course approach is significant because it holds value for people who move in and out of gig economy due to particular life circumstances. Further, the aspects of “*worker voice, flexible education and training institutions and flexible work policies*” should be examined in relation to gig work (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2018: 7-11). The advice of these authors are considered in this study.

3.2 Motivational approaches

An assessment of theories in organisational labour and organisational psychology such as Self- Determination Theory (SDT), Job Characteristics Model (JCM), Job Quality, Job Demands-Resources Model and Freelancer Value Proposition are undertaken in the existing literature.

Table 3. 1: Key theories that underpin gig work

Theory	Basic tenets	Principles
Self-Determination Theory (SDT)	Three psychological demands of a person must be met in order for the individual to feel motivated. These needs contribute to a person's Self-determination (Zaman, Nawaz, Javed, Rasul, 2020: 04).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competence • Relatedness • Autonomy
Job Characteristics Model (JCM)	Five indicators of the joy and happiness at work (Zaman <i>et al.</i> 2020).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Task Identity • Autonomy • Skill Variety • Task Significance • Job-based Feedback
Freelancer Value Proposition (FVP)	The basis for this conceptual framework is Self-Determination Theory, Human Capital and Social Exchange Theory. It also leverages of the concept of Employee Value Proposition (EVP). (Nawaz <i>et al.</i> , 2019; Nawaz, Zhang, Mansoor, Hafeez and Ilmudeen, 2020).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic Value • Social Value • Autonomy Value • Developmental Value • Hedonic Value • Work-Life Balance Value
Job Demands-Resources Theory (J D-R)	This model explains motivational processes and health impairment process by highlighting the demands and resources available to an individual in a work environment, (Watson <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	<p>Demands:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alienation • Emotional Labour • Underemployment <p>Resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy • Workplace social support • Task Identity
Scotland's Fair Work Framework	This framework was developed in 2015 to promote 'fairwork' in Scotland's workplaces and economy, (Myhill, 2021: 07).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective Voice • Respect • Fulfilment • Opportunity • Security

As shown in Table 3.1 above, these theories are underpinned by a psychological rationale which indicate that gig workers rely on their work environment to be stimulating, offer opportunities for career growth, engage workers through incentives and rewards and finally, instil a sense of validation and ownership through feedback and communication about projects.

Zaman *et al.* (2020) examine the extent to which the Self-Determination theory (SDT) and Job Characteristics model (JCM) may help gig workers experience joy through gig work via their own personal intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. They conclude that *“self-determination and job characteristics can influence the joy of gig work, both directly and indirectly”* (Zaman *et al.* 2020: 12). SDT proposes that workers must derive aspects of competence, relatedness and autonomy from their jobs in order to be motivated. Competence indicates the extent to which jobs allow individuals to learn a new skill or abilities and is able to perform a new task. This aspect is particularly relevant to the skills aspects of gig work. Autonomy relates to the extent to which an individual can exercise his or her independent decision-making in a work environment. Finally, relatedness speaks to the extent to which individuals can *“achieve social and emotional development through their work”* (Zaman *et al.*, 2020: 04). The aspects of Job Characteristics Model (JCM) is also perceived to be crucial to the individual attainment of joy in gig work. Each of these related characteristics: task identity, skill variety, autonomy, task significance and job-based feedback is explicated in the Figure 3.2 below. Indicators in the job-characteristics model is applied to some of the findings this study.

With regards to both these concepts, Zaman *et al.* (2020) recommend that gig platforms should look at techniques which can motivate gig workers that are centred on the principles of self-determination theory (SDT) and job characteristics model (JCM). This would enable gig workers to feel more fulfilled in their work.

Task Identity	•Relatedness of tasks to job requirements
Skill Variety	•The extent to which the job incorporates different activities which allow one to utilise new skills and competencies
Autonomy	•Freedom and independence in one's job
Task Significance	•The extent to which the job involvement affects other people
Job-Based Feedback	•The extent to which job holders are clearly directed on job performance and efficiency

Figure 3. 2: Job characteristics indicators

Source: Zaman *et al.* (2020: 05)

The proposition of Zaman *et al.* (2020) is tied to the work of Nawaz *et al.* (2019) conceptualise Freelancer Value Proposition (FVP) to assess the extent to which freelancers attain value from their work on e-lancing platforms. The frameworks of the SDT and Human Capital theory, underpin their model. Freelancer Value Proposition articulates five types of value Economic Value (EV), Autonomy Value (AV), Developmental Value (DV), Hedonic Value (HV) and Social Value (SV) that freelancers should seek in their work. Nawaz *et al.* (2019) regard platforms as entities which are also competing to maintain relationships with the freelancers on their sites. This is because there are a substantial number of platforms where freelancers can register. Thus, platforms can choose to offer more opportunities to sustain their relationship with freelancers. This can be achieved through creating an environment for freelancers that is amenable to achieving the 5 types of value (outlined above) which can contribute to the broader concept of FVP. This underlines a prominent and growing theme in gig economy literature which speaks to the broader responsibilities for platforms that can be beneficial to both business goals and also to suppliers who are the gig workers. Furthermore, as explained in Chapter 1, the aspect of Developmental Value is derived from the study of Nawaz *et al.* (2019). It is considered

of high relevance to this study and it is used as an analytical tool in the latter chapters to construct a conceptual framework.

Watson *et al.* (2021: 328) segment gig workers into the following categories: “*Gig Service Providers, Gig Goods Providers, Gig Data Providers, Agency Gig Workers, and Traditional Gig Workers*”. They examine these categories through the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. This organisation stress model is used to illuminate the need for balance between job strain and motivation amongst gig workers. The study highlights factors such as alienation, emotional labour and underemployment as job demands which negatively impact on gig workers. Of interest to the skills aspect of this study, it is noted that underemployment significantly affects the categories of gig service providers and gig data providers who were mostly overqualified for the jobs they were performing. Underemployed workers can experience job dissatisfaction and less work commitment thus underemployment is recognized as a job demand. (Watson *et al.* 2021: 345-347). Job resources positively affect gig workers through autonomy, workplace social support and task identity (Watson *et al.*: 351-353). The extent to which gig workers experience such factors led to greater or lesser job satisfaction. Watson *et al.* (2021) posit that the JD-R model offer more opportunities for further research in the gig economy. The aspects of underemployment, autonomy and task identity are discussed later on in this study with reference to the data collected.

Myhill *et al.* (2020) apply Scotland’s Fair Work Framework (FWF) as job quality tool to compare the objective verses subjective experiences of gig workers from different industrial sectors including taxi services, hospitality and courier services.



Figure 3. 3: Scotland's Fairwork Framework

Source: Adapted from Myhill *et al.* (2020: 07)

It is highlighted in the study of Myhill *et al.* (2020) that gig work is predominantly regarded as 'bad' when compared with this framework that uses the objective criteria of: Effective Voice, Respect, Opportunity, Fulfillment and Security. However, the study unveils a "*hidden, nuanced and complex*" narrative of gig worker experiences (Myhill *et al.*, 2020: 20) by demonstrating that the attainment of job quality criteria is highly varied depending on individual life choices, preferences and circumstances (thus it is highly subjective). So, for example, the vulnerable position of gig workers often depended on whether platform work served as a primary or secondary source of income. Similarly, the participation of gig workers in opportunities for career advancement, networking and upskilling would also only be considered important for those gig workers that regarded gig work as a long-term career path. Furthermore, although participants expressed negative aspects of their work, such as high levels of control via platform surveillance mechanisms, they still valued the ability to have flexible work schedules. Similarly, in spite of the perilous position that gig workers find themselves in term of intermittent income, this was not perceived to be a huge problem for gig workers. Rather gig worker felt that the opportunity to gain work (even though it was intermittent) still contributed to their own needs to financial security. The framework of job quality is useful to our understanding of how gig workers actually

experience gig work compared to the perceived experiences and top-down analyses of gig work.

3.3 Conclusion

The theories discussed in this chapter provides a holistic understanding of the core criteria relating to the skills competencies needed for gig work. Linkages between skills development, career upgrading and upskilling opportunities and job quality and job satisfaction was demonstrated in this chapter. The relevance of frameworks such as job quality, job satisfaction, job characteristic model, self-determination theory, job-demands resources model and Freelancer Value Proposition amongst gig workers is high. The literature is largely absent on theoretical frameworks that evaluate skills aspects of gig work as a variable. Thus, this study borrows on the above theories as frameworks to examine the themes emanating from the data that align to skills-centric aspects of the gig economy.

The next chapter presents the research methodology adopted for this study.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

The research strategy and methodological justification used in this study are explained in this chapter. In addition to introducing the study's approach, the study's rationale is also discussed. The main research strategy, which is qualitative, is described in the research methodology along with a justification for why it was selected for this study. In addition, this chapter presents the data collecting and sampling methods applied.

4.1 Research design

Creswell (2009: 05) refers to research design as the “*research plan or proposal*” which includes the amalgamation of “*philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods*”. This study applies the case study design as a strategy of inquiry to better understand the experiences in which skills are acquired, transferred and upskilling takes place in the gig work. The case study design was deemed appropriate because the researcher sought to gain insight into the multiple realities of gig workers in the white-collar categories of gig work. This is in view of the current gaps in the literature which points to vague and some stereotypical views of how gig workers experience gig work. This study also uses an inductive approach. According to Saunders *et al.* (2009), research adopting an inductive method is likely to be concerned with the environment and context in which such occurrences were taking place.

As explained in Chapter 1, this study explores the research questions and objectives using the qualitative research methodology. Brink (1993: 35) explains that qualitative researchers are not interested in “*casual laws*” of research inquiry, rather they are focused on the direct experiences of participants and articulating the reality of subject-matter as conveyed by the participants. This introduces a subjective element into data collection and analysis. Figure 4.1 below illustrates the research approach of this study. This is described by Saunders *et al.* (2009: 108) as the “*research onion*”. The figure shows how qualitative research methodology was applied in this study to analyse the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes of gig workers with reference to

the skills aspects of gig work, including skill acquisition, upskilling, career trajectories, and developmental value.

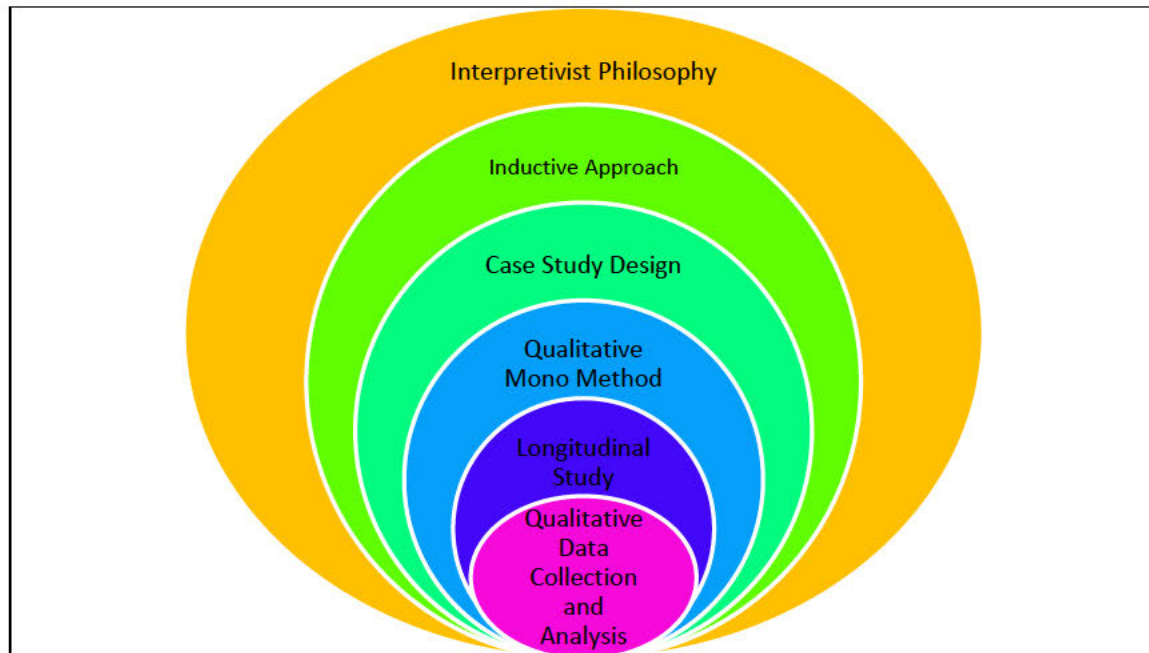


Figure 4. 1: The Research Approach

Adapted from: Saunders *et al.* (2009: 112)

4.2 Research philosophy

The philosophical approach is guided by ontological and epistemological concepts of reality. Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality either subjective or objective, whereas epistemology allows the researcher to make distinctions between what constitutes valid or suitable knowledge within a particular research paradigm, (Saunders *et al.* 2009: 112). The chosen philosophy for this study is interpretivism. According to interpretivism, it is critical for researchers to comprehend the variations among people in order to fully appreciate our functions as social actors. This highlights the distinction between conducting research with humans as opposed to machines like trucks and computers (Saunders *et al.* 2009: 116). The interpretivist approach is further informed by philosophical world views as proposed by Creswell (2009: 05). The aforementioned author proposed four philosophical worldviews which underpins the

philosophical approach and the development of the research design. These worldviews are explicated in table 4.1.

Table 4. 1: Philosophical worldviews

Post-positivism	Constructivism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determination • Reductionism • Empirical Observation and Measurement • Theory verification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding • Multiple participant meanings • Social and historical construction • Theory generation
Advocacy/ Participatory	Pragmatism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political • Empowerment issue-oriented • Collaborative • Change-oriented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences of actions • Problem-centred • Pluralistic • Real-world practice oriented

Source: Creswell (2009: 05)

The ontological reality governing this study maintains that there are multiple realities to be confronted in terms of how people experience and perceive of work in the gig economy. In understanding these multiple realities, this study's approach was to give precedence to the account of gig workers themselves. Gig work is a *"nuanced form of work"* in which there are both *"good jobs and bad jobs"* in the gig economy (Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016), and even those that overlap these boundaries. The literature, however, has been apportioned unevenly, with an abundance of studies focusing on the legal and economic anomalies presented in the gig economy. This has become a chief area of scholarly investigation. An examination of the literature has shown that gig workforces are often portrayed and perceived as vulnerable workforces subject to exploitative and manipulative controls by gig platforms. There is ample empirical evidence of the precarious and subordinate position that gig workers find themselves in, which has contributed to this oppressive typecast of gig workers. Vallas and Schor (2020: 280) argue that gig workforces are more heterogeneous than the typecasting

casting of workers as precarious as people controlled by algorithms. Analysing the gig economy from the perspective of developmental value, considering the skills acquisition, upskilling and career path experiences of gig workers, departs from the homogenous reality of gig work. The realities in which gig work can be an avenue for acquiring skills and transferring skills, thereby contributing to the developmental value of gig workers is therefore highlighted in this study. Gig work is a useful starting point to investigate the "new" economy in action and to assess its growth, operations, and implications, argue Ruyter *et al.* (2019: 38). This study is underpinned by the axiological standpoint of Myhill *et al.* (2020) who notes it is vital to move beyond polarized appraisals of such employment in order to properly comprehend emerging types of work and the ramifications of increased demand for gig work. A subjective as opposed to objective approach has thus adopted in obtaining data from the participants of the study. Therefore, this study adopts an interpretivist philosophy and the inductive approach to highlight experiences of gig work within the South African context.

4.3 Research approach

The inductive approach forms a core aspect of this study. The researcher used different theories or concepts (such as career competencies as related to boundaryless careers theory, and developmental value as related to the concept of Freelancer Value Proposition (FVP) to conceptualise the semi-structured interview questionnaire and then develop a new conceptual framework based on the theories explored and data analysis. In this study, inductive logic is employed as it is aligned to the exploratory research method. Inductive logic is associated with the development of theory rather than using a specific theoretical framework. Inductive logic is commonly associated with grounded theory design. However, this study uses the inductive approach with case study design. The generation of theory using grounded theory was avoided due to the highly prescriptive nature of the design in which a preconceived set of ideas could not be used, (Saunders *et al.*, 2009: 149). Instead, the research approach was to explore the literature for current theoretical frameworks that were relevant to the research. In so doing, the researcher conducted an analysis of the study as supported by the literature including theoretical and

conceptual frameworks; and finally developed a conceptual framework underpinned by both literature and the data. Saunders *et al.*, (2009: 490) also importantly highlight that whilst research may begin with the inductive approach, sometimes elements of the deductive approach is combined because as the researcher aims to develop theory, it will still have to test this to through ongoing data collection and analysis. Table 4.2 makes some useful distinctions between deductive and inductive approaches which this study used as a guideline.

Table 4. 2: Difference between Deductive and Inductive Research Approaches

Deduction emphasises	Induction emphasises
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scientific principles • moving from theory to data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gaining an understanding of the meanings humans attach to events
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the need to explain causal relationships between variables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a close understanding of the research context
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection of quantitative data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection of qualitative data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the application of controls to ensure validity of data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a more flexible structure to permit changes of research emphasis as the research progresses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the operationalisation of concepts to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a realisation that the researcher is part of the research process
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure clarity of definition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less concern with the need to generalise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a highly structured approach • researcher independence of what is being researched 	

- | | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the necessity to select samples of sufficient size in order to generalise conclusions | |
|---|--|

Source: Saunders et al. (2009: 127)

The study draws on existing theories in order to guide and direct the observation and data analysis. Through the usage of the career competencies (know-how, know-whom and know-why) as outlined by boundaryless career theory (Defillippi and Arthur, 1994); and the capabilities approach, which is a conceptual framework (Ashford *et al.*, 2018), this study analysed the findings from the data collection in order to provide structure and give meaning to the perspectives and experiences of participants. In addition to these theories, the study aligned the data by observing and linking it to the other relevant literature. The theory of Freelancer Value Proposition (FVP) (Nawaz *et al.*, 2019) was considered in reflecting on the multiple skills experiences of the gig workers. An element of FVP is developmental value which was selected as the most relevant to the aspects of skills development, skills acquisition and upskilling.

Developmental value emphasises that an individual (gig worker) needs to be able to experience the acquisition, expansion and transfer of skills; needs to have opportunities for the further skills development; and avenues for career advancement in order to attain satisfaction in their work (Nawaz *et al.*, 2019; Nawaz *et al.*, 2020). This study used developmental value to explain why skills development opportunities would be crucial for gig workers and to describe how achieving this kind of opportunities through their work could be beneficial and positively impact gig workers. A culmination of the above theories was used by the researcher to analyse the data collected. Based on the data collected, a conceptual framework was developed. This framework was used to explain the findings of study.

4.4 Data collection methods

According to Johnson and Christensen (2012), data collection is an essential component of every form of research work. Inadequate data collection can have an

influence on the outcomes of a study, eventually leading to inaccurate results. There are two types of data collection methods, that is, primary data and secondary data. The main data collection techniques used in this study include semi-structured interviews, as well as secondary data obtained through a literature review. The next section goes through the primary and secondary data collection techniques employed in this study in more depth. The secondary data collection is presented first.

4.4.1 Secondary data

Extensive literature searches were conducted to supplement the literature review and also inform the analyses of primary data. Desktop searches were conducted online via the DUT Library (<https://library.dut.ac.za/>)

A critical review of the literature was undertaken according to the process outlined by Saunders *et al.* (2003). This process involved:

- Designing the research questions and objectives
- Conducting search
- Drafting the first review
- Redefining parameters of the literature based on what has been read
- Re-conduct literature search
- Redefine research questions and objectives based on what has been read
- Conduct a third literature search
- Redefine research questions and rewrite literature
- Conduct a critical review of all literature collected

This process was a 4-step repetitive process for this particular study. The researcher collected literature over four periods until all the seminal literature on the topic was reviewed

The baseline literature searches were conducted from May to June 2020. These initial searches were broad and based on the keywords as listed below. Due to the exploratory nature of the topic, the initial search yielded widespread results and the research questions and objectives were not fully answered through this initial search.

The following key words were used to conduct the literature searches: International context of Gig Work; Gig economy in South Africa; Gig work and skills; Skills for the gig economy; White Collar gig workers; Gig platforms; Online digital work platforms.

Following this process, the research questions and objectives were adjusted and adapted based on what was read. These were minor adaptations. The search words for the second search included: Theoretical framework for gig work; Theories on the gig economy. A third search conducted was more focused and aimed at looking at specific theoretical frameworks for the study. This also led to the refinement of the research topic, questions and objectives:

- Self-determination theory and gig work
- Human capital theory and gig work
- Skills development and gig work
- Job Quality and gig work
- Organisational psychology theories on gig work
- Labour process theory and gig work

Finally, a search was conducted which allowed the researcher to write the skills aspect of the literature review. This search was conducted using the following key words:

- Skills acquisition and transfer
- Skills development and gig work
- Freelancing in South Africa
- Crowdwork and the sharing economy
- COVID-19 and the gig economy
- Developmental value
- Inclusive Development and Gig work

The searches in total lead to the final research questions and objectives. In the first two rounds, the aspect of developmental value was not included in the study. It was

only included after the third round. A total of 90 articles were read through the literature searches.

Saunders *et al.* (2009) note that there are two ways to review the literature collection through inductive and deductive approaches. This study used the inductive method. It is advised that inductive approaches will need to demonstrate clearly that the researcher knowledgeable about the seminal literature and that the theories developed by the research is linked in some way to the literature that has already been written by other scholars. This represents an understanding of what has or has not been covered in previous literature, that is, gaps in the literature. This study has provided an in-depth critical review which encompasses an objective stance to what has been written. The researcher has identified key gaps in the literature and reviewed similar studies to identify their strengths and weaknesses. This helped in developing the conceptual framework used in this study.

4.4.2 Primary data

Mertens (2010) define primary data as information gathered directly by the researcher or by the entity in charge of gathering it. The researcher is able to specify the variables to be utilized in the research and the methodologies that will be used to assess these variables in order to obtain a legitimate result by using primary data. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the primary data for this research.

4.4.2.1 Target population

The term 'target population' in research refers to the population representing a group of people or things that the researcher wants to analyse for the purposes of the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2019). So, for example, if a researcher is looking at medical professionals in South Africa, he/ she may decide to focus on all nurses and that would be the target population. The sample would then be derived from the target population.

The target population for this study were South African freelancers who worked for one or more online labour platforms.

4.4.2.2 Sampling

Sampling involves the selection of data from a group or sub-group of the target population in order to collect data in a practical and feasible manner. There are a

variety of sampling techniques which enables the researcher to select the sample according to the research design, and objectives. (Saunders *et al.*, 2009)

The first sampling technique chosen for this study was the self-selection sampling method. *“Self-selection sampling occurs when you allow each case, usually individuals, to identify their desire to take part in the research”* (Saunders *et al.*, 2009: 241). In this study, the online labour platforms were meant to be a key site for selecting the intended sample. Online labour platforms were first consulted, because these platforms listed professional freelancers in the domains of Creative and Multimedia; Software Development and Technology; Clerical and Data Entry; Sales and Marketing Support; Writing and Translation and Professional Services. The researcher wrote to two founders of online labour platforms which contained large amounts of South African freelancers. One platform declined to participate or to allow gatekeeper permission for the study to be undertaken. The second platform granted gatekeeper permission and allowed the researcher access to Facebook and LinkedIn social media sites where gig workers could be made aware of the study via a poster and video that was circulated on both Facebook and LinkedIn. The platform founder could not pass on any contact details of gig workers to the researcher due to the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA). The researcher thus created a 2-minute video to explain the research purpose, confidentiality of the participants, and type of research that would be undertaken. In addition to this, the researcher created a poster or memo with her contact details in order to enable interested gig workers to contact her directly. In this way, the self-selection technique was used as a first approach. For a period of two months, the researcher regularly posted the videos and memos however this technique yielded no results in terms of gig workers contacting the researcher to participate in the interview.

Therefore, after the second month, the research decided to combine methods. The researcher approached one person who was identified as a gig worker on the social media site LinkedIn. The person was messaged via LinkedIn. The person agreed to do an interview. The participant was asked after the interview to recommend other people that could participate in the study. This was in line with the snowball sampling method. The prescription given was that the participants had to be undertaking ‘skilled’ work via online labour platforms. The gig workers also had to be South African even if they were living abroad. The first participant provided the researcher with

contact details of 4 other gig workers. This technique therefore followed the snowball sampling method whereby initial contact is made with one person who represents the criteria needed for the study and thereafter this first participant recommends other potential participants for the study (Saunders *et al.*, 2009).

Finally, a sample size of 11 participants was used in this study. It is also noted that *“while ‘number depends on meaning’, it is not always the case that meaning is dependent on number”* (Dey 1993: 28 in Saunders *et al.*, 2009: 482). There is no right number of people in a qualitative sample. (Saunders *et al.*, (2009: 243-244); Merriam and Tisdell (2016: 100-101).

4.4.2.3 Data collection instruments

Data collection instruments are tools, such as a survey or questionnaire, which is used to collect data. In qualitative research, data collection can be done through a variety of techniques such as observation or ethnography, in which case the researcher is the data collection instrument. In other cases, structured, semi-structured or un-structured interviews or focus group discussions can be used to collect data. In these cases, the interview guide is used as the data collection instrument. Depending on the type of research design, certain data collection techniques are better suited to collecting data as opposed to others. This study chose semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are suitable for exploratory research (Saunders *et al.*, 2009). Given the relatively under-explored nature of the topic, semi-structured interviews were deemed necessary to uncover as much information as possible regarding the topic. Saunders *et al.*, (2009) underline that the benefits with semi-structured interviews are that they allow for flexibility in terms of follow-up and more detailed questions and therefore elicit more well-rounded responses. Semi-structured interviews are also aligned to interpretivist methodology thus it was deemed an appropriate data collection method for this study in order to collect the primary data. The questions were formulated from the extensive review of literature. The semi-structured questions allowed the researcher to delve deeper into the subjective meanings that the gig workers attached to their work. In particular, the gig workers articulated the personal experiences as to why they choose to move into gig work. This provided insights that were highly personalised and unique. This then set the scene in terms of the other questioning. Further, with the type of profession that each

gig worker was involved in, certain questions had to be changed according to the profession and level of experience. For example, an entry-level worker was asked slightly different questions from a senior level worker.

This research proved very challenging purely because very few gig workers were willing to be interviewed. In order to gain access to participants, the study had to adopt several techniques, some of which initially proved unsuccessful. Of the four recommended gig workers which was contacted by the researcher, three gig workers agreed to be interviewed. After these interviews, for another month, there were no subsequent recommendation from the other gig workers interviewed. Thus, the researcher went onto the social media site, LinkedIn. On this site, the researcher searched for freelancers with the search query, PeoplePerHour, Upwork, and Fiverr, attached. These platforms are most popular globally as gig worker sites. On the LinkedIn pages of these platforms, the researcher reviewed profiles of South African freelancers who indicated that they worked for one or more of these online labour platforms and messaged them. Some gig workers did not enable people to privately message them. Other gig workers allowed this function on the site; therefore, the researcher could contact them. A total of 25 people were messaged on LinkedIn to connect and discuss the research further. This process yielded 7 positive results. The researcher encapsulates this method under the self-selection technique, as potential participants were messaged and the video and memo were attached for the identified people to contact the researcher further at their will. Therefore, if the identified person did not wish to contact the researcher for an interview, they were not under obligation to do so.

Once freelancers confirmed an interview time, they were emailed the Letter of Information and Informed Consent form. Thereafter, a virtual meeting was set up either via Microsoft teams or Zoom Meetings for the participant to accept. The first two interviews were conducted in December. This followed the snowball sampling method. Thereafter, the Christmas period ensued, during which no interviews were conducted. Early in January, two further interviews were conducted. Again, this was a result of recommendations from the first participant. In February, the additional messaging via the self-selection methods was conducted through the searches on LinkedIn. In March, one interview was conducted. During this month, follow ups were also done with those that did not respond to the original messages sent. In April 2022,

floods ravaged major parts of KZN which impacted the data collection phase. Many people replied in March to indicate their interest however due to the floods and its aftermath, interviews were postponed until late April. One participant requested the completion of a semi-structured questionnaire rather than a sit-down virtual interview. This option was provided for the participant. Thus, a total of three interviews were conducted in April. In May, the final three interviews were conducted. It took a total of 6 months to recruit the 11 participants for the research.

Table 4.3 displays the types of participants interviewed by categorising them as either entry-level, mid-level or senior-level freelancers. Their profession and the broader professional freelancer category is also identified. These broad categories are taken from the Online Labour Index, developed by academics at Oxford University. (<http://ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index/>).

Table 4. 3: List of participants

Level of Profession	Profession	Category of Work (OLI)
Senior Level	Web Developer	Software Development & Technology
Senior Level	Graphic Designer	Creative & Multimedia
Entry Level	Transcriber	Writing & Translation
Mid-Level	Virtual Assistant	Creative & Multimedia Clerical & Data Entry
Senior Level	English Teacher	Professional Services
Entry Level	Virtual Assistant	Creative & Multimedia Clerical & Data Entry
Senior Level	Software Developer	Software Development & Technology
Entry Level	Editor	Writing & Translation Services
Senior Level	Graphic Designer	Creative & Multimedia
Senior Level	Academic Writer	Writing & Translation Services

Entry Level	Academic Writer	Writing & Translation Services
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4.4 Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was conducted using NVIVO 12 qualitative research software to code, theme and analyse the data. The researcher used a set of semi-structured interview questions to collect the data. Due to the need to identify patterns in the data as they emerged inductively, the researcher adopted a flexible approach in which the coding process took place. In particular the “structuring of meanings through narrative” of the data was conducted. The data was firstly transcribed. Before uploading the transcripts, the researcher had to ensure that the transcripts were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data, and to avoid any inconsistencies in terms of grammar and meaning. Once the transcripts were imported into the NVIVO 12 software, the coding processes was conducted. A total of 30 codes were developed from first coding process. The coding process was iterative. Thus, some codes were amalgamated due to repetition. Thus, the final coding yielded 11 codes. The codes were then attached to broader themes. Some themes were also closely related hence they were collapsed into one broader theme. The themes formed the key thematic areas. During the data analysis, each thematic area was analysed in terms of the participant responses. Direct quotes were used to illustrate the exact thoughts, perspectives and experiences of the gig workers.

4.5 Validity and reliability

Brink (1993) notes that qualitative researchers need to give special consideration to enhancing the validity and reliability of their work due to the subjective nature of their research methods. *“Reliability refers to the extent to which your data collection techniques or analysis procedures will yield consistent findings”*, (Saunders, 2009: 156). Validity is focused on the accuracy of the findings in the sense that the analyses should yield accurate results (Brink, 1993; Saunders, 2009).

The truthfulness of study participants while providing data is an essential component to validity. In this study, each person approached was given the option to decline participation in the study, ensuring that the data collection sessions included only those who were really eager to participate and willing to contribute data freely. Participants were urged to be candid from the start of each session, with the researcher attempting to create rapport and stating that there were no perfect answers to the questions posed. As a result, participants could give ideas and share their experiences without fear of losing credibility in the eyes of the researcher. Participants were informed that they might withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason to the researcher.

Qualitative content analysis was used as a measure of reliability. The information was captured and transcribed. Using thematic content analysis, the results were evaluated and compared to previous literature. As a result, the measuring instrument for this research satisfied the standards since it was developed based on a thorough assessment of the literature.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Prior to data collection, ethical permission (Appendix 1) was acquired from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC). Each participant received an information letter and consent form informing them that their participation in this study was entirely voluntary and that their identity and confidentiality would be respected (Appendix 2). Overall, participant confidentiality and anonymity, as well as their informed agreement to engage in this study, ensured that the study adhered to ethical rules of practice. The researcher took adequate precautions to protect all data. The collected data is password-protected on Google Drive.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the research methodology adopted in this study. The research design and approach, as well as the target population, sampling techniques, data collection, data analysis, data validity and reliability are outlined.

The results and analysis of the collected data is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Analyses and Results

This chapter analyses and interprets the findings of the collected data. This study aimed to analyse the gig economy by focusing on the developmental value of such work through skills acquisition, transfer, career pathways and upskilling. A total of 11 participants were interviewed to explore how gig workers, in skilled categories of online digital labour acquire further skills, expand skills, transfer skills and upskill. In doing so, this study aimed to proffer strategies that can assist gig workers with building their developmental value through the development of a conceptual framework based on the findings.

5.1 Demographic profile of the participants

Figure 5.1 below categorises the sample interviewed for this study. The sample was categorised according to Profession and Level of Profession. It was considered important to classify gig workers according to categories of gig work and profession given the nature of the study. This is relevant because insights into skills acquisition, expansion and transfer, career pathways and upskilling may often be determined by the type of profession that the gig worker is involved in.

Further to this, the level of the gig worker may also influence how they prioritise skills acquisition, expansion and transfer and upskilling in their roles. Thus, the subjective position of the participants, including their experiences, opinions and the values surrounding their work on platforms, is mediated by the type of profession and their level of seniority in that particular role. As indicated in Figure 5.1 there were four entry level gig workers in the sample. Also included was one mid-level gig worker and six senior level gig workers.

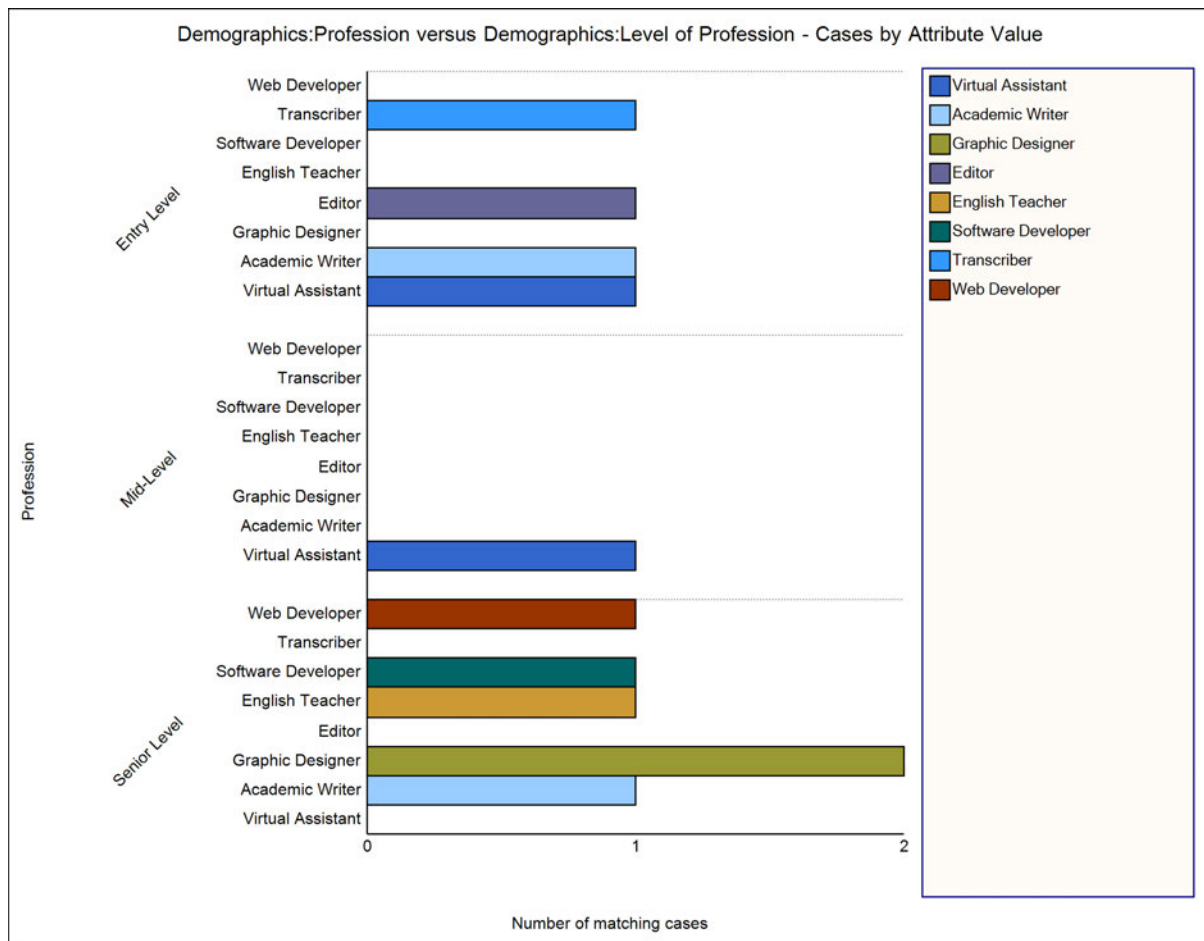


Figure 5. 1: Demographics of Gig worker sample

Source: NVIVO 12 Software

5.2 Emerging themes and subthemes

Table 5.2 below depicts the coding thematic areas that was generated by NVIVO software.

Table 5. 2: Thematic coding

Theme (Node)	Sub-Theme (Codes)
<i>Skills Supply and Demand in the Gig Economy</i>	Qualifications and Experience
	Profile building, bidding, and marketing on platforms
	Essential and Transferrable Skills
	Platform Competition and Skills level
<i>Developmental Value</i>	Skills Acquisition, Expansion and Transfer
	Upskilling and Freelancing
<i>Career Pathways and Progression</i>	Building and Aligning Career Paths
	Experience and Skill-building for Entry Level Freelancers
<i>Platform Skills Mechanisms and Developmental Value</i>	Platform Incentivising Mechanisms towards Skills Acquisition and Developmental Value
<i>Benefits of Freelancing</i>	Autonomy
	Flexibility

5.2.1 Theme 1: Skills supply and demand in the gig economy

Figure 5.3 shows the percentage coverage of the coding for each of the sub-themes covered under this thematic area. This is shown according to the profession of the participants.

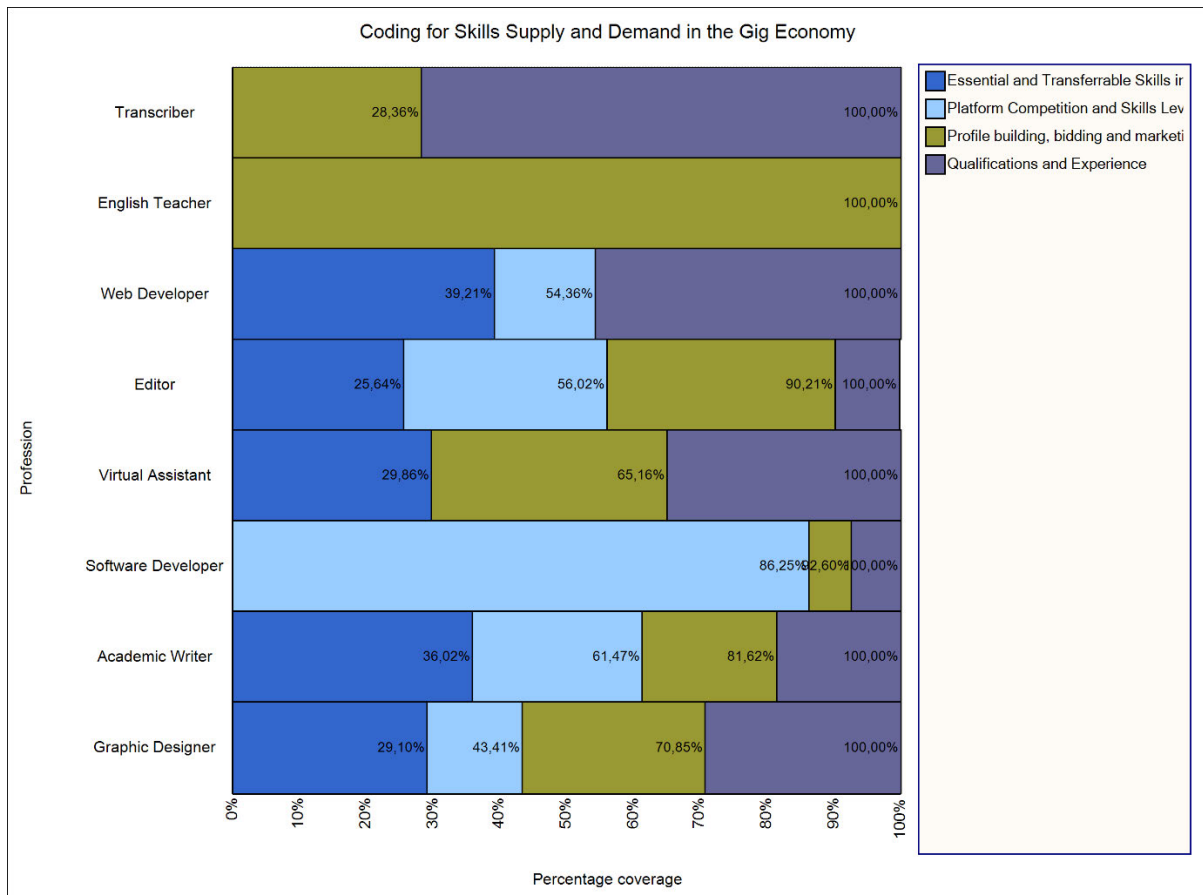


Figure 5. 3: Skills supply and demand in the Gig economy

5.2.1.1 Sub-Theme 1.1: Qualifications and experience

Four of the entry-level gig workers among the participants were employed in gig worker professions or categories of work that were unrelated to their educational backgrounds and intended career paths. One senior freelancer was also in a category of gig work vastly different to his intended profession. The other freelancers were involved in work related to their qualifications and intended career paths. However, all of the gig workers interviewed, displayed indicators of proficiency in their work, either entry-level, mid or senior level.

An observable trait of the gig economy is that, depending on the profession, skills matter to a greater extent when compared against qualifications. Thus, the skill-based nature of the work performed in the gig economy, relays the significance of understanding the various skills patterns of gig workers. All freelancers conveyed different experiences in terms of their qualification type. Much of the skills and abilities

amongst the gig workers were self-taught. For example, one gig worker who had a degree in journalism started working as a transcriptionist. She explained that the low barriers to entry makes this field of gig work easy to get into:

“Okay, so different transcription job avenues will probably use different software but I do think that the training you with their software, which is very nice, uhm, is definitely beneficial if you wanted to go further in transcription because this is totally like beginner, no studying, no sort of, like you don’t need to have experience to join Rev, you just sort of like need to have a good grasp of the English language and decent typing speed and stuff like that. Uhm, but if you did want to get more serious about transcription or sort of related things, uhm, I think that would be pretty helpful” (Respondent 02).

For another participant, the lack of a formal qualification and the appropriate skills enabled him to join the gig economy. Many of his skills were self-taught:

“I didn’t end up doing anything that home-schooling wise officiates, that was like an official recognised South African programme so I just decided to go through freelancing development, it’s more of a skills-based job where you don’t have to have as many qualifications for you skills, to show your qualification. Like you can very easily see the work quality of someone based on what comes out when you hire them to create a web page or an app or a plugin of some kind. You know it showcases you, you know, it showcases the level of the person involved. So, I chose this career path because (A) I knew the technology well enough, and (B)-there’s a lot more work for people skill based whereas with other jobs, you’d need to have the qualifications for it to get into” (Respondent 08).

In the case of the above participant, he was home-schooled and in terms of IT-related or web design-related skills, these were primarily self-taught without ever attending a

university or formal training institution. Interestingly, the participant proved to be highly successful in his career path. This may be attributed to the deployment of know-how, know-whom and know-why competencies, as is discussed under the theme: Essential and Transferable Skills.

A further two participants indicated that much of their skills in graphic design were acquired through short courses or online learning, which again was largely self-taught. Like web design, graphic design represents a skill-based rather than a qualification-based profession as opposed to law or psychology. One graphic designer noted:

“I have been doing Graphic Design since 2011. I did a short course, a short intense course, uh, yeah, I’ve always been into art so it was quite surprising that my art teacher suggested that I do uh, graphic design. Uh, yeah so I did the short course at Hirt and Carter in Durban and since then, I’ve been working full-time, uh, due to the fact the short course was short and compact if you could say, uh, I didn’t, I don’t have a degree, due to my financial situation but what was very helpful was that my first job was at a print shop and so I exposed to how to make art work”, (Respondent 9).

Another participant who is also a graphic designer noted that she could not afford a tertiary education due to financial constraints and did some self-learning in graphic design:

“oh yes, then I started teaching to myself the programmes for Adobe, you know Illustrator and Photoshop and InDesign and I chatted to one of the people that I knew in design cause I thought I’d probably get job if I learnt the programmes and did a portfolio, so then I, I, year within a year I got a portfolio and then I phoned about 3 or 4 agencies” (Respondent 06).

The experiences of the above gig workers complies with the observation that *“freelancing, which tends to pay more attention to skills than educational qualifications, is a separate consideration why the freelance profession is increasingly in demand”*,

(Arifianto and Vallentino, 2022: 51). Certainly, in terms of the South African landscape, the gig economy may prove of high benefit to those that have adequate skills but are limited in terms of qualifications or do not have the necessary resources to pursue formal qualifications.

Important to the discussion surrounding qualifications and experience, it is worth noting that building credibility on platforms requires multiple approaches, and methods by gig workers to prove their credibility to clients and organisations. It is fittingly advised that specialization in particular field may not necessarily be sufficient to allow gig workers to adequately develop their own career growth and development. Rather gig workers need to apply existing skills and adopt new skills for life-long learning in order to engineer their long-term growth in the gig economy or in another form of employment, (Ashford *et al.*, 2018).

5.2.1.2 Sub-Theme 1.2: Profile Building, bidding and marketing on platforms

A common thread amongst all participants relates to profile building and marketing on the platforms. As gig workers, the participants needed to confront the reality of self-branding because they are considered 'self-employed' to external bodies and clients on the platform. Hence they had to independently develop a particular identity (brand) that the platform and clients can become familiar with. As Ashford *et al.* (2018: 28) explains, "*workers are tasked with building their own brand and work identity and connecting with others in meaningful ways*". This task comes with its own set of unique capabilities and competencies which not all gig workers can effectively navigate. Platforms offer some features and mechanisms which are considered part of the profile building process in online labour markets (OLM's).

As previously stated, the platform has developed its own normative constructs around skills efficacy through ratings, badges, reviews and skills tests. Whilst some mechanisms target early career or entry level freelancers, other mechanisms are only suitable for more experienced or senior level freelancers. For instance, (Kassi and Lehdonvirta, 2018) raised earlier that digital skills certificates are useful for those who already have experience whereas those that do not have experience will still rely other mechanisms such as reputation and rating indicators as signified by the platform.

Interestingly, the information provided by the participants on profile building, conveys a strong focus on the aspects such as work experience, ratings, and feedback.

Ratings, reviews and algorithms are all determining factors in the gig workers' ability to effectively navigate this virtual space and ultimately gain work. For example, one participant acknowledged the difficulty of getting work without a sufficient background on the platform. He noted that:

“Before I started, I had no review, no ratings and no recommendations so it is very difficult not to meet up with steady clients when you are just starting off” (Respondent 07).

The centrality of ratings to gaining work was supported by a second participant:

Getting started is the biggest challenge. Whilst you have no reviews and previous work it's very hard to find someone that will say yes. After that first yes it's up to you to do a good job and have good rates (Respondent 11).

This may be the case for many entry-level gig workers who face the challenge of credibility on the platform. This credibility is developed only after the first one or two successfully completed projects which in turn provides the gig worker with a traceable online work history and work status. In order to win an initial project, some participants alluded to a crucial element which is the initial proposal, cover letter or pitch submitted via the platform to the client. This proposal allows gig workers to market themselves. One participant outlined how vital this component is to win a project:

“you have to just basically sell yourself like you're a marketer. That cover letter is that first impression that you make which is going to decide whether you get that job or not” (Respondent 03).

In some instances, platforms assist freelancers by supplying them with short workshops/on-boarding on how to market themselves and build their profiles:

“They have these sporadic uhh, meetings on the platform, maybe, uhh bi-annually and they’ll tell you okay this is how some of our top performers, there’s examples of their cover letters” (Respondent 03).

After the initial letter or proposal, the challenges of breaking into the online digital labour market is centred around developing and maintaining a good online profile on the platform. Another participant highlighted the usefulness of the badges on some platforms that were awarded to freelancers and assisted them in elevating their profiles:

“I kept the editing and proofreading and I got quite a few uhm projects from there and I was awarded a Rising Talent badge which helped me in, which helped clients see that I was worth it,” (Respondent 04).

Many participants indicated that they received good ratings and feedback from their clients on the platform. A teacher who worked on a platform teaching English to foreign students indicated that:

“Yes, uhm, so with my old platform, Londi English, there was a 5-star rating system so after each lesson, the parents could give you a rating out of 5 stars and they could leave a comment and we each had our own personalized coach who was in charge of a small team, they saw the ratings and the comment, and if there was a problem, they would contact you. But I was very blessed, I had very good students. 90, I think 99% of my rating were 5 star” (Respondent 01).

Another effective feature mentioned by one participant was the ability to rate the clients as well. It was noted that:

“And also, Upwork has this feature that freelancers can rate the clients. So before working with any client, I checked their rating, if

their rating was not good, I didn't apply for the job", (Respondent 04).

As indicated by **Respondent 04**, some features are also beneficial to the gig worker in terms of fairness. The ability to rate clients may assist, especially if gig worker feels unfairly discriminated against as a result of a bad rating by a client. The gig worker could then rate the client as well.

All platforms display work experience, feedback and rating mechanisms however these may vary slightly. Some participants expressed frustration with the features on platforms. For example, two participants stated that some platforms do not have features which allow gig workers to list non-digital recommendations or to showcase work from past jobs. So, for example, it was mentioned by one gig worker that '*offline credentials' such as a letter of recommendation'* was not previously accounted for on certain platforms (**Respondent 05**).

Furthermore, another participant concluded that she has chosen a specific platform due to better functionality in terms of being able to display work previously done. This was considered especially vital to the participant who is a graphic designer and required previous portfolios to be showcased:

"Uhm, I'd get at least one job, it was not much but it was definitely something, because I tried on the other websites but on the other websites when you post you think, what you call it, when you pitch, let's say I'm the one who, bid, yes, that's it, you can't attach some examples that are relevant to the job that they offer, (Respondent 06).

As discussed in the literature, the conceptual framework developed by Ashford *et al.* (2018) on surviving and thriving in the gig economy is useful to our understanding of profile building and marketing on platforms. Specifically, Ashford *et al.* (2018: 30) discuss the "*development of portable human capital*" through image and identity building. From the above sentiments raised, it is clear that the profiles of gig workers and their ability to market themselves, are tightly interwoven with the features of the

platform itself in terms of metrics used to assess freelancers. Therefore, gig workers construct their identity and image as governed by the platform features such as ratings, rankings and feedback scores. It can be inferred from Respondents 5 and 6, that reliance on the platform in terms of bidding for work tend to be constraining to the gig worker if the required features are not available. These techno-normative constructs of the platform (Gandini, 2019), limits the ways in which the individual seeks or aims to market himself or herself as an individual.

The critical analyses of Gandini (2019) is prevalent in this discussion. Gandini (2019) reflected on the role of platforms through labour process theory and showed how rating, rankings and feedback systems as forms of emotional labour and control is enacted by the platform. Essentially, the ranking and ratings are measures to which freelancers or gig workers must conform in order to win more projects. Interestingly, Gandini (2019) notes that for freelancers, these metrics and indicators on platforms takes precedence for freelancers who sometimes engage in soft skills development for the specific purposes of improving their online metrics. These metrics then feed into profiles and serve as an important role that is used to appraise gig workers.

Arguably, gig workers need to more accessibility and flexibility to generate profiles outside of the rankings and ratings systems used by platforms. Other options in terms of profile display and qualifications and experience should be granted to freelancers in order for them to effectively demonstrate their skills and competencies to potential clients.

5.2.1.3 Sub-Theme 1.3: Essential and transferrable skills in Gig work

Undoubtedly, the right skills set that combines soft skills with technical and generic skills are of paramount importance to the work environment, regardless of whether the job is temporary or permanent, remote or office-based. The key differentiation in terms of gig workers is that they must have heightened knowledge, proficiency in technical skills and expert level competencies. This must be combined with a set of necessary behaviours, relational behaviours, and cognitive capabilities in order to thrive rather than survive in the gig economy (Ashford *et al.* 2018). Ashford *et al.* (2018) appropriately note that the platform ecosystem is highly competitive and in the

absence of appropriate capabilities will simply mean that a gig worker is out-bid by someone else. Hence the priority towards ensuring that one possesses both basic and diverse skill sets is key.

Proactivity and persistence are two necessary behaviours, outlined in Ashford's Capabilities-based Approach, which are particularly relevant here and represent a key thematic area when it comes to achieving developmental value. Gig workers need to be more proactive as they do not have organisational resources at their disposal to assist them in developing the essential and transferable skills needed for gig work. Furthermore, a high level of commitment was identified by one participant as an important competency for gig work:

"And then you know, be diligent and follow through and not procrastinate because I think it's easy to just not work hard or I don't know how to explain. I think it can be a lot harder than sitting in an office, cause at least your boss can see you doing, you're there so you know you have to be doing work. But at home, sometimes you're monitored with the work that you're doing and the hours, could be a bit longer. It could take you a bit longer, uh because of time differences, depending on the client that you work with. But yeah I guess you just have to be organised and want to work hard as well", (Respondent 10).

Similarly, another participant described the element of persistence in gig work by outlining the differences of working as a freelancer as compared to working for a company:

"But basically, you go in everyday, you do what you ought to do and then at the end of the month, you get paid hopefully, whereas as a freelancer, you need a lot more grit and determination. You can't let other people put you off. You basically have to just keep on knocking at opportunities or even creating your own so because of the freelancing, you are wearing so many hats", (Respondent 09).

An important aspect intertwined with performing work is the need for work-life balance.

This was articulated by a participant:

“You have to be disciplined because I found myself doing design work late into the night that was going into family time and personal time. It was like there was no cut of point and it actually affects your health, you just not excited to do work, you’re tired the next day, you’re not motivated to stay up and do a day’s work or follow up on clients or stuff like that” (Respondent 09).

Indeed, one of the biggest challenges with the gig economy is that gig work it can often encompass traits common to entrepreneurs. In fact, gig workers are sometimes termed ‘solopreneurs’, which is a term to describe people who run a business without employees. Gig workers take on similar roles and responsibilities of entrepreneurs in that they are solely responsible for generating their own income and resources including training and upskilling resources. In addition, remote working further induces a lack of clear boundaries between work and personal life. As a result, when gig workers fail to manage their identities, their time and their resources, overworking may become a possibility. Ultimately, inadequate management of job and personal roles, could lead to techno-stress, a described by Umair (2019). Furthermore, such stress could impede the developmental value of gig workers as they would be less productive to focus to career building and being fully engaged in their work. Thus, relational behaviours as presented in the capabilities framework (Ashford *et al.*, 2019) offer strategic advice for how to manage work-life relationships and in so doing represents a key competency to for gig workers.

Developing know-how and know-why competencies are also regarded as key to gig worker’s essential and transferable skills. Know-how competencies would be essential to execute the job at hand. Significantly, know-how, know-whom and know-why competencies are interrelated (Duggan *et al.* 2020: 06) Many participants considered soft skills to be exceptionally important in gig work. Some indicators of this were responses aligned to soft skills abilities and competencies:

“Without a doubt, like if you don’t have any of those soft skills as you mentioned interpersonal skills, communication, ability to gauge

what kind of project you're actually working on because some of the time you would get accepted for a bid and the project isn't what you had in mind or the price is way off. If you're doing freelancing essentially you're running the business, yes I'd say the soft skills, you'd need to develop a lot more soft skills, it's not just hey, I'll do work, I'll get money, you have to get your client, you have to get what they want, they have to like you, you have to be able to communicate well with them", (Respondent 08).

"Yeah I suppose if you're working virtually, you have to have good people skills because it's a little bit awkward sometimes to just meet a stranger over the computer, uh especially if it's like a video interview and you're, like you're eventually get to know them, uh, but yeah, you just have to be, I think soft skills would be you know, being relatable, being easy to get along with, flexible..." (Respondent 10).

The second statement illustrates the relatedness between know-how and know-whom competencies. Gig workers must develop their know-how competencies and behavioural traits such as relationship building in order win more projects and also build new networks (know-whom competencies). Client relationships may be more difficult to form online hence there is a need for greater effort amongst gig workers to establish and maintain these relationships. Three participants in particular outlined that building relationships did not need to be dependent on the platform itself. Instead gig workers need to be flexible and adopt other methods of connecting with people in order to build relationships. For instance, some gig workers also used traditional methods such as approaching people directly, by emailing people or even joining freelancer communities.

One gig worker indicated that she joined freelancing sites to have a connection with other freelancers. Such actions are also indicators of proactivity as discussed earlier. This creates a positive environment for the gig worker when they are able to engage in activities that assist in career-building and developmental value activities. Some of the statements made in support of expanding networks, were as follows:

“But most of my kind of experience was between both learning this and I’d hit a lot of different areas you know you’d go to especially in freelancing you’d go to or you can find, because there’s not guaranteed work, you have to guarantee you own work so I’d speak to people door-to-door, I’d also go online, go on LinkedIn, freelancer, before it was called Upwork it was actually called e-lance and these kinds of websites, there were quite a few of them,”
(Respondent 08).

“Yeah, well the thing is I, so from PeoplePerHour, I got quite a bit of illustration, and logo design. That’s definitely the main type of work from there and then I also got UK clients from emailing people because I also got 50-100 people or companies should I say, a day, every day, I took quite some time to get lists of all different types of companies from corporate”,
(Respondent 06).

“I still use platforms but I also work outside of them. As a freelancer, we shouldn’t stick to one platform, for example. We should try every option we have and build our own network of clients, too, I’m also part of different freelancing groups where we exchange information”,
(Respondent 11).

The ability to communicate effectively was considered a particular soft skill that would in fact be crucial to ensuring that the project brief was correctly understood and that the job was carried out correctly. One participant expressed this by stating:

“If you got into talking to them, maybe there could be some communication but again, you’re right, freelancing communication tends to be a lot more limited, it’s up to you to communicate with your client because a lot of the time, especially the clients I’ve dealt with, they don’t know a 100% what they want. Very few clients know what they want and how they want it. So, you have to kind of make-up for it, you have to kind of have to have a lot more skills. You can’t

just be like, hey I'm a laurevel developer, I develop these applications, you have to be a bit more full-stand in order to get more work because that's the nature of the field you know",
(Respondent 08).

Particular emphasis was placed on communication by another participant who stated:

"From then on, it was very helpful to sit in on meetings with clients for example, to be prepared, you've got to really hear the brief from the client, and you can't just go and do your own thing. And being a creative person, it was difficult being in these meetings to actually do that so I would say you've to listen to the client, what their brief is, what they need the art or design for. And really work on communicating because if you come across an issue in the design or if you have questions, you must never hold back because actually, you're charging your client per hour and it actually, they can get quite irate if you, you know, wasting their time",
(Respondent 09).

Like communication, problem-solving is a generic skill that can be regarded as essential and transferrable. The ability to problem-solve would be key for gig workers, especially since these workers do not have support teams, unlike organisational employees, to assist them with this capability. One participant mentioned each project has unique elements that require new ways of thinking and problem-solving:

"That's not what the freelancing side is about, the freelancing side is about, is very much customized and every single problem is new. This current thing that I'm working on now, I'm working on a portfolio that has 65 individual sites. Every single one of them, although they are similarities, there has to be when you're handling that much, they are unique. Same but unique, I think problem-solving something would be the best skill to learn. How to think, essentially how to think," **(Respondent 07).**

A noteworthy observation is that gig workers all recognized soft skills to be important to their roles as freelancers. The importance placed on this implies that gig workers considered these competencies as adding further value to their technical ability. In this regard, all the gig workers interviewed conveyed a sense of self-reflection about their on their own job roles and how their own skills were tied to their ongoing success as freelancers on online platforms.

5.2.1.4 Sub-Theme: Platform competition and skills levels

Understanding the competitive nature of gig work informs this study in the sense that it gives us a broader picture of the ecosystem in which gig workers find themselves. Competition can influence the way gig workers understand their comparative *skills* advantage. This is increasingly difficult as gig workers do not meet each other and cannot view other proposals. They are only aware of the numbers that have applied for a specific project. Thus, it is fittingly argued that “*platforms strategically induce a competitive environment by enabling large and diverse gig worker populations to enter and transact on their sites*”, (Vallas and Schor, 2020: 279). Gig workers must face two types of competition. The first is when a gig worker enters a platform with the aim to transact and compete. The challenge of gaining legitimacy and credibility starts with competing with other gig workers who have either the same or better skills sets. The difference is in the established legitimacy of other gig workers who display indicators of credibility against their profiles such a ratings, ranking and feedback. The type of competition is exemplified by one participant, who indicated that:

“I had no rating at all, so it was just a case of, I think my challenge was just a case of competing against people, you know 5 star rating, 4,5 star rating, uhh, people who have been used before by other companies, by other people so and who have successfully bidded in the past so, bear in mind, that I was bidding for projects that were, that weren’t exactly low level so it was quite advanced and like you know complicated, and uhm the problem was that I had to compete against people having zero-rating or zero credibility on that platform so I eventually had to resign myself to taking on the more or the lesser uhh complicated work”, (Respondent 05).

Another participant also mentioned that in order to gain legitimacy on the platform, she had to do work for much less pay:

“uh yeah but I did start at like three dollars an hour for like one client just so I could get some experience, so it was pretty easy”

(Respondent 10).

The second type of competition essentially relates to bidding and competing on a global marketplace. Many participants highlighted the nature of competition on the sites.

“Uh, so on Upwork, you’re given like connects so you have to send through a proposal, kind of like a cover letter, explaining your skills, why you would be good for the job. Uh, that type of job post or what to look for on the job post so, some you’ll see like you have over 50 proposals, like you don’t bother with that, because your proposal will just get buried along with everyone else’s, they do have a bidding process now where you can use connects to push your proposal to the top. But yeah, otherwise, I just choose job posts that had less than like 5 proposals, and then I just kept personality, like, I didn’t keep it unprofessional but like you’re working closely with this client, so you don’t want it to be too professional, you want it to be friendly, it just took trial and error on what type of proposals worked and what didn’t work” **(Respondent 10).**

Some gig workers had developed a ‘thick skin’ against the competition on sites. The above participant highlights that even though there can be over 50 proposals, you should still submit a bid. Another participant also noted:

“As soon as, like the second they post the job, you get, you’ll see in the corner, 300 applicants, 400 applicants, that must not deter you, like you, you still go ahead and you apply, and if you list all your experience and you list all your qualifications, you have to ignore basically the competition and push and apply” **(Respondent 03).**

The attitude of perseverance and persistence is represented in the above statement. To iterate our earlier discussion of persistence and proactivity as a key competency for gig workers, (Ashford *et al.*, 2018) is evident here. Gig workers must persist in spite of the hyper-competition on platforms.

An interesting observation by two gig workers was that the competition on the platforms that they were on had significantly increased of recent. It was mentioned that:

“And before there was like 30 or 20 people bidding on the logos, then this year, and end of last year, there was so many people, suddenly I see 60 or 90 people bidding on a logo job when it definitely wasn’t like that before”, (Respondent 06).

This study would attribute such an increase in gig workers to the COVID-19 pandemic and huge number of permanent employees globally that have been retrenched. This could be the reason for an increase of gig workers on platforms. Another participant, who has been a freelancer/gig worker for seven years, also observed an interesting increase in the platform competition:

“So, another thing that I have experienced is that people from the Native English-speaking countries, who had no interest in freelancing, are now joining freelancing so they are the ones that are taking the, the premium jobs, I mean the better paying jobs now. So, they leave freelancers in third world countries to take up the other ones. So, and some employers, whenever they see the country where you are from, they won’t bother to contact you. So, I have discovered so many other sites aside from the popular ones like Upwork because Upwork has become so competitive these days. Uh, like uh, PeoplePerHour.com and there is WriterAccess.com”, (Respondent 7),

This intuition again raises the possibility that, in certain professions, there is an increase in freelancers on certain online digital labour platforms due to a lack of job

opportunities, and retrenchments as a result of COVID-19. This inference from the data is consistent with the study of Stephany *et al.* (2020) which analyses the possible effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of increasing or decreasing the supply and demand of gig workers globally. One of the possibilities discussed in their work is the increased supply of gig workers on labour platforms due to mass retrenchments. These retrenched workers have marketable skill sets and are open to the idea of online work. The study of Stephany *et al.* (2020) uses the Online Labour Index (OLI) to track the global gig economy such as registered users on online labour platforms. A significant finding emanating from their quantitative and qualitative analysis was that the United States saw an increase in newly registered workers from April 2020 in the software and technology category. On a micro-level, our study demonstrates the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in increasing the supply of workers on online labour platforms and highlights the lived experience of this impact. Arguably, two of the participants from our study are those that have been involved in the gig economy for more than 2 years. These participants have observed increases in supply which for them, skews the competition and has impacted their work personally. Hence, COVID-19 is highlighted as an important factor in the competition on online platforms in contemporary times.

Another substantial consideration in terms of the dynamics of platform competition is evident in the above statement from Respondent 7 regarding Native English speakers. As the participant describes, freelancers in Native English-speaking countries who now have an advantage on these sites compared to second language English speakers. Notably, the responses of gig workers who are non-Native English speakers would be to lower their rates to ensure they gain work. This dynamics translates into further competition.

More generally, many gig workers are from the Global South or Africa and the exchange rates work in their favour. The payment of clients in the USA or Europe when compared against the South African rand or other currencies in developing countries, would be considered 'acceptable' or 'decent'. One participant stated that:

"But there's also a lot of private people in those countries, they known that their exchange rate is high, so they will contact you, or

they'll even look for people from like Thailand, and where they can get educated people but at better rate, because of their exchange rate basically. SO, their 5 dollars over there is nothing, it's not going to mean anything there, but over here, if I do a couple, if I do a couple of uhh, 20-dollar projects for the month, then obviously that's going to mean much more to me here" (Respondent 03).

Another participant expressed a contrasting view by stating that although the pay rate allowed him to earn an income, he could be earning much more through a company or as a business owner. He noted:

"Just to put in perspective, if I had done the same piece of work as for a company, for one of my clients, when I had my company you know the hourly rate would have been something like 8, R750, R800 an hour at the time. And then having to limit myself and cut myself down to 24 dollars an hour which worked out to like the exchange rate at that time was 11/12 rands to the dollar so that worked out to like just under R400 per hour or R380 an hour or something like that. So yeah, it was very disheartening from that perspective to do almost double the amount of work to earn the same amount of money, to bring in the same amount of money into a household that I had been used to before" (Respondent 05).

This speaks to the complexity of platform competition as it demonstrates gig workers often need to lower rates, in order to win projects. Gig workers who possess specialised skills set or niche skills may therefore be unable to command the standard rates for their profession or skill. Thus Drahokoupil and Piasna, (2017: 335) notes that *"the pay offered through platforms is very low, a fact closely related to a competition model based on cheaper service achieved through low pay and often regulatory avoidance"*. Whilst this may not be case for every gig worker, it is exemplified by the above responses that gig workers are greatly impacted by the environment of the platform. The type of competition they experience on these platforms are unpredictable as they are based on the type of bid and profession.

The dynamics and complexity involved in this process is aptly described by one of the participants.

“I think at the time, I was doing some Magento development and I was competing against, two other people, one from Bangladesh, and one guy from Pakistan, I believe, and their rates were about 25 and 27 dollars per hour respectively, so yeah, and like you know, that’s still very low to try and beat, to actually be competitive and to actually you know earn a decent income from it because you know, it’s your hours of work, it’s the hours that you’re putting into it and you know 25 dollars or 27 dollars would have been sufficient for them but it wasn’t sufficient enough for me so I eventually had to like, you know, on two of the projects I bid on, I had to come in at like 24 dollars so...” **(Respondent 05)**

Thus, during the bidding process, gig workers from these continents will push down pay rates as a strategy to win bids. This finding is validated by the findings of Anwar and Graham (2020) whose study on gig workers in Africa and Asia illustrates the challenges that platforms present in terms of competition. As described earlier, competition is ruthless and the findings from Anwar and Graham (2020: 13) reveal that: *“almost every worker we met had the experience of being undercut by a lower bid, particularly from Indian, Bangladeshi and Filipino workers who have a reputation for bidding extremely low.”* This kind of competition is referred to as marketplace bargaining power. In this instance gig workers experience a lack of marketplace bargaining power. This super or hyper-competition also has a negative effect in terms of skills levels because the most qualified person for the position may not always win the bid. In other instances, the possibility of underemployment is high, in that overqualified people may bid for work simply due to the competition on the sites and their inability to find work elsewhere. Underemployment is an aspect of gig work which is discussed in more detail later on.

5.2.2 Theme 2: Developmental value in freelancing/gig work

Know-how competencies are derived as a concept in support of boundaryless career theory. Whilst this study takes the position that boundaryless careers cannot be developed through gig work, the concepts of know-how, know whom and know-why competencies are vital aspects that will be used as a framework to analyse what type of competencies are being acquired by gig workers through their work.

Figure 5.4 below shows the coding percentages for each participant according to profession for the Theme: Developmental value in freelancing/gig work

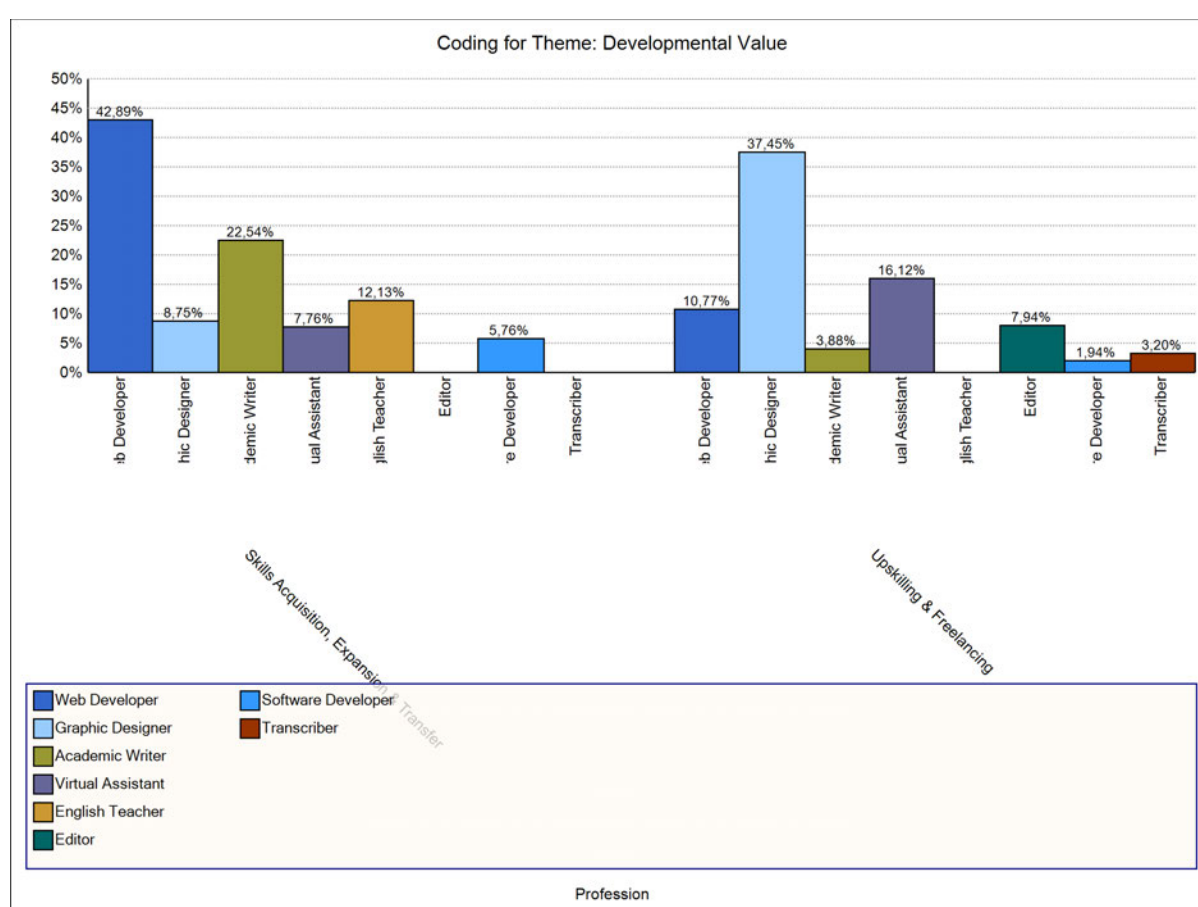


Figure 5. 4: Thematic Area 2: Developmental Value

5.2.2.1 Sub-Theme 2.1: Skills acquisition, skills expansion and skills transfer

The coding for skills acquisition, skills expansion and skills transfer have been amalgamated due to the closely related responses by the participants. The techniques and approaches to skills acquisition and skills expansion for gig workers represents a fundamental research question of this study. Skills acquisition, skills expansion and

skills transfer are best understood through the know-how, know-whom and know-why competencies, (Defillippi, 1994). Know-how competencies relates to “job-related competencies”, specifically the knowledge, skills and competencies needed to perform a specific occupation or job function.

As discussed earlier, certain aspects of skills acquisition and transfer are more pronounced in the context of gig work as opposed to organisation-based work. Some of the aspects are articulated by the participants which aligns to know-how competencies.

Learning and acquiring new skills amongst the participants involved adaption to new clients and projects and even new roles. In 3 cases, the gig workers were former employees who took on freelancing via platforms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence they had to adapt very quickly to new circumstances and home in on their ‘marketable skills’. In this sense, learning agility as a “critical underlying capability” is achieved by the participants in unique ways (Ashford *et al.*, 2018: 29).

For example, one participant mentioned that:

“I was very tired of the industry I was working on already, and then the Covid-19 pandemic hit. So, at that time, I realized I wanted to do something else and made a full list of every skill I had or had acquired during my working years. I proceeded to do some market research and start taking online courses to perfect my skills”
(Respondent 11).

The above response signifies an awareness of the participant in terms of their developmental value. This awareness is underscored by the concept of know-why competencies as some participants could easily relate their skills acquisition experiences to their underlying career motivations. The participant added that for her new role she had to develop new skills, specifically:

“I had to develop my SEO and keyword analysis skills”,
(Respondent 11).

Embedded in this statement is the element of know-how competencies described earlier. Once the participant identified the new skills needed, she then pursued this further.

All participants, in some way, recognized the influence of their work on their skills and competencies. One participant asserted that he had considerably improved his writing ability through his work and the feedback of clients. In fact, he also developed new skills that he was not previously able to do:

“I think freelance writing has helped me to improve in my research writing, uh, and it has helped me to, uh, sometimes I get academic write ups where I had to use different kinds of referencing, so when I was doing my Bachelors in South African for instance, it’s different from the referencing that my clients request I use. Uh, now I am able to reference in APA, MLS, Harvard referencing style, so that is one of the skills have acquired through freelance writing and I hope to learn more about it” (Respondent 07).

Again, the know-how competencies needed to fulfil this participant’s role as a writer took a considerable amount of time to develop however he was eventually achieved this. This new skills set added to the gig worker’s developmental value because he developed new skills which enabled him to forge a better relationship with clients and thereby get more work.

Another participant notably outlined a key factor in learning and expanding on skills by describing the process of trying to win bids and in so doing bidding for projects slightly outside of one’s skillset:

“Okay so just to address that, it’s strange that you actually asked that because you know, as a bidder you know you basically bidding for anything and everything and you hitting and hoping right and essentially anything that’s out of scope of what your skills set allows, you still bidding for it you know in the hopes that you know you can escape by and win the bid just by basically yeah, how can I put it yeah so basically, for me it was a case where I actually had won a

bid, and there was a small component of it that I needed to do a little more research on after the fact, after I had actually won the project. So, you know what, from a certain perspective, it was good because, I mean in that regard, because at least you know what, I learned, I was forced to learn something that I didn't know before"
(Respondent 05).

The interpretation of Huang *et al.* (2019) on skills expansion is valid in the experience of this gig worker. Huang *et al.* (2019) explains that gig workers can exercise freedom in expanding their skills based on different contexts and apply new skills as they work on projects. In this instance, the freelancer took on a project, and learnt and applied a new skill in the same process. Another important aspect of skills acquisition and skills expansion is the technique of expanding skills in areas where demand is high.

As described earlier, digitalisation has impacted work to the extent that many longstanding professions and jobs are becoming obsolete (Anani, 2018), whilst others have changed significantly in their composition to include different tasks. Gig workers now have to be anticipatory in assessing where the demand lies and trying to expand their roles in line with the demand thereby increasing their value and possibly income as well. One participant mentioned how she was considering branching out into related roles, in order to unlock higher pay:

"Uh, I think I'll try and get into social media management, cause that has a higher pay bracket per hour, yeah, as opposed to virtual assistant, or even if you put like Executive virtual assistant, if you worked for like CEO's or marketing directors, that's also higher pay on freelancing platforms as well" **(Respondent 11).**

Through the process of branching out into social media management and or other fields, the freelancer could then further develop her skills into an area of high demand and significance especially for both local and international markets. In this way, she would enhance her developmental value, expand her know-how, know-whom and why competencies and contribute more sustainably to her career path.

Other techniques in the expansion of skills includes the concept of 'stretch-work' as described by Barlage (2019). 'Stretch-work' involves freelancers who take on a particular job with the aim of expanding their skills. This concept proposes that freelancers will purposefully choose projects which contains aspects in which the freelancer has limited or no knowledge, with the aim of gaining knowledge (skills expansion) in this area. A participant whose experience provides evidence of skills acquisition and expansion states that:

"I like to take jobs where I know I will expand my knowledge in areas in which I am fully interested. I like to take every job humbly. What I mean by this is that I want to learn with every client, and perform the tasks as they'd like me to, always having into account my experience", (Respondent 11).

Similarly, another freelancer revealed an enthusiasm for problem-solving through his work and advised that he therefore took on projects where he learnt something new and was given the freedom to problem solve, thus the concept of stretch-work is also useful to our understanding here:

"Put it this way, I have not had a single project to date that did not have something that I didn't fully like know what to do. I had to research on every single project, it was fun, that's the beauty of it, I'd say if you're going to teach a skill set, teach people how to problem-solve, that will allow them to delve into this crazy world, weird world of IT, especially in freelancing, when you have to solve someone else's problem, they bring a unique perspective", (Respondent 08).

Further to this, the element of problem-solving as a key skill iterates the know-how competencies that the gig worker possesses. The gig workers interviewed have displayed a high aptitude for life-long learning and generic skills such as problem-solving. This is a notable finding of this study.

Skills transfer is an important aspect in relation to developmental value of gig workers. Some studies have focused on the effects of co-creation, and knowledge exchange

between the freelancer and the organisation (Barlage, 2019); (Seppanen, 2021). Furthermore, Arifianto and Vallentino (2022) assert that freelancers represent an independent and impartial role when tasked to do work for a company or client. They may thus be able to observe aspects from distance which could be of benefit to the company or client. Another benefit with freelancers they often have a wealth of experience from working on different projects. (Arifianto and Vallentino, 2022) Gig workers/ freelancer can in fact be of distinctive value to companies in that they can provide an objective perspective and also offer new knowledge. They can advance their own developmental value by problem-solving or applying their knowledge to various contexts in numerous projects. Two participants described their feelings when their effort on a certain project had an impact on the client:

“And I’m sure I imparted skills on them because I taught one of the students fire rack which is a the way you answer the legal question and they were completely like blown away because they were basically answering their question in an essay type format which is for more a social science answer, fire rack is like you have to uhh, play it out in the way that relates to the issue and then you relate that cases together, so that person had I think 80 or 90, no they had a, I’m not sure if they had a 80 or 90, but they had a after I broke that down for them, and that was an American student so I was actually very pleased about that” (Respondent 03).

“So, I particularly edited and proofread e-books before they were published on the platforms. So, I was very happy when the client would now say, their happy and now their book is now published” (Respondent 04).

The elements of skills acquisition, skills expansion and skill transfer greatly impact development value. If gig workers are not learning or acquiring new skills, it could stagnate their career mobility and ability to develop transferable skills and competencies. Further, the know-how, know-whom and know-why competencies resonates with these processes of skill acquisition, expansion and transfer. As gig workers acquire skills they augment their competencies.

5.2.2.2 Sub-Theme 2.2: Upskilling and freelancing

Upskilling was not considered an imperative by participants. Rather the imperative was to use their skills effectively to gain work. If this process included taking on a new course or doing training in a field that they believed could be of benefit to them, this was done occasionally by way of courses and workshops to upskill themselves:

“I did several online courses for different skills such as SEO, and different tools used, and I still do. In freelancing, you have to keep constantly updated. New things are appearing every day in the digital world and we have to mostly follow along with evolution to not stay back. Recruiters and clients also value the fact you take the time to learn new skills constantly. We live in the Era of Information and should take advantage of this privilege”,
(Respondent 11).

“I have done, well I’ve got the Adobe Creative Cloud suite so they already give you tutorials for photoshop illustrator and design, uh, and actually all of them, but the package that I got is still like the basic. So anyways, you can already, do the tutorials and it even gives you digital exercises to do. So, you can keep you skills fresh. So, I found that really helpful”, **(Respondent 09).**

These statements emphasises the need for gig workers acquire new skills that are relevant and in-demand. Upskilling and re-skilling for gig workers is considered another way to ensure their bids stand-out and they can effectively compete with other gig workers.

However, in terms of finances, the “*viability challenge*” as put forward by Ashford *et al.* (2018: 25) is foregrounded in the responses of the participants. Ashford *et al.* (2018: 25) explained that “*on a practical level, financial instability and job insecurity create a viability challenge for workers in the gig economy*”. Whilst many participants did not express huge financial challenges, or financial insecurity, there was a distinct awareness and practically around the kind of upskilling they chose, taking into account

their financial position. Hence, it is evident the upskilling initiatives on the part of the freelancers is a carefully thought-out processes which involve opportunity-cost reasoning. For example, one participant noted that:

“I actually wanted to wait till Udemy has a sale again, because earlier this year, January they had a sale that was quite reasonable like R200 or R300 and then get uh, and then get something on there, you know”, (Respondent 06).

Another participant also emphasised the financial viability of upskilling stating that:

“I would go through any online courses available that you didn’t have to spend too much on. Ultimately, it’s, no lies, it’s extremely difficult to live at a mid--to-mid-low tier developer of any kind of skills set in freelancing because the reality is that there is not enough work coming in to justify it, if that makes any sense, you have to supplement it so I had to, essentially, I’d go through what courses I could, if you develop any of these skills, yes, but not paid for. While I did do some courses, most of them were only freely available to use, Udemy, uhh, business courses, a couple, more of my side was relating to skills set courses, basic skills set course to get me into the field”, (Respondent 08).

Significantly, a third participant indicated the value of YouTube that could also assist in terms of refreshing one’s skillset:

“Yeah so I would definitely say, if you say just try and put aside, you know courses are quite expensive, even though we’re in South Africa, so yeah that is what hold me back personally. But you know YouTube has a lot of informative tutorials you can just brush up on”, (Respondent 09).

The participants demonstrated a clear viability challenge based on the financial insecurity attached to their work (Ashford *et al.*, 2018: 25). As gig workers, they must

first assess the feasibility of doing courses which they have to pay. Furthermore, it can be inferred from the above that the developmental opportunities attached to gig work is limited. Only gig workers earning higher than average incomes could then invest in upskilling without having constraints on the types of courses they choose. Interestingly, this limitation, did not appear as a serious challenge for the gig workers interviewed. Instead, an emergent trend in the data was the adoption of freely available online courses through Google, YouTube, Udemy and Coursera. For instance, one participant noted:

“Well, I suppose that’s what nice about, you got YouTube and YouTube’s like your best friend cause you can learn anything on YouTube and then don’t have to pay for a course”, (Respondent 10).

Another participant explained that she did a bouquet of courses, all of which were free:

“Yeah so you know, I did what I could with, and also, I did a bit of uhm, there’s FreeCodeCamp.org. I did all those tutorials, although, I think web design, you know, you need to know more than that but anyway, but that was free, so I always kept on, I did what I could, and a bit of Blender also, a little bit of 3D,” (Respondent 06).

Another trait of gig workers which can be identified from the above responses is the concept of bricolage. This concept is proposed by Ashford *et al.* (2018: 30) as a set of necessary behaviours, needed to survive and thrive in the gig economy: *“Bricolage helps individuals overcome the resource constraints inherent to the gig economy by allowing them to maximize the resources they have to find solutions that will likely satisfy current employers”*. The effective adaption of these gig workers of other free resources to help them upskill is an indication of bricolage.

The trend towards online upskilling is important to capture because it speaks to the broader drivers of change in education and also in how people acquire skills. The shift towards online learning and life-long learning means that open source, flexible learning, and re-skilling opportunities are now servicing people from various

backgrounds including gig workers. Anani (2018: 169) aptly explains that *“the trend towards academic democratization, competition and informalization is likely to continue, especially as flexible gig economy workers require increasingly regular skills upgrades”*. Developmental value, in terms of upskilling and re-skilling for gig workers, is likely being shaped, to a large extent, by the financial position of gig workers to access such available courses online.

5.2.3 Theme 3: Career pathways and progression

Figure 5.5 below illustrates the coding percentages for all participants under the theme ‘Career Pathways and Progression’ according to profession.

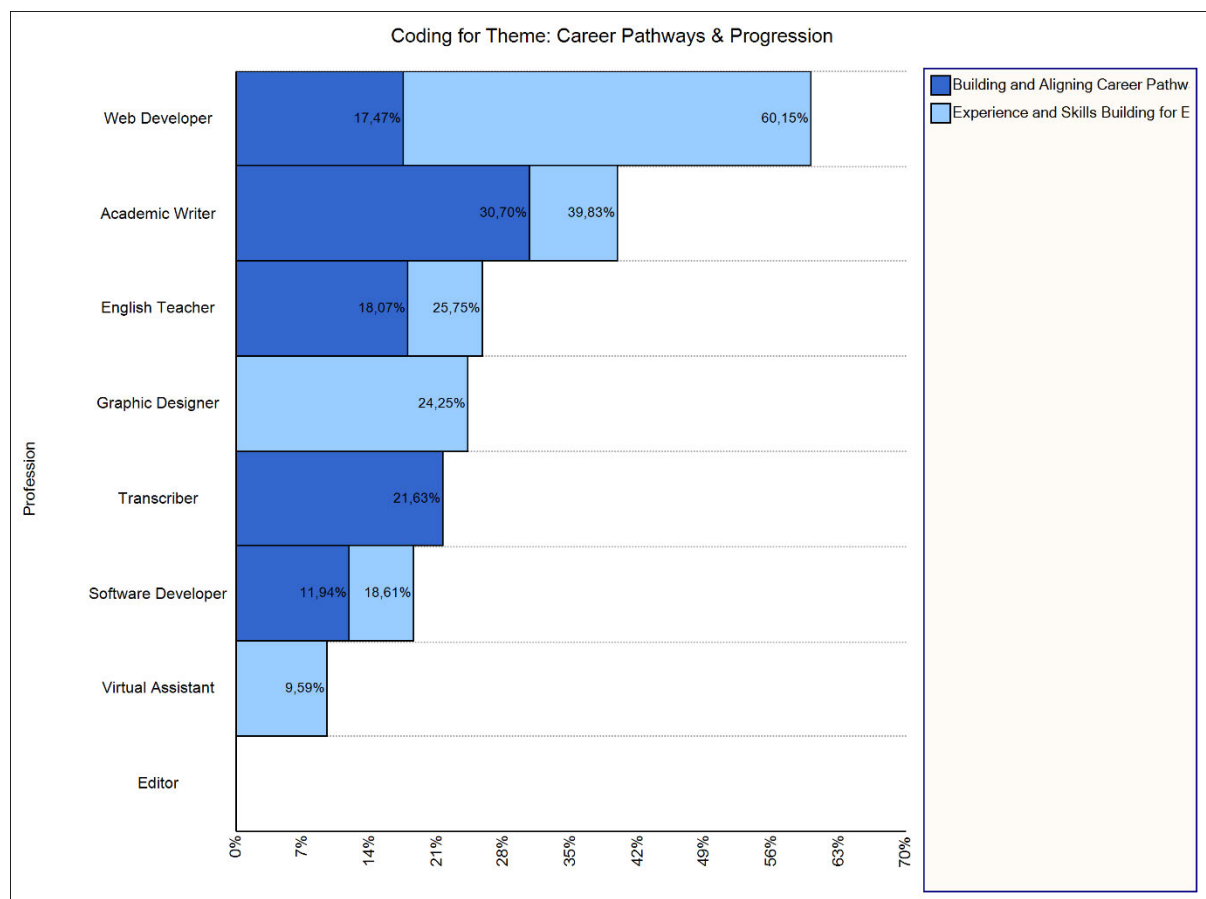


Figure 5. 5: Thematic Area 3 Career Pathways and Progression

5.2.3.1 Sub-Theme 3.1: Building and aligning career pathways

The study by Wong *et al.* (2020) assesses whether micro-workers are able to develop careers in the gig economy, using career construction theory. They find that constructing careers in the context of micro-work is dependent on the congruence or

incongruence between jobs and careers. It is emphasised that jobs are based on extrinsic motivations, that is, extracting key material benefits specifically payment from the work. Careers, instead, reflect a broader outlook, on the part of the individual towards developmental value including career progression, promotions and overall job quality such as job motivations and satisfaction (Wong *et al.*, 2020). Notably, a distinction between jobs and careers provide useful insights in terms of this study.

The participants articulated challenges towards leveraging their roles to establish better career pathways for themselves. This sentiment was more pronounced in the bracket identified to be entry-level freelancers. This is exemplified by one gig worker who noted:

“Yikes, uhm, I think, like, so I finished my degree in 2019 and uhm like there was a lot going on in my own mind about my like ‘career’ in inverted commas, just because like school was always very, you know, you do something, you do it well, you get a good mark, you do it badly you get a bad mark, but the real world isn’t like that and I wasn’t even sure if, like I’m still not even sure like if there is a future for me in in journalism, uhm [silence] but I think that’s like, so I don’t think of transcription with Rev as being a permanent thing because it’s not the most lucrative thing in the world...”, (Respondent 02)

Furthermore, the participant hinted at some key skills gaps between her role as a gig worker and her intended career:

“...but while I’m busy doing transcription, definitely the world of journalism is moving away from me, you know? Technologically speaking and everything else. If I wanted to get back into journalism, I’m stressed, some of these skills are definitely transferrable but I would probably need a little bit of a bridging course or something like that”, (Respondent 02).

A highly skilled participant who held a Law degree also faced the same inconsistency between her intended career path and gig work. She noted that:

“Yes, yes because I still have myself on there as a uh Legal Researcher and there were a couple of projects that were uhh, involve law, so if I go into my LinkedIn now and add in I did projects for international clients for a contract done in America that should look good on my CV or it’s going to be very far and few in between because it’s mostly been like social science things that they give me to do”, (Respondent 03).

The idea that gig work can be constraining to younger gig workers was raised earlier through the perspective of Brown (2017) who explained that the skills acquired through gig work may not be adequate for organisation-based work. Therefore, gig worker roles may widen skills gaps for individuals still wanting to pursue organisation-based work over the long-term. This may be equally true for those gig workers want to pursue freelancing in another category of gig work. This is exemplified in the cases above. The participants articulated some concern that there were already skills and experience disparities as a result of their participation in gig work as opposed to their intended career paths. Therefore, it would be improbable for these participants to expect developmental value to be achieved through such roles. This compounds the complexity in terms of the transferability of skills, i.e. using skills and experience obtained through gig work for other professional roles that the gig worker desires or aspires towards.

Elaborating on this argument, it is conceivable that the above participants are facing an ‘incongruence’ between job and career (Wong *et al.*, 2020: 886), due to the fact that their career aspirations do not match their current roles as gig workers. Gig workers seeking to develop career pathways through gig work must attempt to align job and career paths. This will facilitate a less disruptive shift towards their intended career pathways. Arguably, gig workers may find themselves unable to extract developmental value from their work if their motivations for pursuing the work in the first place is extrinsically biased. However, as will be discussed later on, the other motivations for gig workers to pursue gig work, are influenced by a range of factors not confined to seeking developmental value or building a career path. For the participants discussed, the issues are multi-layered. In contrast, as the below cases

show, for some participants, gig work has enabled them to forge a very effective career pathways in the gig economy. For example, one participant mentioned that:

“My experiences have been largely very positive and I do think it’s a very nice avenue for a lot of people to go, in terms of, you can just have your degree, in some cases been earning your degree and don’t have to have it yet and there’s this job opportunity for you, often you’re paid in dollars, so even if it’s quiet low in dollars, its quiet high in South African rands and its normally quiet short hours as I said, about 3 hours a day, which is nice for people who are studying, or maybe doing another job. Uhh, I don’t know about, uhh, as in I think overall the positives outweigh the negatives,”
(Respondent 1).

The above perspective mainly concentrates on the economic value to be extracted from gig work as opposed to the developmental value. Nevertheless, the economic reality, of high structural unemployment in South Africa underpins this perspective by demonstrating that gig work can in fact fulfil an important aspect of their livelihoods (income) through gig work.

Aligned with the above view, a virtual assistance shared with enthusiasm her views of building a career through gig work:

“I would definitely recommend freelancing. There is so much more opportunities to build your career path the way you want it, not having to rely on anything else but your hard work. Just keep in mind that it’s hard and takes some time to gain stability. But once you have this, you’ll know you built that from scratch for yourself, and it’s a very rewarding feeling”, **(Respondent 11).**

Further, some freelancers had already identified their career progression in terms of gig work, that is, their long-term career prospects. Participant 1 mentioned that:

“I definitely want to expand, but I would never do what Londi and those companies did to us, I would never want to do what essentially became a pyramid scheme of recruiting other people, and that’s really where you make the money and then they all work for super low pay and uhm, I won’t go into too much detail cause obviously this is not part of the question but I do sort of essentially want to branch into other aspects of online English teaching. I want to go into more advanced classes, I don’t want to just sort of do this forever, teaching young learners, I want to actually like make courses that I can teach”, (Respondent 01).

For other gig workers, their long-term vision did not include gig work or freelancing:

“Don’t think that’s what I want because I don’t even like to be actually called a freelancer, I uhh, especially knowing that I studied for so long, freelancing should be for somebody straight out of campus, and looking for something, in your 20’s you can call yourself a freelancer, right, it’s not something I want long term, and I’m even looking at opening up my own law firm, so I don’t have to go begging people to give my employment, especially with all my degrees behind me and it is frustrating uhh, but a permanent law job, I at the same time even though I don’t want to do freelancing long term, I don’t think I want to be stuck at another person’s law firm, I think now, moving forward, I’ll want to open up my own firm or my own legal consulting, consultation branch or something, uhh yeah”, (Respondent 03).

The varied responses depict the diversity of experiences in the gig economy. Whilst some gig workers can effectively merge their career aspirations with gig work, others are unable to do so as a result of different motivations or career aspirations. The aim to be employed and earn an income is a key source of career indisposition in the sense that those simply seeking to be employed temporarily, expressed more dissatisfaction with their current roles in the gig economy. This is exemplified in the case above. Likewise, another participant expressed that:

“To be honest, I was only going into Web Design and Web Development because I was so desperate for a job”, (Respondent 04).

The situations of some participants reflect desperation for employment and significant confusion about the way forward in terms of gig work or other professions. The experiences of other participants who are successfully navigating the gig economy point to a correct application of competencies and career-building capabilities to achieve such success in gig work. Whilst this differentiation seems to outline that those experiencing confusion about gig work, are unsuccessful, this would be a simplistic and unfair conclusion. Rather, the differences pointed out, are useful in demonstrating that some gig workers are able to cope in the gig economy to the extent that they are able to grow and achieve developmental value. Others, however, for various reasons, only seek the need to survive in the gig economy. Duggan *et al.* (2021) aptly capture a similar finding in their study of how rideshare drivers apply career competencies in their work. With reference to these drivers, they note that: *“a proportion of this workforce simply do not expect or desire these opportunities. Rather, some workers engage only for opportunistic reasons, such as the potential to supplement existing income”*, (Duggan *et al.*, 2021: 23). Although the experiences of rideshare drivers are not the same as white collar gig workers, it is worth observing these parallels in the extrinsic motivations of gig workers. As seen from the above statements of Respondents 03 and 04, they are primarily engaging in this work to earn an income due to a lack of other employment opportunities.

5.2.3.2 Sub-Theme: Experience and skills building for entry-level freelancers

The above section debated how the personal experiences of the participants', their intrinsic and extrinsic career motivations, and their dependability on gig work for a source of income, influenced their career pathways and progression. In general, many scholars have questioned whether gig work could be of benefit to younger freelancers and if so, specifically in what ways (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2018; Healy *et al.*, 2017). In terms of developmental value, it is worth exploring whether entry-level freelancers in particular can develop the necessary competencies through gig work in order to progress toward related career opportunities. This study asked the participants to provide their views on whether gig work could be of benefit to graduates and students, based on their personal experiences. There was an overall positive yet critical outlook towards this question.

One participant spoke of the credibility or legitimacy which graduates or students could obtain from gig work:

“Actually yes I would because then at least they could get some uhh, some credibility maybe not so much in terms of actually doing work but the earlier they get onto it, the better because you know everybody needs to start somewhere...a graduate who’s just entering the job market may look at it as a good thing because uh, project posters will know that a person with limited experience will be a lot cheaper of a resource so yeah I would definitely suggest that graduates entering the job market look at it as an option. Even you know, they can still be working for a company, you know be job hunting but still actually have this option uhm of this uh freelance work by signing up on the site to do freelance work”, (Respondent 05).

For entry-level freelancers, establishing a good profile on gig platforms and gaining experience early in their career is stressed by the above participant. This perception is further underscored by another participant who mentioned:

“I will also advise that they start looking for freelance opportunities right when they are in high school, they don’t have to wait until when they get to college before they start taking up freelancing opportunities because some of the things that I eventually know now are the things that I should have known long before so I would have been much better, I mean more successful, if I had known about freelance writing earlier enough”, (Respondent 7).

Evident from the above responses is that some participants did have positive experiences which has led to them recommending gig work to students and graduates especially those that are unemployed. Significantly, many of the responses also alluded to the development of know-how, know-why and know-whom competencies whilst doing such work. For instance, one participant noted that:

“The platforms are a great way to start building your career. They provide us with safety and a database of buyers and offers. Although, in the long-term one shall look for independence since they do take a good part of our incomes. At this point, I wouldn't say leave the platforms, but build your network of clients everywhere you can. We don't have why to stick exclusively to the platforms, there is a big market out there”, (Respondent 11).

This participant conspicuously advises that gig workers should not confine themselves to platforms alone to develop as a freelancer and use all opportunities available to build network. This is related to the development of know-whom competencies. The need for gig workers to work independently from the platform in order to build their networks, was a perception raised by a second participant:

“Yes but they must also email and get into contact with actual people as well and put themselves out there. They mustn't just rely on the platforms themselves”, (Respondent 06).

Finally, a third participant advised that gig workers should work hard in order to prove their skills to people so that they could gain work. This again is related to the deployment of know-how and know-whom competencies in order to appear credible to clients. The participant mentioned that:

“People have a hard time trusting your ability, it's not just graphic design, I'm sure it's with any other career choice”, (Respondent 09).

This perception is broadly described as a competency challenge which gig workers may face, especially because they work with people and organisations, sometimes without sufficient knowledge about each other. Hence gig workers need to work twice as hard to prove their competency to the client in order to gain credibility and establish a good working relationship (Ashford *et al.*, 2018).

In summary, the participants contributed to our understanding of how graduates and students could use gig work to forge their career paths. Graduates and students should approach the gig economy just as they would the formal job market, with a viable profile and the usage of key competencies and capabilities (Ashford *et al.*, 2018) in order to effectively navigate gig work. Further exercising know-how, know-whom and know-why competencies (Kost *et al.*, 2020) is central to this kind of work. Finally, according to Wong *et al.* (2020), proactivity (the ability to take the necessary steps for career-building) is fundamental to the obtaining the necessary developmental value from gig work. Combining all these theoretical and conceptual approaches to gig work, can further benefit gig workers of all levels (entry, mid-level and senior levels) of their professions.

However, the gig economy is an online global marketplace and, as explained earlier, the competition effects of gig economy are coupled with platform mechanisms that can prove limiting to the gig worker. Thus, the viability of looking at other ways to assist gig workers in achieving developmental value is worth exploring and formed a key research question of this study. This will now be discussed.

5.2.4 Theme 4: Platform skills mechanisms and developmental value

The narrative around platforms, their merits and demerits are extensively debated in the extant literature. Platforms exercise techno-normative forms of control (Gandini, 2019); monitoring and surveillance (Fleming, 2017) and execute punitive measures to those that do meet its minimum criteria of work performance. However, another end of the spectrum is the work of Chiang *et al.* (2018); Huang *et al.* (2019); and Stephany *et al.* (2021) which portrays a contrasting narrative whereby algorithms and other technological features of the platform can actually be used towards positively impacting gig workers by recommending skills courses and acting as skills advisors in terms of upskilling and skills acquisition.

5.2.4.1 Platform incentivising mechanisms towards skills acquisition and developmental value

A key research question posed to participants was whether upskilling or reskilling courses or some training initiatives could be or should be offered by the platforms. This sparked a controversial debate, as many felt that the role of platforms could not accommodate skilling, upskilling or reskilling of gig workers. This is exhibited by the following responses:

“So yeah, Google has a lot of free courses you can take, which I have done but yeah, Upwork, the platform I use, isn’t uh, it doesn’t really upskill you in any way. You have to do that yourself”
(Respondent 10).

“I will have to go on, go and do a small course for myself because constantly to build myself up, I can’t expect that employer or something like that to help me out with that”, **(Respondent 03).**

The clearly defined roles and expectations of the platform and that of the gig worker is portrayed in these responses. A moot point conveyed by another gig worker was that:

“I think that freelancing platforms, they wouldn’t, it’s so difficult to have a certain skills programme because you’re dealing with the international market”, **(Respondent 04).**

As a business entity, the platforms that the participants were associated with, seemed to effectively enforce the notion that gig workers were merely service providers that engaged with clients for their own benefit. This was conveyed through the manner in which the above participants refuted the possibility of upskilling taking place via platforms. When asked about the possibility of skills provision mechanisms on the platforms, some participants regarded this as an idealistic and utopian view, almost as something unrealistic:

“Probably, but I think uh, with Upwork, it is just a platform to post jobs, I think they are mainly interested in the money because even

they take a percentage of what you earn. So yeah, I don't know, in an ideal world it would be good if, they had someone running it who thought about upskilling newer freelancers on the site",
(Respondent 10).

Participants also questioned business motive that would justify the implementation of training courses on the site:

"The reason I say what value add is that I'm kind of trained ,or I've trained myself I guess, through information is that any kind of benefit to anyone has to value add to both parties and while I do thing the idea of having information and course work on Upwork is a pretty cool one", **(Respondent 08).**

The above participants' responses further revealed that they perceived the platform as a highly independent entity. However, as Nawaz *et al.* (2020: 35) explicitly states: *"platform needs to develop strong and long-term relationship with freelancers and develop strategies for attraction and retention of freelancers in order to stay competitive in freelancing industry"*. From gig workers, platforms extract monetary value and execute techno-normative mechanisms of control (Gandini, 2019). Hence, platforms have a stake in offering courses and additional training to gig workers which may add to their developmental value. In spite of the above initial responses of the participants to the notion of upskilling and reskilling mechanisms on the sites, the participants also expressed that having such mechanisms could be useful and add value to a certain degree:

"Yeah, they should definitely have options for like entry level freelancers, uh, I know they have beginner but you still need experience, and people want to see that, uh, so they should definitely have options for a no experience, like someone whose just getting on the platform and then, yeah, it would be a good idea for them to have even you usual connects that you do, to have like build up to do a little design course or little courses like that, it's not a bad idea, I guess you have more room to grow", **(Respondent 10).**

“Yes, think they should like to offer maybe discounted or even possibly free online short courses like from Coursera, it’s not the best but it’s still recognised. Or I’m sure they could, I mean they, as the platform knowing that they have a lot of professionals on their platform and they do get a percentage of your profit, its 5% I think, I’m not sure. But they changed it, initially it was 3% but I think it went up to 5% if I’m not mistaken, so they should, yeah they should be offering like maybe enhancing your marketing skills or your presentation skills, writing, whatever it may be”, (Respondent 03).

“Yeah, I think they should because they just, they have a blog but that doesn’t really help or they could you know. Gather the best course for those people. But right there on the website so they wouldn’t have to go looking”, (Respondent 06).

Some participants indicated that their sites already had aspects akin to on-boarding and training however this was nothing extensive and related more to an assessment of the gig workers existing skills set:

“Yes, yes you had to take a training, sort of a training module before you started...Uhh, it wasn’t too difficult but it was also quiet punishing, I remember you had to sort of watch classes and then take a quiz, and if you failed the quiz two times in a row, your application was automatically scraped but it wasn’t too difficult, it was quiet helpful I thought”, (Respondent 01)

“Platforms such as Fiverr and Legit, for example, have great courses and skill tests available to grow our skills”, (Respondent 11).

“Yeah, when the grading is there then it is helpful, it’s like oh I actually didn’t pick up on that, I missed that”, (Respondent 02)

“Uh yes, before I registered on the sites, I already did uh, IELTS, which is the British council English. So, I think that was one of the things they considered to allow me to be a writer there. The Upwork has an advanced English course, uh I think it runs for a few days and you have to write a test after studying that course”,
(Respondent 07).

“Okay look there are certain platforms that add a way of benchmarking your skills, you get the CSS benchmark, HTML benchmark, Java, whatever, there are sort of assessment things that you can do, but I would not say that they train so much as they just evaluate where you are”, **(Respondent 08).**

Recommendations for the instituting of courses that could either help entry-level freelancers or assist mid-level or senior-level freelancers in upskilling or reskilling was also put forward by the participants:

“Yeah Coursera, Khan Academy, etc. Yeah so I mean if they actually extend they’re platform to actually be like a Course Content aggregator, and you even also build it up to a point where they become almost an affiliate, you know, almost like the platform becomes an affiliate to Udemy so somebody signs up for a Udemy course through freelancer, you know they either the person gets a discount, they person signing up gets a discount or freelancer.com gets a bit of a kick back”, **(Respondent 05).**

The notion of a content course aggregator that would recommend appropriate courses to gig workers is linked to the proposals put forward by Huang *et al.* (2019) and Chiang *et al.* (2018). For gig workers in professions that have constant advancements such as IT and software development, new courses or upskilling would be incredibly useful. Further reskilling has now proven to be high on the agenda for skills development especially through the advent of the 4th industrial revolution. Platforms that partner with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC’s) and other e-learning partners could

enhance the value that they offer to gig workers. This would be especially useful for independent professionals who are seeking to increase their developmental value through their work. This could work as an incentivised model whereby gig workers could gain discounts or even fully-paid for courses as a result of good ratings, feedback, and high rankings. This could be good for platforms and help gig workers build their skills at the same time.

The skill acquisition elements of gig work would thereby be augmented by training and support as well as through the actual work performed. Through such a model, entry-level gig workers who are recent graduates could then associate their work on gig platforms with not only experience building but with the expansion of skills in related fields. More senior level professionals would have opportunities to learn skills outside of their professions that could still assist in enhancing their work. Enabling gig workers with opportunities to learn these 'up-to-date' capabilities could considerably improve gig workers' competitive advantage, in particular, those from developing countries who may not have had exposure to such online courses. As seen earlier, financial challenges, in particular, are a determining factor in gig workers' uptake of online courses. The offering of courses via platforms could also help in decreasing stress and assist gig workers to stay focused, engaged and motivated during periods where there is no work.

Elaborating on such recommendations, another participant advised that based on his personal experience, an online mentorship programme, targeted specifically at entry-level gig workers who are seeking experience and portfolio-building, could be easily initiated by the platform. For example, senior gig workers could take on entry-level gig workers in the same profession to mentor. This would work well for professions that are remotely-based such as graphic design, anything IT related and even research and legal professions. The participant noted:

“My idea initially would be mentorship programme, my, what helped me early on was that I had a couple people that I could turn to for help and mentor through it. Some of the time, they would be lead on a project, and then help me along and tag me along, and help me learn a skill. So, they would get a majority of the pay but also

have experience a bit of pay, uh, if there is going to be an influx, thanks to COVID most businesses are seeing the benefit and use of having a work from home concept, unless you have a hard-core skill like plumbing, etc. but having a mentorship programme for a batch of freelancing newbies...”, (Respondent 8)

This recommendation is based on the personal experience of the gig worker who had no formal qualifications but learnt through a variety of methods including being mentored. Of significance is the fact that this type of programme could be highly advantageous to those gig workers from the Global South who may not be able to easily access such opportunities in their home countries. South African gig workers could access mentors in areas where there are no specialists or professionals in South Africa, for example. The same can be true for gig workers from other countries.

Finally, an acute observation made by another gig worker is the relative disadvantage that gig workers from non-Native English-speaking countries are placed in when trying to gain clients. He noted that initially when he worked on projects, he worked with Native English speakers however he did not work for a long time with such clients as they discriminated against his English writing ability. Subsequently, he got jobs with non-Native English speakers and they were happy with the work produced even though he was a non-Native English speaker. This personal experience led the freelancer to recommend that:

“Then another thing these websites should do is to train freelancers on how to write like people from native English-speaking countries, because clients always mention they want someone from Native English-speaking countries but no one knows exactly how exactly a native English speaker speaks [laughter]. We don’t really know how they write because sometimes we just see the contents as almost the same except for some slangs and stuff that are only common in those developed countries. So those are the things that I believe freelance websites can do, to help freelancers from third world countries”, (Respondent 09).

Especially due to the global nature of the platform, some training of Native English is considered important to ensuring gig workers, in particular those from the Global South

and Africa can apply for jobs that require this kind of English writing ability. This is because *“the requirement for international service delivery to communicate in English is an entry barrier for poorer (often more remote) communities to engage in this type of work, meaning that restrictions on who benefits from this type of employment will continue”*, (Beerepoot and Oprins, 2021: 12). Rather than perpetuating the status quo in terms of non-English and Native English speaker, platforms could include some workshops on this aspect for gig workers, that could especially benefit gig workers from non-English speaking countries.

5.2.5 Theme 5: Benefits of freelancing

The fifth theme generated from the data analysis is the benefits of freelancing. As shown in figure 5.6., two subthemes were identified, namely autonomy and flexibility. Further, the percentage of coding per freelancer is indicated in this figure.

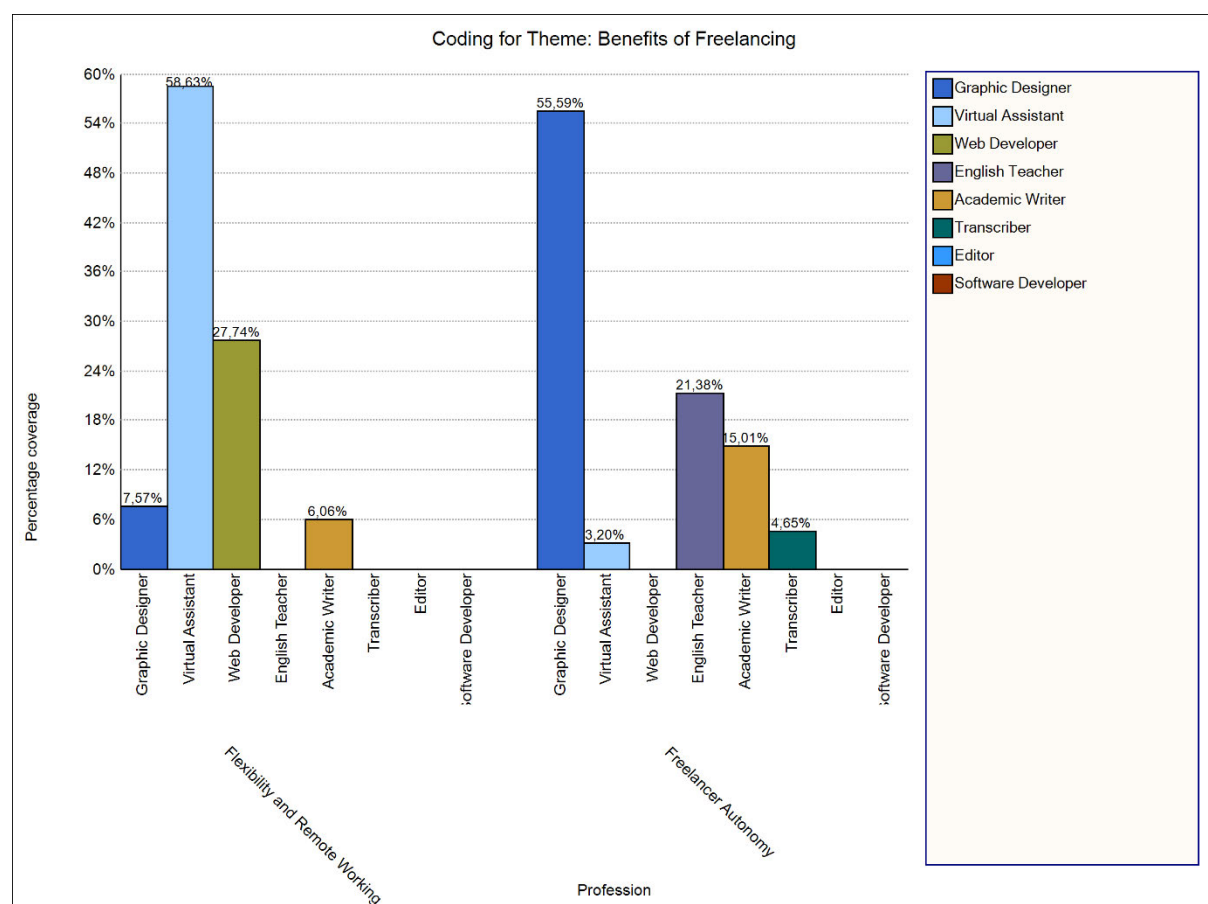


Figure 5. 6: Thematic Area 5: Benefits of Freelancing

5.2.5.1 Sub-Theme 5.1: Autonomy

Autonomy and flexibility are two interconnected concepts however each impact the developmental value of gig workers differently. Autonomy is commonly understood as independence of an individual in decision-making, and other aspects concerning his or her work. According to Pichault and McKeown (2019), autonomy can be measured against the dimensions of 'work status, work content and work conditions'. Worker status is related to the employment status and resulting social protection policies that may or may not apply to the worker. In the case of this study, workers status is temporary hence social protection would not apply. Work content refers to the ability of gig workers (independent professionals) to make decisions about how the work will be undertaken and coordinated. Finally, work conditions refers to decision-making around key aspects which shape the experience of work including the skills aspects of work, rate of pay and flexibility. In particular, the work content and work conditions can be seen as aspects that influence autonomy and also impact how developmental value is or is not achieved by gig workers. This is better articulated through the experiences of the participants, as described below. Pichault and McKeown (2019) importantly note that greater autonomy positively influences career progression because freelancers will have more freedom to make decisions about how this will work for them. Instead, lesser autonomy results in greater social protection and other benefits related to a more stability in the working relationship. Thus, autonomy can be viewed as a double-edged sword.

Significantly, as is the case with flexibility, the general assumption around autonomy is that high-skilled jobs such as software development and technology would automatically facilitate greater autonomy than low-skilled roles such as microwork, (Kalleberg and Dunn, 2016). Highly skilled workers can possess greater autonomy due to several related factors. Firstly, their level of skills puts them in a superior position to decide how the task at hand can and should be undertaken. Thus, the work content and work conditions are better controlled by themselves as opposed to a third party such as the platform, client or organisation. Participants alluded to greater autonomy in their work due to their status as gig workers:

"Autonomy definitely, because I get to decide what I want, I don't have to follow my like, like at the law firm, I had to follow somebody's

schedule, I had to wake up go to the high court, drive here, drive there, pick up these people's kids and stuff like that, I have now, my own autonomy, my own diary, and I can decide how much I want to earn. And there have been months where I've earned well and that's where I push and I get as much orders as possible, so there's definitely autonomy in it so, autonomy for sure", (Respondent 03).

For many participants the ability to choose their work content and take creative ownership was a primary factor in their consideration of autonomy. For one participant, autonomy was impossible to achieve due to the controlling nature of the platform she worked for:

"I was not allowed to get distracted with students, you can see they want to develop and they wanted to expand and oh they wanted to do this thing today and there was all this passion from them, and I have to shut it down and say 'no, we have to get through the work because it was unforgiving, we had to relentlessly go through the work with their lesson structure", (Respondent 01).

The participant eventually left the platform and started her own business to teach English:

"it's really relieving to be able to take off time if I need it, I can make my own materials, so if I'm not happy with the coursework I can change it, and if I have problematic clients, I can say, you know, just don't come back", (Respondent 01).

This comparison highlights that gig workers that are higher in the professional ladder or who have more skills do not necessarily experience greater autonomy in their work. More importantly, in relation to developmental value, the restraining factors as imposed by certain platforms on gig workers impacts their ability to sufficiently apply their skills to their work.

Another participant compared her experience as a full-time employee and thereafter

as a gig worker:

“Yes definitely, especially in the one, the 13th floor, the agency I worked for, myself and a few designer you know, they give it to the art director and they say oh no they don’t like this and it’s not in the brand thing and it’s not their personal favourite and they want you to change it and freelancing you do it till you’re happy, you sent it to the client, most of the time they’re happy, there’s quite a few times they like it straight away and that gives you a sense like you got some authority”, (Respondent 6).

The case of Respondent 06 demonstrated an imposition on autonomy whilst in formal employment. This was frustrating for the participant and partially motivated her move towards the gig economy. Therefore, it is evident that traditional employment can curtail a worker’s freedom in various ways. When comparing the experiences of both Respondents 01 and 06, the imposed limits on their creativity (work content), undermined their capacity to fully apply their skills to their work. Thus, autonomy was only achieved once those limits were removed. Thus, autonomy impacts developmental value because gig workers need freedom to utilise their skills and abilities in undertaking their work. If workers are constantly being given a manual on how to do their work, as was the case of the participant who taught English (Respondent 01), this could stagnate their developmental value as they would lose the ability to think and solve independently and even the ability to transfer their skills onto others.

5.2.5.2 Sub-Theme 5.2: Flexibility

Most participants considered flexibility to be a positive outcome of their work. A combination of factors- COVID-19, unemployment, low barriers to entry- served as the various rationales behind each of the participants’ choices. As discussed earlier for example, some participants were pushed into gig work because of COVID-19 and the lack of alternative means to get work during the period of lockdown in South Africa. Others who were highly qualified, struggled to find employment for some time and resigned to entering the gig economy in aid of an income and some sort of experience. Low barriers to entry, was another reason for people joining gig work. This bracket of gig workers possessed the necessary skills set but no formal qualifications thereby

narrowing down the type of jobs they could easily enter into. Thus, the various reasons for entering gig work did not encompass flexibility as a primary factor. Rather, flexibility was more of a feature of the work that became an added benefit. One participant was retrenched as a result of COVID-19 and then began freelancing, however she soon found that this type of work suited her lifestyle and family commitments:

“Yeah that flexibility, yeah I’m saying the best thing about freelancing for me is the flexibility and being able to spend time with my daughter, that is the most important thing to me”, (Respondent 06).

Previous studies have contested the notion of flexibility as it relates to gig work. The work of Anwar and Graham (2019) and Shibata (2020) for example, challenges the discourses of freedom, flexibility and autonomy in the gig economy by describing oppressive working conditions of gig workers who are under the surveillance of the platform. In such circumstances, freedom and flexibility is regarded as a highly politicized discourse. This discourse characterizes gig work as the widespread choice of millennials and future workforces due to the preference towards more flexibility. The growth of gig workforces globally is also conveniently attributed to the need for a more relaxed work structure (Poon, 2018). Indeed, many millennials are choosing gig work however the extent to which their perceived flexibility matches their actual experience of flexibility needs to be researched. Even those who choose gig work due to the need for more flexibility may find that the actual reality can be atrocious. A participant mentioned the punitive measures employed by the platform she taught on:

“You had a penalty of one dollar per hour for every hour you’ve worked an entire month. So essentially you pay drops for an entire month if you’ve take even one day or even one hour off. A very harsh penalty”, (Respondent 01).

This statement reflects on some of the restrictions on flexibility that gig workers on some platforms need to confront. Although, this was not the case for all gig workers. More participants felt that they truly experienced a high degree of flexibility in their work scheduling:

“uh, it was very flexible, its flexible to be able to be able to work online as a virtual assistant because you don’t have to sit at a desk, I can go to a coffee shop or I can go to the gym, or pop to the shops or go see my mum, uh, so the positives are just more flexibility, you’re just able to, I don’t know, in my experience, live your life a bit more than sitting in an office”, (Respondent 10).

“So uh, I think another benefit that I would say that uh I’m enjoying related to the work is I mean related to the opportunity to set my own timeframe. Sometimes I work early in the morning and sometimes I do my write-ups in the night, I then sleep in the morning. So that is one of the benefits that come with it”, (Respondent 07).

Flexibility thus contributed to better work-life balance in certain circumstances. More pertinent to this study is that flexibility can enhance developmental value as flexible work hours mean that gig workers may be able to dedicate more time to upskilling as opposed to those working full-time. For instance, one participant mentioned that:

“But it’s basically all about like digital marketing, uhh search engine optimisation and that sort of thing. It’s pretty cool, cause it is free, and it’s like a whole forty-hour course and you get a certificate at the end of it so uhm, I’ve been doing that on my off days, when I want to take a break from transcribing”, (Respondent 02).

“I did work as, after doing freelancing for a few years, I did work for a company as a Head of IT for a while, now I’m going back to freelancing to continue the studying side”, (Respondent 08).

Evidently, for participant 02, work flexibility means that she can pursue online courses in her spare time. For participant 08, he made a conscious decision to pursue his studies and thus moved back into gig work knowing that this type of work would allow him to work according to his own time. Flexibility can enable greater mobility in terms of the development of know-how competencies (Kost *et al.*, 2020), as gig workers may

have more time to develop such competencies depending on their ability to control their work schedules (Pichault and Mckeown, 2019).

It has been argued that those engaged in white-collar gig work experience liberation more authentically as compared with those gig workers in low-skilled labour, (de Ruyter *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, those who are more educated are able to enjoy more freedom because they get to choose with whom, how, when and even why they work. This insight corresponds with the findings of our study where the majority of professionals interviewed feel in control of their own schedules. However, this does not mean the white-collar gig workers in every category are exempt from constricting rules and treatment which exist on certain platforms. Instead, the case of Respondent 01, discussed above, clearly demonstrates that platforms can apply obstructive means to flexibility to any profession through 'technocratic' means of control.

5.3 Discussion

Wong *et al.*, (2020: 907) notes that *"much attention has been paid to the technology side of this digital transformation, but the human side has largely been overlooked"*. According to Myhill *et al.* (2021:18) the subjective as opposed to objective narratives around gig work reveal different insights in terms of gig work. Their study illustrates that when comparing the lived experience of gig workers against the objective framework of job quality, a dichotomy exists. Specifically, it is noted that: *"strength of the findings is how lived experience approaches allows insiders a chance to tell a story of how they come to frame work, sometimes quite differently, from those who have little or no experience of such work"* (Myhill, 2021: 18). This observation strengthens the findings of our study. In particular, it can be noted that whereas top-down perspectives tend to highlight the oppressive nature of this work, the gig workers interviewed did not feel that the injustices of the gig economy greatly impacted them. Rather their attitude towards the work was simply that any discrimination or challenges was something that they expected as result of the type of work they were involved in. There was evidence that some gig workers conveyed a sense of compliance, in the sense that, they submitted to the rules of the platform in order to gain work. Some participants moved platforms when they were dissatisfied with certain aspects (3

cases) and others moved out of gig work entirely (2 cases). For those participants still in gig work, 6 cases are highly positive in that these workers are actively engaged, are not experiencing any major platform challenges and earning an income through gig work. They are also actively involved in building their developmental value by being exposed to new opportunities and by expanding their skills via the gig economy.

Therefore, like the findings of Myhill (2021), an investigation into the subjective experiences of gig workers has revealed insights about how freelancers experience the gig economy and to what extent they can acquire skills, upskill and enhance their developmental value. The evidence has been divided and nuanced (Kalleberg and Dunn 2016), demonstrating that there is no one way to characterize the gig economy nor those who work in it. This study has illustrated that the skills acquisition, expansion and transfer practices of the participants are fragmented. There are instances where gig workers are able to connect their experiences with skills acquisition, expansion or transfer. However, to elevate this to the extent of developmental value or career pathway building, the outlook for the entry-level gig workers are weak, whereas for senior level gig workers, there is considerable evidence that achieving developmental value and building careers through gig work is possible.

5.4 Conclusion

The qualitative approach of this study has enabled the first-hand account of 11 South African gig workers (freelancers) to be highlighted in order to gain a deeper understanding of gig work. Five main themes were generated from the data analysis with 11 sub-themes. The perspectives of the gig workers interviewed are varied and represent a two important brackets: senior level and entry-level gig workers with only one mid-level gig worker. Even though the sample was small, the researcher did succeed in gaining insights on the implications of the gig economy as a conduit for skills acquisition and skills transfer, the ability of gig workers to achieve developmental value in their work and the possibility for gig workers, especially at the entry-level to build experience and career pathways through the gig economy. Finally, the potential for platforms to assist in upskilling revealed some key recommendations about how platforms could work with freelancers in a collaborative way.

The next chapter presents the conclusion of the study and provides recommendations.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this final chapter is to reiterate the results that were made during the development of the thesis in the preceding chapters, as well as to relate the findings to the research objectives and explicate the conceptual framework that has been developed. This chapter will further present the limitations of the study, as well as provide recommendations for future research.

6.1 Main insights of this study

As reviewed in the extensive literature, many scholars contend that gig work leads to precariousness (Anwar and Graham, 2020), financial insecurity (Ashford *et al.*, 2018), and “*radical responsabilization*” of the workforce (Fleming, 2017: 693). However, Duggan *et al.* (2021: 02) point out that although gig work is distinguished by “*precariousness and a mostly short-term emphasis, it may be naïve to assume that every worker is unable to create a career in this environment*”.

The findings of this study are interwoven with the argument of Duggan *et al.* (2021), by relatedly demonstrating that developmental value can be achieved through some gig work professions. More importantly, the acquisition, expansion and transfer of skills does occur through gig work, although this is contingent upon a variety of factors. Most ostensibly, the platform ecosystem, together the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of gig workers greatly shape the extent to which they improve their skill sets, access opportunities for the enhancement of skills and attain developmental value through their work.

Several studies as previously mentioned in the literature review investigate and analyse the career-related, skills-related, and development-related gains from gig work (see Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2019; Kost *et al.*, 2020; Duggan *et al.*, 2021; Myhill, 2020; Sepannen *et al.* 2021; Barlage *et al.*. 2019); Stephany *et al.* 2021).

6.1.1 Revisiting the study objectives

The study’s objectives and associated findings can now be revisited:

Objective 1: To explore skills, capabilities and competencies commonly used by gig workers/ freelancers in white collar categories of work

The literature review and the interviews provided an understanding of what skills are required by white-collar gig workers. The data was coded according to the following sub-themes: qualifications and experience; profile-building essential and transferrable skills; and platform competition and skills levels.

The first sub-theme: Qualifications and experience, was deemed of high importance as it pointed to some trends which was supported by the literature. The overarching finding was that qualifications and experience does not carry as much weight on online digital labour platforms as it does in the formal work settings. Three of the senior level freelancers did not hold degrees or diplomas. Rather they were self-taught and used online courses to build their experience. On the other hand, three of the entry-level gig workers were highly qualified in different professions and could not find employment via formal employment channels. *“Low barriers to entry”* (Drahokoupil and Piasna, 2017: 336) or *“lowering access credentials”* (Arcidiacono *et al.* 2019: 611) has been key feature of the gig economy and is generally critiqued. However, in the cases researched in this study, this trend has meant that those previously excluded from employment due to a lack of formal qualifications, can now be included and have greater access to employment opportunities.

Arguably for the bracket of gig workers that were identified as senior level professionals who did not have degrees or other formal qualifications, their choice to participate in the gig economy was driven by lower barriers to entry. The inclusivity promoted by the gig economy is therefore evident here. The gig economy provides accessibility, which is positive outcome for many people, especially those in developing countries. To this end, Kalleberg and Dunn (2016) also express similar sentiments by noting in the gig economy, geographical boundaries are irrelevant hence those with appropriate skills in periphery regions are now given the opportunity to compete internationally for work. One participant argued that through the gig economy, people are creating their own employment (Respondent 9). In many respects, this is true, especially in South Africa with high unemployment rates as shown in Chapter 1.

Even for the participants who were equipped with formal qualifications and were not employed within their professions, they primarily viewed the low barriers to entry as a positive aspect as they could gain experience and also earn an income. Some of these participants were unemployed for a long time despite the fact that they held formal qualifications. Thus, many of them were grateful to have found some form of work through gig platforms. These perspectives are of course, highly subjective and represent the personalised accounts of the participants.

On the other hand, consideration must be given to the possibility of underemployment, which is highlighted in the literature. Three of the four entry-level gig workers were underemployed. This is of concern and it raises the question of whether these workers could, in fact improve their developmental value and create appropriate careers if they continued in the gig economy for too long. This finding aligns to Graham *et al.*, (2017) who find, in their study, evidence of digital workers who undertook work inferior to their current skills. Likewise, Watson *et al.*, (2021) find that workers in certain categories exceed the skills requirements of the jobs they undertake in the gig economy. This is precisely the case of the 3 entry-level gig workers of this study as they represented highly qualified graduates (law postgraduate, finance postgraduate, journalism graduate). In all 3 cases, the participants expressed uncertainty about how they could bridge the gap between their current roles and the career aspirations, as articulated in Chapter 5.

Therefore, whilst the gig economy has opened up doors of opportunity, especially for those who have been at the periphery in terms of employment opportunities, underemployment is a long-term consequence that may seriously affect the skills development, upskilling and other developmental opportunities for gig workers.

The third sub-theme: Essential and transferable skills, revealed some core skills needed for gig work. Most participants felt that soft skills were essential to gig work especially for client interaction. More specifically, the essential skills needed for gig work included communication, problem-solving, interpersonal skills soft skills and English writing abilities. These findings are supported by the study of Broughton *et al.* (2018: 73) which categorizes the skills needed for gig work accordingly: *specific professional and vocational skills; ICT literacy skills; employability skills including English writing capabilities, interpersonal skills, communication and other soft skills.*

In addition, the capabilities-based approach by Ashford *et al.* (2018) was foregrounded in the analysis to draw connections in the data. Of relevance were the concepts of 'career related behaviours' such as proactivity, and 'relational behaviours' such as relational agility (Ashford *et al.*, 2018). Of interest was that gig workers often had to assume the roles of entrepreneurs which required merging business related skills with technical and soft skills. In general, gig workers need to persist, persevere and have a high amount of discipline due to the lack of organisational structures to guide and manage their work for them. Importantly, gig workers only have one chance in each project, at proving their skills (and credibility). Therefore, the manner in which they can articulate in their competencies and capabilities is crucial to gaining work

Amongst the skills and competencies for gig workers, it was observed that a key aspect is intrinsic motivation. In order to gig workers to be engaged and proactive in their roles, intrinsic motivation is identified by the researcher as a key aspect which is explained further by the literature and later on, in the conceptual framework.

Another important theme generated from the data analysis was Platform competition and skill levels. The dynamics involved in platform competition can impact how gig workers exercise their skill sets. In some experiences, gig workers had to accept lower pay for highly specialised skills due to platform competition. Such examples are indicative of the hyper-competition or super-competition on platforms. For some professions, the pushing down of pay rates can influence work to such a degree that gig workers take on projects below their skill-level just to win bids. This again speaks to the aspect of underemployment as discussed earlier. Drahokoupil and Piasna, (2017) also contest that this trend is perpetuated by platform competition. In some instances, this competition persuades gig workers to bid for projects which require lower skill sets than that which they possess. The "*deskilling of the workforce*" is a possibility which is considered by Drahokoupil and Piasna (2017: 338) whereby a lack of developmental opportunities combined with the absence of appropriate skills criteria for jobs in the gig economy can in fact impact workforces in the long-term.

In summary, the findings explicitly show that soft skills, technical skills and critical underlying capabilities are skills or competencies that gig workers must possess to effectively navigate gig work. Further, based on the subjective experiences of the respondents, it was important to capture the unique milieu to which these

professionals (white collar workers) must adapt and confront in terms of skills development and utilisation of skills. In this instance, challenges of unemployment and the issue of platform competition has implications for how gig workers utilise their skills through digital labour.

Objective 2: To explore how gig workers, in skilled categories of online digital labour acquire further skills, expand skills and transfer skills and how this influences their developmental value

This objective was met under Theme 2: Developmental value. Two sub-themes were identified here, namely, skills acquisition, transfer and expansion, and upskilling. However, another theme that was identified as an important factor was autonomy. This research objective is intertwined with understanding the developmental value gains that can be achieved from gig work. Acquiring, expansion and transferring skills are understood in this study as indicators of developmental value.

Arifanto and Vallentino (2022) asserts that freelancers have freedom to bid on a variety of projects therefore the opportunities for them to acquire new skills and experience represents a form of development. To elaborate further, a list of the key findings are listed below:

- Entry-level verse senior level freelancers approached and experienced skills acquisition, expansion and transfer opportunities differently. This can be attributed to a variety of factors as is discussed below;
- The extent to which gig workers can acquire, transfer and expand skills depends on the category of work they are involved in;
- ‘*Stretch-work*’ (Barlage, 2020: 04) was an important method in acquiring and expanding skills;
- The concept of ‘*co-creation*’ (Seppanen *et al.*, 2021) is articulated through the experiences of some respondents;
- Skills transfer was realised amongst both entry-level and senior level freelancers.
- Extracting developmental value from gig work is highly dependent on the personalised experience of the freelancer and a number of factors such as the category of work, level of work;
- Developmental value is fragmented, with entry-level freelancers vulnerable to

the detrimental effects of platform work, whereas there is a more positive outlook for the senior level freelancers.

Participants belonging to the fields of Software Development and Technology; Creative and Multimedia and Writing and Translation; reported that they had acquired new knowledge and skills through their work. Some discernible trends was within the categories, such as Writing and Translation. One entry-level transcriber fell within the category of Writing and Translation. The participant reported that she had gained the capabilities in writing and speed typing however this was not necessarily new skills rather skills which she already had the abilities for. Furthermore, it was clear that the participant could not grow further in the field of transcribing and seemed confused about the next steps in her career. Another participant, who was an editor did not report acquiring any significant skills development or skills expansion. This participant did however, report on the skills transfer that her work enabled her to engage in. The possibility for growth in low level tasks such as transcribing is limited. The study of Broughton *et al.*, (2018) made similar findings on the limited opportunity for career progression in certain types of gig work. It is noted by Broughton *et al.*, (2018) that types of gig work requiring low level skills could stagnate the skills and career progression of young graduates or students. Indeed, such a statement relates to and supports the finding in this study.

Further, these findings of this study show that while some freelancers cannot achieve developmental value through such work, others are able to acquire, expand on and transfer skill. Within the category on Software Development and Technology, two gig workers reported they gained new skills, and exercised their competencies to add value to the projects they worked on. There was also evidence of the application of *know-how, know-why and know-whom* competencies on the part of some gig workers.

The concept of co-creation, proposed by Seppanen *et al.* (2021) has merit in terms of understanding how freelancers acquire and transfer skills. Seppanen *et al.* (2021) proposed that freelancers and client are involved in the co-creation of content and design when they work on projects together. Some of the participants in this study, specifically those in the categories of Creative and Multimedia and Software Development and Technology conveyed elements of *co-creation* when speaking

about how they interacted with clients and did 'background research' with clients in order to design something or create a web page. The findings imply that co-creation facilitates growth through acquisition of new skills, and skills transfer from the gig work to the client.

Furthermore, the finding that entry-level and senior-level freelancers experienced skills acquisition, expansion and transfer differently is evident in certain categories of gig work. For example, comparisons can be drawn for the Writing and Translation category where two participants, one from the entry-level and one from the senior level category were involved. In particular, the academic writer accomplished a broader depth of knowledge from his field. This could be attributed to enhanced skill variety, which is application of a combination of skills and competencies in one's job, (Zaman *et al.*, 2019). Thus, gaining new skills and expanding skills is contingent upon the skill level and category of the work that is being undertaken via the gig economy. The categories of work that these gig workers are involved in can inhibit their developmental value as result of less skills variety and monotony in the work itself.

For other senior level freelancers, such as those in work such as web design, graphic design or software development, they were often involved in heterogeneous projects which demanded skill variety and thus increased their ability to acquire and expand on skills. This enabled them to elevate their developmental value.

For some participants, skills expansion took on an intentional approach ('*stretch-work*') (Barlage, 2020), whereby they purposefully bid for projects that they could expand and develop professionally through. Some gig workers learnt new skills unintentionally by taking on slightly different projects which facilitated their growth. By taking on new projects that encourages skill variety (Zaman *et al.*, 2019), gig workers are able to augment their developmental value gains.

A significant finding of this study was that autonomy could in fact affect the ability of gig workers to gain new skills, expand on and even transfer skill. This was discovered through the direct experiences of the gig workers. As described in the literature, some platforms can constrain the collaboration of clients and gig workers by setting limitations as to how they can meet, communicate by monitoring interactions (Gandini, 2019). This affects autonomy value as freelancers are not able to do research or establish relationships with clients in order to provide a holistic approach to the task at

hand. Thus, the limited application of skills, or decreased 'skill variety' is then imposed on the gig worker. In some cases, a lack of autonomy affected gig workers (2 cases). In other cases, in this study, increased autonomy, allowed gig workers to flourish and be highly involved with their clients. Furthermore, as explained in Chapter 5, autonomy value (Nawaz *et al.*, 2019) can affect developmental value.

Objective 3: To explore current upskilling mechanisms that is used by gig workers

A distinctive pattern of online upskilling emerged through the data. The trade-off between financial stability and upskilling meant that for all of the gig workers interviewed, financial stability took precedence. Online MOOC's, YouTube, Coursera and Udemy were amongst the cited e-learning platforms that was used by gig workers for upskilling, reskilling or knowledge expansion. Some of these courses were freely available. In addition, as most of the gig workers interviewed were accustomed to the flexible mode of working, the convenience of online learning may have also been another factor for them choosing this as opposed to formal learning institutions.

A broad assesment of the ways in which gig workers choose to upskill reveals that entry-level workers, were primarily interested in undertaking courses that could help them gain more work. Senior level gig workers were more pragmatic and viewed upskilling as a purposeful engagment. They therefore only engaged in upskilling as it was linked to projects or a new development or software related to their work. On closer examination, a key finding was that many participants had aspirations to engage in up-skilling and re-skilling in certain domains such as social media marketing, digital marketing, and web design and other digital related skills. This was perceived as a way to improve their skillset towards categories of work that were in high demand. For example, participants in the categories on Creative and Multimedia, Writing and Translation, Clerical and Data entry all mentioned that they were either doing or intended to do a course relating to such domains as mentioned above. A related finding is that even those involved in fields highly unrelated to digital marketing or web design- such as editing and transcribing, confirmed that they did such courses. Thus, it is evident that the gig workers aimed to develop skills more relevant to the current job market demands, possibly to start offering such skills via gig platforms.

By learning sought after skills, the gig workers would possibly be able to charge higher rates by bundling and re-bundling their skill sets in unique offerings, (Stephany, 2021). This is aligned with the broader theme of digitalisation that encapsulates the gig economy. Stephany (2021: 03) advises that *“digitalisation and the related technological changes has provided the impetus to “re-skill” “as technological change accelerates and task automation reshuffles occupational skill requirements”*.

The work of Stephany (2021) and Chiang *et al.* (2019) also impress upon this study that reskilling or upskilling can also help gig workers or crowd-workers demand higher pay for their work. This is indeed an extrinsic motivation for being re-skilling and upskilling as gig worker. In fact, one participant outlined that her intentions were to move into social media marketing as it was a higher pay bracket (Respondent 11). However, the objectives of gig workers to move towards reskilling must also considered in view of the earlier discussion of platform competition and the pushing down of pay rates, (Drahokoupil and Piasna, 2017). Even though workers can fetch good rates for specialised skills and quality, the global nature of platform competition means that gig workers may not necessarily fetch expected pay for these advanced skills.

Finally, there were limited platform driven resources for skills development that was mentioned by the gig workers in their current roles. The platform only provided onboarding or assesment of skills through skills tests or certifications. This will be elaborated on under Research Objective 6.

Objective 4: To explore methods, gig workers use to build their portfolios and market themselves

Profile building, Bidding and Marketing on Platforms was coded as a sub-theme under Skills Supply and Demand in the Gig economy. This thematic area provided insight into aspects such as the ability of participants to holistically market themselves in order to win bids. All participants displayed high proactivity in trying to build profiles and market themselves. This was considered a core starting point as platforms represented tightly controlled virtual environments (Gandini, 2019). Thus, gig workers needed to conform to platform indicators of skills and experience. This involved ratings, rankings and feedback. Without this online credibility, gig worker profiles are dormant until they received a project with good ratings.

In particular, even highly skilled participants sit at the periphery in terms of gig work if they do not display the necessary indicators of skills efficacy on platforms. Seppanen (2020: 82) notes that *“rating and reputation are indispensable for building necessary trust between strangers on a global scale.”* In fact, the work of Seppanen (2020: 82) looks at the Upwork platform and advises reveals the Job Success Score (JSS) not only demonstrates the scores of gig workers but it is driven by algorithms hence freelancers are shown in a particular order to clients and this affects how they bid and gain work.

With regards to the actual process of bidding and crafting marketable profiles, the participants had to deploy a combination of techniques in marketing and communication. In fact, profile-building and bidding makes explicit some core skills and competencies the gig workers should exercise in order to craft an identity that conforms to platform standards and enables them to win projects.

Objective 5: To explore ways that gig work can assist in career path building for entry-level gig workers

This question was approached in two ways. The first looks at the observable experiences of the gig workers interviewed, some of whom demonstrate strengths in their career paths which have been developed over time; and others who demonstrate notable weaknesses in their career path building. The second approach was more explicit, whereby the question was posed to gig workers as to whether they would recommend or encourage that graduates or young people engage in the gig economy?

As discussed in Chapter 5, the incongruence of career and job motivations (Wong *et al.*, 2018) has led to many entry-level gig workers being unable to extract the full benefit from this kind of work. This incongruence has been attributed to an imbalance between intrinsic (career-related) and extrinsic (job-related) motivations amongst these gig workers. This led to entry-level workers choosing this work primarily for income generation and because they were unemployed for a long time. In addition, the low barriers to entry and potential to earn in dollars, prompted these gig workers into freelancing via online platforms. More ostensibly, these entry-level works articulated that their long-term career aspirations did not include gig work. For this

bracket of gig workers, the argument of de Ruyter *et al.* (2018: 46-47) offers critical reflection:

“From the patchy evidence it appears that gig workers are predominantly young and engaged in study or in job search while holding multiple part-time and temporary jobs, many linked to gig work. Does gig work lead to a career and is it part of a sustainable career path? Once again, the available evidence suggests that it is a fill-in, part of a process of irregular and insecure employment until regular work is accessed”.

Indeed, many of the entry-level gig workers fit the description as outlined above. However, as discussed under the theme of Qualifications and Experience, many of the entry-level gig workers were highly qualified in terms of their qualifications but lacked the necessary work-related experience. Although gig work did not enable all gig workers at entry and senior level with same kind of skills progression and career-related aspirations, it was confirmed that most the entry-level gig workers did acquire some level of competencies, capabilities and experience that could assist them as resume and portfolio-building.

Thus, this study again emphasizes that potential for developmental value through gig work is highly personalised. From the findings related to skills acquisition, transfer and expansion, it is clear that gig workers of all levels, qualification types and experience have the ability to harness the gig work for career-building activities and to further enhance their developmental value. This is signified by ample evidence which points to the expansion of skills in some areas and even transfer of skills in other instances. From their experiences, capabilities such as “proactivity”, “image management”, and “learning agility”, were cultivated through interaction with clients, the building of profiles and applying their skills to the actual work.

Undoubtedly, there is merit to what gig work can offer in terms of skills acquisition, upskilling and portfolio building. These findings are corroborated by the study of Broughton *et al.* (2018) with reference to the skill progression opportunities as they are experienced by different types of gig workers. It is noted in this study that *“respondents in the early stages of their career saw their progression in terms of becoming a bit more ‘savvy’ about picking the right jobs, and becoming a little quicker*

at completing work, thus being able to bring in more money”, (Broughton *et al.*, 2018: 83). Certainly, individual gig workers in the entry-level perceived their experiences differently in terms of progression and developmental value than those at the senior level but were still empowered with some key takeaways as a result of their involvement in gig work.

The experiences of the senior level gig workers also prove noteworthy. Facets of *know-how, know-whom and know-why* (Defillippi and Arthur, 1994) competencies were identified in the approach of senior level freelancers towards their work. As an overlap into the second question, some senior level freelancers mentioned that those graduates seeking to gain work experience should expand their network, “*not rely on the platform*” (Respondent 11) and approach people directly. This alludes to the development of *know-whom* competencies. All gig workers, irrespective of their profession or level advised that graduates should start transacting in the gig economy as a means to gain experience and earn money. The general predisposition showed that gig workers were very sensitive towards the broader issues facing youth in South Africa and in more broadly in Africa. Many felt that gig work could help graduates to become more knowledgeable about the working world and use gig work as a “*bridge*” rather than a “*trap*” (Healy, 2017: 240) for better employment opportunities. In particular, it was raised that graduates could become involved in such work whilst applying for jobs in the formal economy in order to build their portfolios (Respondent 5).

Objective 6: To assess ways or methods that platforms can assist gig workers with building their developmental value offering of appropriate skills interventions

Numerous studies have examined the extent to which platforms can assist gig workers in skills development (Lehdonvirta, 2019); reskilling (Stephany, 2021); and the inclusive development potential of gig work (Beerepoot and Oprins, 2021). Through these perspectives, it is outlined that there is both a need for and benefit to platforms to produce more skills-related mechanisms which can assist gig workers in their upskilling journeys. As platforms shifts risk from capital to labour (Anwar and Graham, 2020:02); the responsibility for skills development also moves from the platform to the

gig worker (Lehdonvirta, 2019: 21). However, Lehdonvirta (2019: 21) advises that this shift, could one the hand enhance the flexibility of gig workers to decide how they would like to upskill. On the other hand, the resulting effect of this flexibility could also lead to “*skills mismatches*” for gig workers who are “*poorly informed*” or “*insufficiently resourced*”.

Contrary to this observation by Lehdonvirta (2019), the findings of this study demonstrate the gig workers are in fact well-informed about the types of freely available courses which they have pursued or intend to pursue in order to upskill and also unlock higher earnings. In spite of the accessibility of courses online, another key finding relating to upskilling is that gig workers are financially constrained. This finding was common amongst both senior level and entry-level gig workers. It is also related to the findings of Broughton *et al.* (2018:72) who found in their examination of the skill development amongst gig workers that training for limited via platforms and in many instances were sourced and funded by gig workers themselves.

This study argues, in view of the current labour changes, where occupations are changing faster than educational and training opportunities can keep up (Stephany *et al.*, 2021), the provision of upskilling and reskilling opportunities on platforms could impact both entry-level and senior level freelancers positively. This is because it will enable gig workers to maintain their developmental value and career progression even when there are no opportunities to earn money through projects.

The notion of platform-based mechanisms for upskilling is not new. As discussed under theme: *Platform Incentivising Mechanisms towards Skills Acquisition and Developmental Value*, some platforms have already instituted workshops and short trainings on aspects such as the writing of proposals, and other on-boarding aspects. Some platforms even have skills tests and skills certifications that freelancers can take. Many of these tests were mandatory in order for gig workers to continue on the platform. Some participants mentioned that they had to take tests or even interviews for the platform to assess their skills competency (Respondent 4) or benchmark their skills (Respondent 8). When asked if they found such skills tests or mechanism helpful, most participants indicated that they were helpful to a small extent and they were mainly based on the platforms’ objective of assessing their skills. In this regard, it is safe to say, that the platforms did offer some trainings, workshops and generic skills

opportunities however these are limited and are mainly top-down rather than bottom-up approaches.

The participant's reactions to platforms offering more skills opportunities such as through fully-fledged course in-demand areas, were mixed. Many were initially perplexed at this idea and felt that the work of the platform remains strictly in the domain of business operations and providing a marketplace for them to access work. However, as demonstrated in Chapter 5, the respondents offered some useful recommendations as to how platforms could execute skills development opportunities further to assist gig workers especially those at entry-level. Interestingly, those in the space of Software Development and Technology offered recommendations that involved the usage of algorithms and online mentorships. Others mentioned how it would be useful to gain discounts on courses through incentivised methods linked to ratings and rankings. The practicality of implementing such measures were questioned by some participants. However, the recommendations of using algorithms to initiate such a plan, as mentioned by two participants, made the possibility of implementing such skills-related mechanism more plausible.

Furthermore, the findings are interlaced with the recommendations of literature to some extent. The work of Stephany (2021) recommends that online labour platforms (OLP's) can offer insight into the re-bundling and unbundling of skills as offered by gig workers. The recommendations posed by this study elevates these recommendations of the literature through a more inclusive approach that speak to the reality faced by many gig workers. As supported by the literature, gig workers are solely responsible for their own upskilling (Lehdonvirta, 2019; Broughton, 2018). Thus, enabling a holistic approach to upskilling would incorporate both the recommendations emanating from the literature and the findings of this study. In this way, platforms could recommend to gig workers of the type of skills that they should offer, and how they should pair it (skills re-bundling) (Stephany, 2021). Platforms should also offer opportunities for gig workers to gain access to courses through an affiliate approach, i.e. partnering with Udemy, Coursera etc., to offer these courses (Respondent 5). This would be incredibly useful for gig workers who cannot afford courses. The recommendations from Respondent 8 also offers a kind of synergistic approach through an online mentorship programme whereby entry-level gig workers could be paired with senior level gig

workers for more work exposure. This could positively impact entry-level gig workers who are fresh graduates seeking experience thereby adding to their developmental value.

From the perspective of developmental value, this study has shown that entry-level workers in particular, are confused about their career paths and lack the intrinsic motivations to engage in other developmental opportunities. Others are heavily constrained by some platforms which impedes on the application of skills and autonomy in general. Thus, enhanced opportunities for upskilling, reskilling through platforms could empower such workers. As Lehdonvirta (2019: 07) states, *“key factors that could enable workers to maximise the opportunities and minimise some of the drawbacks of the platform work are thus skills, dispositions, and mind-sets required to learn and develop professionally within these new work settings”*.

What benefit could platforms possibly gain from instituting such mechanisms? Nawaz *et al.*, (2019) outlined that platforms must seek ways to continuously attract freelancers as part of their business motive. Part of this may be to offer greater value in terms of upskilling and free courses. Related to this, some participants articulated that they specifically choose to remove their profiles from certain platforms due to it being constraining for them to apply for work. This finding suggests that where there is greater incentive to shift to another platform, gig workers will easily do so- due to the non-proprietary nature of the relationship. Thus, platforms that offer such features such as incentivised access to short courses and mentoring programmes, could attract a huge market of gig workers. In addition, platforms could offer clients more value, as platform would better be able to assure their clients that gig workers are engaging in just-in-time-learning. The recommendation of Nawaz *et al.* (2020) are that platforms could introduce professional certifications which do not only increase gig workers' developmental value but also assist clients in decision-making about which gig worker to use. Some platforms such as Upwork already have similar indicators through skills tests and certificates. However, Nawaz *et al.* (2020) identify a gap in the ratings process of certain platforms which does not display all of the gig workers' skills. Therefore, through professional certifications *“clients can have benchmark measurement of skills and capabilities ensured by platform, which will prevent them from scams and enhance their satisfaction”* (Nawaz *et al.*, 2020: 52). It therefore

evident the platform mechanisms for upskilling and re-skilling could benefit all three entities of this relationship: the gig worker (through enhanced developmental opportunities), the platforms (by providing features on their sites which could attract business), and finally, the client/organisation (by benefiting from the value-add of gig workers and gig platforms).

6.2 Recommendations

This study aimed to convey the subjective experiences of gig workers in relation to their skills related experiences of gig work. However, these skills related experiences cannot be viewed in isolation, as they are enmeshed with the broader processes of platform work. This study recommends a conceptual framework, as shown in Figure 6.1 below, to better articulate the recommendations emanating from the data.

The framework was developed based on the findings which explicitly showed that whilst gig workers do acquire, expand on and transfer skills during their work, this occurs at varying levels. Significantly, comparison could be drawn between entry-level and senior level freelancers. To iterate some of the key findings:

- Essential and Transferrable skills needed for gig work were identified from the participants;
- Evidence of underemployment was found amongst some participants;
- Evidence of skills expansion, skill acquisition and skills transfer were found to be achievable amongst majority (80%) of participants;
- Upskilling for gig workers was limited to the domains of high-priority or in-demand skills;
- Upskilling initiatives were financial constrained;
- The intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of entry-level gig workers were misaligned;
- Gig workers felt that gig work could allow entry-level gig worker to gain further experience and earn an income;
- Platforms should initiate incentivised structures through gig platforms to assist gig workers in upskilling and re-skilling initiatives.

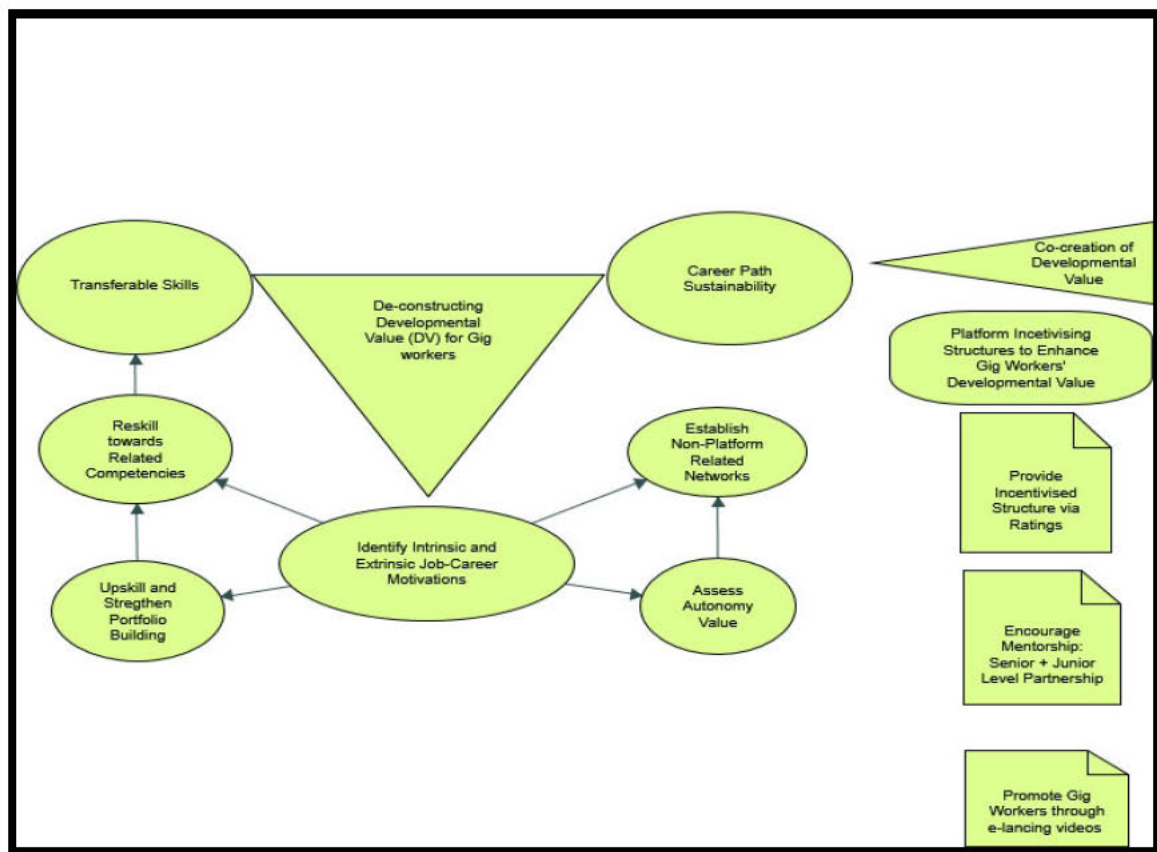


Figure 6. 1: Co-creation of Developmental Value for Gig workers

Each component of the conceptual framework is discussed below:

- **Identify Intrinsic and Extrinsic Job-Career Motivations**

According to Jabagi, Croteau, Audebrand, and Marsan (2019: 198), *“intrinsic motivation is a specific form of autonomous motivation wherein individuals engage in an activity with a full sense of willingness, volition and choice; it embodies the most self-determined behavior regulation by inherent interest, enjoyment and satisfaction”*. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand is related to the outward rewards such as financial gain. Of importance to this study it is mentioned that *“extrinsic motivators such as money neither alter the attitudes that underlie behaviors, nor can they create an enduring commitment to learning or a set of values”*, (Jabagi et al., 2019: 195). With reference to the findings emanating from this study, it is clear that some gig workers are intrinsically motivated whilst others are extrinsically motivated. In order to cultivate developmental value through gig work, gig workers must first decide if the job-career

motivations are aligned or not, (Wong *et al.*, 2020). This will then set the foundation for achieving the necessary skills, developing competencies and taking actions to ensure his/her experiences, projects and profile are aligned on gig platforms. Thus this aspect is placed at the centre of the framework as it is considered the starting point of all other development related objectives in gig work.

- ***Transferrable Skills***

This component is specifically earmarked because of the mobility it implies. The transferrability of skills can be achieved as illustrated in figure 6.1 as follows: *‘upskill and strengthen portfolio-building’* and *‘reskill toward related competencies’*. From our findings, it is evident that gig workers possess essential skills to carry out their work. Some possess highly specialised and niche skills. Other gig workers possess qualifications in professions such as law. The key aspect here is that, as illustrated earlier, the skills required by gig workers must enable their mobility in terms of moving from one project to another, or even from the gig economy to traditional employment. Transferrable skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving are key to ensuring that gig workers (especially entry-level gig workers) are able to make the transition to other forms of employment should they wish to (Brown, 2015).

This will involve upskilling but also re-skilling in accordance with skills rebundling proposed by Stephany *et al.* (2021). Gig workers can add to their portfolios, expand their knowledge and enhance the quality of their work through upskilling or reskilling. They could find the work more stimulating and engaging if they were involved with courses and trainings in the spare time. Stephany *et al.* (2020: 02) note that *“individuals often lack foresight into which skills are rising and falling, which skills are most valuable, and, most importantly, which skills their existing portfolio is complementary”*. Although the gig workers identified in the study seemed to know how they wanted to expand or re-skill, their reasoning for choosing courses was mainly aimed at meeting the demand in digitalised skills such as Search Engine Optimisation (SEO). In fact, if gig workers had a developmental value roadmap to assist and guide them, they could better determine how to better reposition their existing skills set with new skills. This could be done through the process of ‘co-creation’ as articulated in the diagram. This will be discussed below.

- **Career Path Sustainability**

In terms of developing sustainable career paths, this is highly questionable as articulated by de Ruyter *et al.* (2018). This is because autonomy and flexibility are dependant factors in determining whether gig workers can access opportunities to linearly develop their careers via the gig economy. Thus two key aspects must be considered here: '*autonomy value and establish non-platform related networks*'. Firstly, gig workers should consider whether they can experience autonomy value through their work of chosen platform. As discussed earlier, those gig workers that had less autonomy in work control and content, were less able to exercise skill variety in their work. (Pichault and McKeown, 2019; Zaman *et al.*, 2019). Secondly, gig workers must generate networks outside of the platform, so that they are able to maintain relationships even if they decide to move from one platform to another or should they want to move into organisation-based employment. This alludes to the development of career competencies (*know-how, know-whom, know-why*) as discussed earlier.

- **Co-creation of Developmental Value: Platform Incentivising Structures to Enhance Gig workers' Developmental Value**

Co-creation value as offered through platforms is listed horizontally in the diagram to show how it can assist with each objective/phase that the gig worker should integrate to achieve developmental value. Platform approaches to assist gig workers has been recommended by a number of scholars (Stephany *et al.*, 2021; Lehdonvirta, 2019). In their literature review, Lehdonvirta *et al.* (2019:20) state that while platforms provide "*skills tests and access to learning resources*", there is "*little systematic understanding*" of the overall impact of these resources and "*what constrains there may be on their further development*" of gig workers. This is further iterated from the findings of this study. Skills tests and certifications serve a one-directional purpose and do not really empower gig workers with new knowledge and skills. Hence, the mentorship programme as suggested by participants, is crucial aspect that can be further implemented via platforms. Such a model could particularly assist entry-level gig workers. Hence in figure 6.1, the study mentions '*encourage mentorship through a senior and junior level partnership*'.

In addition, a key aspect to be considered by platforms to assist gig workers in co-creating their developmental value, is the “transferability” of reputation and rankings from one platform to another. Lehdonvirta *et al.*, (2019: 17) for example, highlights that currently, rankings and ratings obtained on one platform cannot be shifted to another platform. The point is thus made that: *“This reduced mobility could in turn have implications for crowdworkers’ ability to follow skills development and career trajectories that take them, for instance, from a relatively less skilled platform towards a platform for more skilled work. It is thus work asking how inter-platform recognition and portability of skills could be improved”*, (Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2019: 17). The improvement of portability of skills, as stated by Lehdonvirta (2019) is responded through in this conceptual model. Platforms could firstly allow the accumulation of rankings and ratings and include mechanisms for gig workers to create e-lancing videos based on their ratings and ranking. Thus instead of transferring stars, and scores, they could design a video which provides a synopsis of their performance as a gig worker. This could especially help in reducing some barriers with writing ability, especially for those gig workers for whom English is a second language. This aspect is shown in Figure 6.1 as *‘promote gig workers through e-lancing videos’*.

Finally it is mentioned in Figure 6.1 that platforms could also *‘provide an incentivised through ratings’*. These incentives could be based on good performance. As mentioned earlier, by a few respondents, algorithms could in fact assist with this process, where good performance is tracked and gig workers are given a discount on courses from affiliate online e-learning companies. This approach could benefit both senior level and entry-level freelancers. For senior-level freelancers, upskilling is also a priority in order for them to keep updated with the changing needs of industry.

The study argues that this conceptual framework advances the literature in terms of its recommendations. Specifically, the contribution of this framework in terms of upskilling and mentoring capacity of platforms takes into account both senior level and entry-level gig workers in the context of a developing country like South Africa. Thus, creating a collaborative and inclusive approach that prioritises those at the periphery of employment opportunities, is critical. The recommendations may be applicable to gig workers in various contexts.

As discussed earlier, the skills offerings and upskilling mechanisms on platforms as

described in the literature represent either 'techno-centric' recommendations such as the works of Chiang *et al.* (2019) and Huang *et al.* (2019) or suggestions based on specific platform offerings such as the work of Donner *et al.* (2019) and (Beerepoot and Oprins, 2021). These suggestions are highly valuable to our understanding of how platform mechanisms can be deployed for the objective of skills development. However, this study maintains that the recommendations suggested by the participants elevate our understanding of how platforms can optimally be used to assist in gig workers developmental value. The incentivising structures to encourage upskilling and the inclusion of mentorship programmes have not previously been mentioned in the extant literature to the best of the author's knowledge. Thus, this represents a contribution of knowledge to the area of platform upskilling and skills development in the gig economy.

Finally, this study challenges the dominant discourses of platforms, gig worker exploitation and the detrimental effects of the gig economy on gig workers as only one reality of the gig economy. This study proposes that through co-creation, platforms and gig workers can synchronise objectives towards developmental value that would encourage greater skills acquisition, expansion and transfer as gig workers progress through projects. Through the findings, this study has demonstrated that developmental value through gig work is achievable. This study posits that measures to regulate the gig economy are but one approach to how we can improve this new type of labour. However, if we remain concerned with only what the gig economy lacks then will remain ignorant to how this economy can be harnessed to improve the livelihoods of people that so desperately need this work due to no other reasonable employment alternatives in their country. Earlier, the work of Anwar and Graham (2020) pointed out that regulation was viewed reluctantly by gig workers from Africa because they felt that if they complained, platforms could move their business elsewhere. Indeed, some platforms have rules which restrict which nationalities can or cannot join or register on their sites. Therefore, regulation again, should not be the only option to give the gig economy more credibility. Rather, platforms can enhance the developmental gain of such work so that gig workers are considered for better learning and skills opportunities. This could enable better sustainability in terms of this type of work because gig workers would then be better empowered, having built a good foundation of skills and experience through their work in the gig economy.

This study agrees with the sentiments raised by de Ruyter *et al.* (2018: 47) who argues that: *“if gig work is to become a new norm, then there is an argument to be made for improving the work-life trajectories of such workers. That is, if workers are easy to dismiss, then the state should have recourse to create a welfare net secure enough for them between periods of work and to improve skills and employability”*. From this statement, it is evident that government also has a huge role to play in ensuring the welfare is provided to gig workers. Also key to this study is the aspect of skills and employability which is recognized as imperative in the context of creating more sustainable work. To improve the skills development pathways of gig workers, governments could work with platforms to ensure this goal is met. There have been examples as mentioned by Graham *et al.* (2017: 138) whereby government- industry coalitions to encourage work in the gig economy are evident including: *“the Rockefeller Foundation’s 7-year Digital Jobs Africa initiative and the Malaysian government’s Digital Malaysia strategy”*. Some of these initiatives have been criticized for perpetuating traditional outsourcing under the guise of digital work and furthering exploitation (Graham *et al.*, 2017). This study argues that such initiatives must take in account the perspectives of gig workers themselves as to how such work can be improved towards being more sustainable. A key element should therefore be developmental value of gig workers through skills acquisition, expansion and upskilling opportunities which can be encouraged through the conceptual framework as illustrated above.

6.3 Limitations

The study was limited in terms of availability of gig workers for the study. Further, due to the small sample, the researcher cannot generalise the findings. Future studies should explore the developmental gains and skills acquisition, expansion and transfer and upskilling possibilities of gig work on a larger scale.

6.4 Future research

There is certainly a need to further investigate the contribution and effects of current skills development provisions by platforms for gig workers (Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2019). Future research could be experimental in nature and use a platform and a cohort of

entry-level gig workers to determine the influence that platform directed mechanisms of upskilling can have on gig workers.

There is a need to consider profession specific investigations of skills acquisition and transfer implications of such work. Nawaz *et al.* (2020) also advise that cross-country value comparisons can be done between developed, developing and under developed countries. In light of skills development and career pathing, such research would shed light as to whether populations in developed countries are better enabled to develop career competencies and enhance their developmental value through gig work.

More research needs to investigate the extent to which underemployment in the gig economy is a reality, especially within the South African context. This study has shown that underemployment is a high possibility especially for graduates in South Africa. This represents a threat to economic development in South Africa and future analyses should consider avenues for moving underemployed persons into better positions either in the gig economy and elsewhere to improve their livelihoods. It can be argued that lowering the barriers to entry and allowing anyone to compete for any job in the gig economy does not level the playing field. Instead, it heightens inequality, and maintains the status quo of precarious digital labour. Thus, future investigations, or explorations into this would be helpful. Relatedly, more studies need to analyse the extent to which gig work contributes to employability.

6.5 Conclusion

This study has been centred on the explicit behaviours, attitudes and experiences of gig workers towards their own developmental value. In order to explore this, the approach has been to dissect and segment developmental value into aspects of skills acquisition, skills expansion and skills transfer, career pathways and the upskilling approaches and techniques of gig workers. In addition, the study has explored the dominant theories that emanated from literature to provide a conceptual understanding of how gig workers acquire skills; the core competencies and capabilities that are specific to gig work and the underlying motivations that shape gig worker experiences.

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Accessed: 16 June 2021

APPENDIX 1: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



Institutional Research Ethics Committee
Research and Postgraduate Support Directorate
2nd Floor, Berwyn Court
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P O Box 1334, Durban, South Africa, 4001

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www.dut.ac.za

16 November 2021

Mrs S Palhad
4 Wade Park Close
Shastri Park
4068

Dear Mrs Palhad

Financial and insurance skills acquisition and transfer in South Africa's gig economy
Ethical Clearance number 196/21

The Institutional Research Ethics Committee acknowledges receipt of your gatekeeper permission letter.

Please note that FULL APPROVAL is granted to your research proposal. You may proceed with data collection.

Any adverse events [serious or minor] which occur in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported to the IREC according to the IREC Standard Operating Procedures (SOP's).

Please note that any deviations from the approved proposal require the approval of the IREC as outlined in the IREC SOP's.

Yours Sincerely

Prof J K Adam
Chairperson: IREC

APPENDIX 2: LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT



LETTER OF INFORMATION

Title of the Research Study: Skills acquisition and transfer in South Africa's gig economy

Principal Investigator/s/researcher: Mrs Sudhika Palhad, BA (English and Media) BSocSci Honours (International Relations) (UKZN)

Co-Investigator/s/supervisor/s: Prof Geoffrey Thomas Harris

Brief Introduction and Purpose of the Study:

Greeting (Start with a greeting, Hello, Good morning, Good Day, How are you etc.).

Good day,

My name is Sudhika Palhad and I am a master's candidate at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). I am conducting research on the implications of Gig work on skills acquisition & transfer in South Africa. This study aims to understand gig work from the perspective of freelancers, contractors, consultants and organisations engaged in this type of work and to understand how such workers acquire skills via gig platforms.

I would like to extend an invitation to you to participate in my research study through means of answering semi structured questions or engaging in a focus group discussion.

Research primarily involves empirical enquiry (real-world investigation) into phenomena (objects and subjects) in relation to an existing theory or hypothesis (assumption or explanation).

This study is part of the requirements for my master's degree at DUT. As a potential participant in my study, you are free to ask questions in relation to this study to me at any time prior to, during or post the interview process. Your concerns or enquiry you may have about this research study is important as it is necessary that that you fully understand the aims, objectives and final outcomes of the research.

You will also be given a copy of this letter of information should you wish to further discuss or deliberate on your decision to participate in this study. You will not be immediately required to make final commitment at this stage.

You are one of 20 potential participants identified for this study.

You have been chosen based on your profession and requested to voluntarily participate in this study by answering questions related to skills acquisition and transfer and gig work. If you choose to be part of the study you will either:

1. Have an interview of about 30 minutes with me or;
2. Be part of a small group of participants in a focus group discussion of about 60 minutes.

Aside from the actual interview process or focus group discussion, I will request that you are available for about a month after the initial data collection process to answer any follow up questions and make any enquires to you.

Risks or Discomforts to You: This is a very low risk study and you can therefore expect no discomforts in your participation in this study.

Withdrawal from the Study: Your participation is entirely voluntarily and you have the right to withdraw at any time and for any reason without any adverse consequences. The research may be terminated in the event of unforeseen circumstances, i.e., illness. In addition, I, as the researcher, may, under certain circumstances decide to withdraw you as participant from my study. Under such circumstances, I will duly inform you, in an email of the termination.

Benefits: This study is entirely funded by DUT therefore you are not expected to pay anything, nor will you benefit in monetary terms from this study.

Remuneration: No remuneration will be granted to you for your participation in this study.

Costs of the Study: Data costs in terms of the interview itself, to join the interview virtually via MS Teams, will be expected to be covered by you as the participant.

Confidentiality: Both interviews/discussions will be recorded and responses will be transcribed to be used as part of the final thesis. Nothing that you say will be traced back to you. All quotes and data used from the interview with you will be anonymized and then used in the final thesis.

Results: The results of the research will be distributed only in the final thesis. Any new findings, results arising from this research study, which is related to your involvement in this study, may be disseminated to you as a participant.

Research-related Injury: There will be no compensation to the participant if injury occurs during the interview process as the interview does not cause bodily harm or adverse reaction.

Storage of all electronic and hard copies including tape recordings: All the information collected will be recorded and kept in a locked drive and destroyed after five years. The access to this electronic drive will be restricted to the principal researcher, which is myself.

Persons to contact in the Event of Any Problems or Queries:

You may contact the following people with reference to any queries or challenges pertaining to the research being conducted:

Researcher: Mrs Sudhika Palhad: sudhikap@dut.ac.za /

0724285386 My supervisor: Prof Geoffrey Harris:

geoffreyh@dut.ac.za / 031 373 5709

The Institutional Research Ethics administrator on 031 373 2375.

Complaints can be reported to the Director: Dr. Linda Linganiso (Research and Postgraduate Support) at researchdirector@dut.ac.za. Contact number: 031 373 2577.



CONSENT

Full Title of the Study: Skills acquisition and transfer in South Africa's gig economy

Names of Researcher/s: Mrs Sudhika Palhad, BA (English and Media) BSocSci Honours (International Relations) (UKZN)

Statement of Agreement to Participate in the Research Study:

- I hereby confirm that I have been informed by the researcher, Mrs Sudhika Palhad, about the nature, conduct, benefits and risks of this study - Research Ethics Clearance Number: 196/21•
- I have also received, read and understood the above written information (Participant Letter of Information) regarding the study.
- I am aware that the results of the study, including personal details regarding my sex, age, date of birth, initials and diagnosis will be anonymously processed into a study report.
- In view of the requirements of research, I agree that the data collected during this study can be processed in a computerised system by the researcher.
- I may, at any stage, without prejudice, withdraw my consent and participation in the study.
- I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and (of my own free will) declare myself prepared to participate in the study.
- I understand that significant new findings developed during the course of this research which may relate to my participation will be made available to me.

Full Name of Participant

Date

Time

Signature/Right Thumb Print

I, Mrs Sudhika Palhad, herewith confirm that the above participant has been fully informed about the nature, conduct and risks of the above study.

Mrs Sudhika Palhad

02/05/2022

Name of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE



Topic: The experience of South African gig workers in acquiring and transferring skills

Date:

Time:

I will start by introducing myself and the purpose of conducting the interview. I will thank the participant for agreeing to be a part of my study. Research procedure will be followed. I will outline the ethical considerations and inform the participant about the use of the Dictaphone throughout the session. The respondent will be assured that the Dictaphone will strictly be used by the researcher only and that the recording will thereafter be transferred to a computer and password protected. The recording will also be deleted from the device to avoid access to the recording by other people.

General Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself and what kind of work you are involved with?
2. Would you describe yourself as an entry-level or experienced professional?
3. Does your work on the platform provide you with a primary or secondary source of income?
4. How long have you been listed as a worker on this platform?
5. When did you first hear of such a platform and what motivated you to join?
6. Did you easily adapt to the environment? What were some immediate challenges you experienced?

Leading Questions about nature of Gig work:

7. How would explain the difference between platform-mediated work as opposed to working as an employee of a company?
8. What are the implicit differences about this type of work as opposed to working for a company?

Questions about skills:

9. What skills are required of you to perform work in your role and did you take courses, programmes to expand on your skills when you first joined these platforms?

10. In what ways do you expand on your skills and competencies presently, as a freelancer?
11. Please elaborate on some of your experiences on the platforms, your type of clients and the level of skills required in various contexts.
12. What effect does the rating or feedback mechanism on platforms have on your work?
13. Have you ever been motivated to upskill or reskill yourself as a result of a poor rating or rejection by a company or organisation?
14. Would you say that the work you provided for organisations added value in terms of skills, expertise and knowledge?
15. Freelancers often need to exercise know-how, know-whom and know-why competencies in their work. Know-how competencies relate to the ability to optimally exercise your skills. Know-whom competencies relate to the ability of freelancers to build and expand networks in order to market themselves.

Know-why competencies relates to the purpose behind the task/project at hand.

How would you say you utilise and maximise such competencies through your work?

16. Besides providing a source of income, what are some of the positive/rewarding aspects of obtaining work via the platform?
17. Online Digital Platforms such as Fiverr, Upwork have granted opportunities to numerous people across the globe especially in the Global South and on the African continent. How has freelancing via these platforms provided an opportunity for you and how has it either made your freelancing journey easier or more challenging?
18. What are the positive and negative aspects of being an online freelancer via platforms?
19. What features or mechanisms have you come across via platforms such as Fiverr and Upwork that is assisting freelancers in building and further advancing their skills, if any?
20. How do you think platforms can assist freelancers, like yourself, in building and further advancing their skills, if at all?
21. How has your work as freelancer been rewarding and/ or constraining to your career path?
22. Given the high rate of unemployment amongst youth and graduates throughout the African continent, how do you think freelancing can be a 'bridge' for young people to build their skills, portfolios an experience? Would you recommend young join these freelancing platforms in search of better opportunities?