


Disabled gig workers in Canada: Exploring experiences and identifying interventions to improve safety and well-being

☰ Executive Summary



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Platform apps and gig work predate the pandemic, but the number of people that they employ increased sharply as a result of COVID-19 related lockdowns and job losses. Too little is known about the working conditions in the gig economy, especially for particular groups of workers, like people living with disabilities.

This project examined gig work literature and applied its insights to conduct semi-structured interviews with a small group of Canadians with disabilities engaged in gig work.

The findings from the review and interviews showed that many people living with disabilities feel pushed into gig work by a lack of other employment options. Despite the financial instability, lack of benefits and discrimination that accompany gig work for people living with disabilities, the majority of interviewees in this project said that they preferred gig work because of its flexibility.

The findings of this project provide policy-makers and employers more information about the evolving gig workforce and how people living with disabilities are faring. It also provides rationale for efforts to improve financial security of those doing gig work, and increase availability of benefits.

KEY INSIGHTS

- 1 84% of people living with disabilities interviewed for this project felt that they'd been pushed into gig work due to a lack of suitable and accommodating employment.
- 2 76% of people living with disabilities interviewed for this project appreciated the flexibility that gig work afforded them.
- 3 Despite the challenges, the majority of interviewees in this project said that they preferred gig work.

▶ The Issue

Although platform apps and gig work predate the pandemic, the number of people that they employ increased sharply as a result of COVID-19-related job loss and the influx of available work that was driven towards gig platforms at that time. The term 'gig economy' refers to a short, task-based means of generating income that is different from temporary contracting and business ownership. In the gig world, workers are paid out per task or hourly, and are involved in a variety of work ranging from transportation to graphic design. Gig workers can be based anywhere in the world and often serve international clients.



It's estimated that gig workers represent roughly 10% of the current workforce in Canada and provide a wide set of services that many have become dependent upon. Gig work does not appear to be disappearing any time soon. However, there are concerns about the working conditions in the gig economy. This remains especially true in the context of gig workers with disabilities, who face a different set of challenges and do not have access to the same employment opportunities as workers without disabilities. People of working age who have a disability face barriers including workplace stigma, hiring practice discrimination, physical and mental impairment, lack of accommodations, long term and/or repetitive strain and sometimes an inability to meet job demands.

It is important that both research and policy remain at the forefront of establishing an understanding of gig work and how to best support people who do gig work moving forward, including understanding how different groups, like people living with disabilities, experience gig work.

What We Investigated

This project sought to understand the experiences of people living with disabilities working in the gig economy, specifically the benefits and drawbacks of doing gig work and effective interventions to protect the health and safety of disabled gig workers in Canada.

The research questions guiding the project include:

1. What are the lived experiences of people with disabilities working in the gig economy in Canada? How does working in the gig economy affect the health and well-being of disabled Canadians? What are the differences in lived experience based on generational status, gender, race and/or immigrant status?
2. What barriers and opportunities exist for people with disabilities in gig work?
3. What interventions by the government and the private sector protect the health and well-being of disabled gig workers in Canada?

To answer these questions, the project performed a scoping review, surveying literature on gig work and people living with disabilities to identify themes and gaps. Findings from the scoping review informed semi-structured interviews with people living with disabilities working in the Canadian gig economy.

What We're Learning

The project interviewed 21 people living with disabilities who were doing gig work. These experiences corroborated many of the themes that emerged from the scoping review, which synthesized findings from 57 articles from 2002-2022.

Pushed into the gig economy due to a lack of options. Although positive themes emerged from the interviews, on the whole, interviewees had more negative than positive things to say about working in the gig economy. Most felt pushed into gig work due to a lack of employment options, rather than attracted to go into the field. This finding corroborates other research that indicates limited employment choices for many people living with disabilities. Of those that reflected on this, 84% (n=16) felt that they'd been pushed into gig work due to a lack of suitable and accommodating employment. Despite the feeling that many people with disabilities are pushed into gig work, the majority of interviewees in this project said that they preferred gig work, most often citing its flexibility.

Drawbacks of the gig economy for people living with disabilities.

Interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the absence of protections and benefits available in the gig economy and most felt the work was not financially sustainable due to its unpredictability. This corroborates recent studies on the gig economy that echo the financial instability described by interviewees and the mental and physical health consequences of it. The need for benefits and access to paid leave was also well documented in existing literature, where these drawbacks were reported as even more critical than insufficient income. As mentioned by an interviewee, gig workers with disabilities are often the people who need medical benefits the most, due to managing ongoing health concerns and having little income to cover external disability-related costs themselves.

Pull factors for people living with disabilities to the gig economy.

Interviewees appreciated certain aspects of gig work, including the flexibility, increased autonomy, flexible working hours, and the ability to leverage their unique skills and strengths. This corroborates other research findings on the benefits of flexibility and autonomy that gig work facilitates and how these freedoms can support health and work-life integration.

Common for people living with disabilities to experience discrimination in gig work. Nearly half of the people living with disabilities that were interviewed for this project (n=10, 48%) said they experience discrimination in the gig economy as a result of their disability. This included instances where ongoing work was discontinued once the client realized the gig worker had a disability; a sense of amazement from clients that high-quality work was completed by a person living with a disability, or statements that insinuate the deliverables were low priority because they were handled by a person living with a disability. Only a few of the studies included in the scoping review mentioned racial discrimination in certain fields of gig work and gender inequity, but none so far have touched on disability-related stigma and discrimination, so more research is needed. produce training at the cutting edge of technology while being appropriate for mid-career professionals.

 **Why It Matters**

As the gig economy becomes more prevalent around the world, some economists and social scientists have theorized that individuals with disabilities may start to make up a large percentage of the gig work population.

This project suggests that gig work is a viable, albeit precarious form of work for some people living with disabilities. Depending on the type of disability that an individual is living with, the option to pursue gig work can feel like a welcomed solution or a last resort. It can offer flexibility, but often at the expense of income security. These points considered, as the gig economy continues to expand, discussions around equity and safety for the industry's workers will continue to be a crucial discussion to which future researchers and decision-makers should pay attention.

The drawbacks of gig work are similar across groups of workers – financial instability, lack of benefits and protections – but this project suggests that the impact of these drawbacks may be especially acute for people living with disabilities. The lack of predictable, reliable income and the lack of benefits means that gig workers living with disabilities may be less able to afford the necessary treatment and care for their disabilities than both non-disabled gig workers and those with disabilities in standard, secure employment. Ironically,

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the traditional working world that most often pushes out people with disabilities, is the very same one that offers long-term disability coverage and the best medical insurance. The workers who arguably need these services the most then, have the least opportunity to access them and may front their disability-related costs out of pocket. Decision-makers at different levels can improve this inequity by finding ways to offer gig workers in general, but people living with disabilities especially, health benefits and more income security.

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What's Next

Disabled gig workers in Canada project partners created videos for finding interventions to improve safety and well-being is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.