

**Special Report** Gig economy**Driven to despair – the hidden costs of the gig economy**

Signing up with the likes of Uber or Deliveroo offers flexibility, but the isolation and stress can take their toll

Sarah O'Connor SEPTEMBER 22 2017

Sami needed money and Uber seemed like a good way to make it. He could clock off after an eight-hour shift at Tesco, the supermarket, hop into his car and log straight on to the ride-hailing app. But the long hours were a struggle. Sometimes he found himself falling asleep at the wheel. “I had to force myself to stop the car in the middle of nowhere sometimes, get fresh air, get Red Bull, just something.” This, the 29-year-old says, is a hidden danger of the so-called “gig economy”: he says the roads are filling up with exhausted drivers who have only an app for company and no one telling them when to stop. He talked to fellow Uber drivers at the airport and discovered some were working for 14 or 15 hours a day.

“It’s quite shocking; nobody really knows about it,” he says. “If you go at night to Shoreditch, Soho, Clapham [in London], you will see a lot of [Uber drivers in] accidents; nine times out of 10 it’s because of tiredness.” Uber does not currently restrict the time drivers in London can be logged in to the app, though a spokesman says the company sends messages to people who have been driving for a “prolonged” period to remind them of the importance of taking breaks.

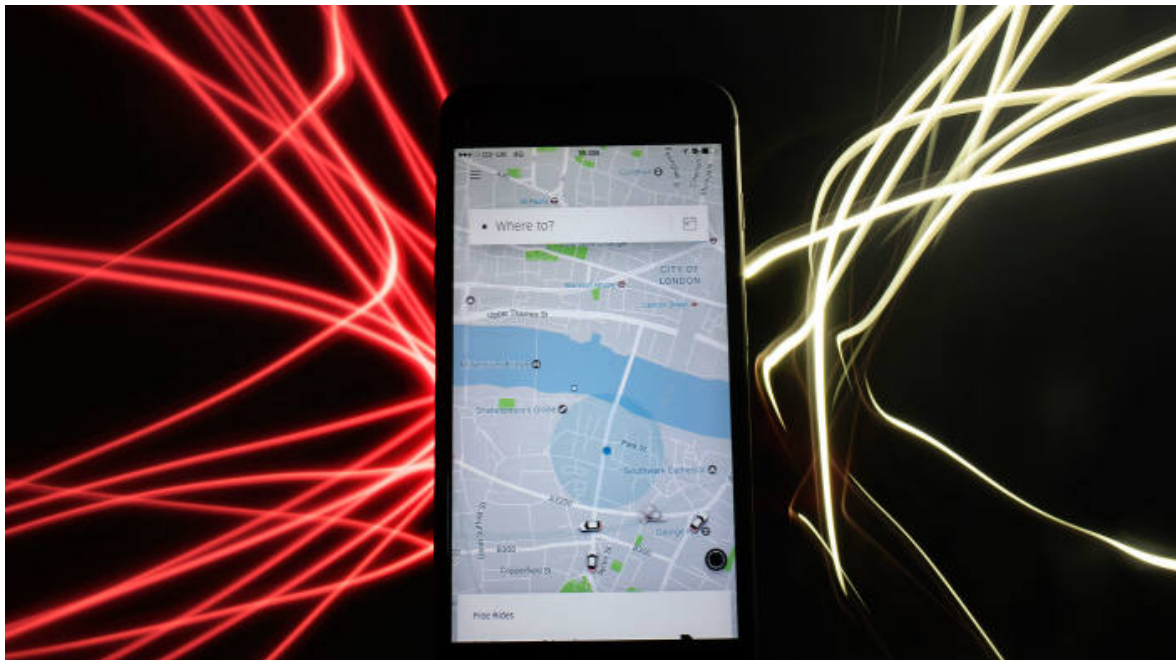
Even if Uber did limit the number of hours people could work per day, Sami says, the company would not know about people like him who had worked a full day elsewhere before logging on. He also worries about the slow-burn damage being done to drivers’ physical and mental health. “It’s very, very lonely — it’s just you inside your box, driving with London traffic, with all this stress. The long-term effect, honestly: it’s like a bomb waiting to explode.”

“Gig economy” companies like Uber, which from the end of September [loses its licence to operate in London](#), connect workers to customers via online platforms. They usually allow people to “log on” to work when they want, but the companies often control and monitor the work, and some also set the fee. There are roughly 1.1m people working in the “gig economy” in the UK — about the same number as in the National Health Service, the country’s largest employer. Ask someone who works in the “gig economy” what attracted them and they almost always say “the flexibility”. The promise of being able to choose when to work is a powerful one, particularly for lower-paid workers whose other job options can be inflexible and disempowering.

One 21-year-old student at Leicester University, who did not want to be named, said he signed up to deliver food on his bicycle for “gig” company Deliveroo, after his hours were cut in his bar job. To be able to top up his income flexibly via Deliveroo was “quite freeing”, he says. “It was good for my confidence, not being reliant on one thing.”

Multiple studies have shown that genuine flexibility is good for one’s health. Francis Green, professor of work and education economics at University College London, says data from the long-running [European Working Conditions Survey](#) (which covers 44,000 workers in 35 countries) show a remarkable link between wellbeing and the option to “take an hour or two off during working hours to take care of personal or family matters”. [A 2015 study of virtual secretaries](#) — white-collar “gig economy” workers who do administrative tasks for clients from home — flagged this same positive factor. “It’s the flexibility of it. I’m here for my daughter and it doesn’t matter if she’s sick; it doesn’t matter if she’s on school holiday. I haven’t got to panic about childcare. That is absolutely fantastic,” one virtual secretary told the researchers.

But for Joanna Wilde, a consultant organisational psychologist and board director of the Council for Work and Health, these health benefits do not outweigh the risks for “gig economy” workers. “The flexibility to be around when your daughter is sick — absolutely [that’s good]. But that is not a benefit of working for Uber; that is a benefit of working for a good company,” she says.



Uber does not restrict how long drivers in London can be logged into its app but is planning to introduce a limit © Charlie Bibby

Occupational health experts have yet to investigate properly the potential risks of “gig economy” work. But a paper published by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine in April called on the profession to [start worrying about it](#). The article pointed out that “both offline work in transportation and services and online work are characterised by a number of health and safety hazards”.

In the case of food-delivery bike riders, demand often peaks at times when conditions are most hazardous. People will often order takeaway meals when it is cold, dark and wet. One winter night in Brighton, south-east England, in near-freezing temperatures, a Deliveroo cyclist called Eugene Zakharenko was cycling up a hill when he felt a sharp pain in his stomach. He phoned a doctor who concluded he had hypothermia. “I tried to learn from it — if you sweat, you immediately get cold.” Part of the problem is the waiting outside in bad weather for Deliveroo’s algorithm to assign riders an order.

Then there are the longer-term health consequences — what Wilde calls “slow accidents”. She says any gig job that combines a lack of control over how the work is done, insecurity of income, low pay and isolation represents an “absolute recipe for a stress-related illness”. She adds: “You couldn’t treat a human being in a way that is more guaranteed to generate some sort of mental health problem.”

Kevin Daniels, professor of organisational behaviour at the University of East Anglia, says isolation is particularly hazardous to health. “Hundreds of high-quality studies” show that social relationships are critical to wellbeing and safety at work, he says. He has [published a study](#) on the health and safety of “remote” workers that shows being able to talk, preferably face-to-face, with a line manager is also critical.

## **The long-term effect of all this stress: honestly, it's like a bomb waiting to explode**

Yet one of the defining features of “gig-economy” work is the lack of human line managers. The platforms classify the workers as “independent contractors” and most communication is done via the app or email. When Yaseen Aslam first switched from a traditional minicab company to Uber in 2013, this was one of the things he loved about it. Unlike at the cab company, where he felt favouritism

led to some drivers being given more jobs, the Uber algorithm played fair. “If a job comes, you would get it,” he says. But as time went on, Uber cut the fares and he had to drive for longer to maintain a decent income. He says he was driving about 40 hours a week initially and earning about £1,000 after expenses; two years later, just before he stopped driving for Uber, he was sometimes working about 70 hours a week and taking home about £500.

He also felt stressed by the customer-rating system. Uber “deactivates” drivers whose average ratings drop too low, though the company says they are given “several opportunities” over a two-month period to improve their rating before they are deactivated.

Aslam began to miss the social aspects of his old minicab job. “When the work was quiet, you’d go back into the office: all the drivers would be there, you’d mingle, you’d have a little chit-chat.” Uber was lonely by comparison because everyone was operating on their own, often with fixed costs such as car-loan repayments hanging over them.

He thinks many Uber drivers have depression but avoid seeing a doctor for fear it would go on their medical record and affect their ability to drive. “You go in the morning to work and you need to earn ‘X’ amount of money; you’re sitting there all day, you’re not talking to anyone, you’re isolated — it does get to you,” he says. “You notice these low mood swings; there’s times where you can’t talk properly, you’re shaking, you’re not thinking straight.”

But what obligation, if any, do “gig economy” companies have to protect these workers’ health and safety?



Deliveroo is recruiting ‘operations liaison’ staff to whom its riders can talk about safety concerns © Bloomberg

Some of the platforms are making changes in response to growing concerns. Speaking before Uber loses its London licence, a spokesman for the company said the company was planning to introduce a limit “later this year” on the number of hours a driver in London can use the app within a given period. Uber also started offering discounted illness and injury insurance to UK drivers this year. “With our app, drivers are totally free to choose if, when and where they drive, with no shifts or minimum hours so they can balance driving with other commitments,” says Fred Jones, head of UK cities at Uber. He says drivers’ average fares are £15 an hour after Uber’s fee “and, even after costs, the average driver took home well over the national living wage” of £7.50 an hour.



Meanwhile, Deliveroo is hiring 50 “operations liaison” staff who will be “named, physical points of contact that riders can approach whenever they have safety concerns”. “As a point of principle, Deliveroo believes that the people who ride with us should be kept as safe as possible,” says a Deliveroo spokesman. “We provide all of our riders with helmets and lights free of charge and give them safety guidance before working with us.”

Will Shu, Deliveroo chief executive, has said he would like to do more for couriers. “I’m the first to admit there are some anxieties out there about this new way of working — in particular, whether certain benefits and protections, like sick pay or insurance, should be on offer,” he said earlier this year. But he went on to say that if Deliveroo were to offer such benefits, the courts would view Deliveroo riders as “workers”, who would require pre-arranged shifts. “This would not only put at risk the flexibility our riders cherish but would limit our ability to respond to customer demand,” Shu added.

Aslam believes the best way to help Uber drivers is to force the company to treat them as “workers” rather than “independent contractors”. Last year, he and another Uber driver called James Farrar took this argument to an employment tribunal. The judges ruled in their favour, saying it was “[faintly ridiculous](#)” for Uber to present itself as “a mosaic of 30,000 small businesses linked by a common platform”. Because Uber controlled the fees and funnelled the work to the drivers, the three-person panel pointed out, the drivers had no power to “grow their business” other than to “spend more hours at the wheel.” Uber is appealing against the ruling.

A spokesman for the Health and Safety Executive, which enforces UK health and safety law, says the “changing nature of employment is an area we are following closely in order to identify and explore possible health and safety impacts”.

Aslam says people who feel under pressure should ask for help.” Not talking about it means it’s not being dealt with,” he says. “And these guys are getting worse and worse.”

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