

Gig economy may hold some hope for jobs in age of COVID-19

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Hundreds of thousands of Australians are out of work as a result of COVID-19, but a QUT expert says some may find new jobs through digital platforms, particularly in areas like food delivery, writing, law, accountancy, home maintenance, IT or graphic design.

More than 100 such platforms are now operating in Australia, with workers matched to clients via apps or websites who are then paid through the [platform](#).

"Doors have slammed shut for many employees throughout Australia since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and there may be alternative work opportunities within the [gig economy](#)," said Professor Paula McDonald from QUT's Business School.

"Digital platform, or 'gig' workers may be eligible for JobKeeper payments but as self-employed workers they must demonstrate a 30 percent reduction in turnover from the previous 12 months. Establishing this may be difficult for some.

"There have also been concerns raised about on-demand drivers having to choose between earning an income delivering food and other goods and being exposed to COVID-19, especially as they face an absence of sick pay entitlements if they acquire the virus or are directed to self-isolate.

"However, the gig economy could provide opportunities for some

workers laid off from 'regular jobs' to source alternative income."

Professor McDonald and QUT colleagues Dr. Penny Williams and Associate Professor Robyn Mayes, along with researchers from UTS and the University of Adelaide, last year conducted the first ever national [Digital Platform Work in Australia](#) survey and have now published their preliminary findings.

"We had more than 14,000 useable responses from adult internet users from throughout Australia and the top five platforms are Airtasker, Uber, Freelancer, Uber Eats and Deliveroo," Professor McDonald said.

"Overall, 13.1% of survey respondents have, at some time, undertaken digital platform work, similar to recent findings in Europe but larger than any previous estimates in Australia.

"It's a rapidly growing sector and while for most it is not full-time, a substantial minority treat the income generated from this work as important or even essential.

"There are two main types of digital platform work. The first is performed in-person at a specified location, such as driving, food delivery, caring or home maintenance. The second is computer or internet-based."

Professor McDonald said the COVID-19 restrictions requiring people to mostly stay at home, along with the closure of restaurants, cafes, hotels and other hospitality venues, has probably driven up demand for some kinds of in-person [digital platform](#) work.

"Transport and food delivery were the most common types of work performed by platform workers in our survey. This work is consistent with social distancing rules because the driver usually works solo and has

limited contact with restaurant staff and often no contact with customers," she said.

"Even as some restrictions relax, demand in this space may well increase as a result of people's reluctance to encounter others on public transport. At the same time, work for on-demand drivers may well decrease due to fewer people having nights out and meeting with others.

"Uber has just announced a cut of 3,000 staff and the closer of 45 offices, including its Singapore base. This comes after the company already shed 3,700 jobs earlier in May.

"Computer or internet-based platform work may also provide options for some who have lost jobs, especially in professional services such as law, accountancy, engineering and architecture, or fields like writing and translation, creative and multimedia work and software development.

"People with technological, creative or professional skills may find work on digital platforms and work entirely from home for clients anywhere in the world. They may even be able to develop new skills and enjoy a level of flexibility not possible in regular employment.

"Constraining such opportunities, however, is the overall contraction of the global economy. The chances of substituting employment income with money earned performing internet-based platform work are also dependent on particular skills sets and having appropriate home-based technology.

"Gig workers should also assess whether income they earn is sufficient for the time and effort they put in. Most platforms don't pay workers to create and maintain online profiles, respond to jobs that don't eventuate, negotiate with prospective clients, and travel between paid jobs or tasks.

"For these reasons, many platform workers don't know how much they actually earn per hour.

"And if more retrenched workers sign onto platforms without an equal increase in client demand, it may create further competition for work and a 'race to the bottom' in pay and conditions."

Provided by Queensland University of Technology

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