

Platform workers stuck in career cul-de-sacs deserve closer look so others don't fall into same trap

Researchers from the Institute of Policy Studies found that platform workers lack savings and are financially stressed.

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SINGAPORE - For the past two years, Riz has been trying to leave the ride-hailing business, but he just cannot seem to get out. Despite applying for close to 170 jobs, the 38-year-old has not had much success.

Boon Lai, 35, started delivering food four years ago as a temporary measure but now finds himself stuck as well. The university graduate has tried multiple training and upskilling programmes to no avail, and has accepted that he has to continue his current gig until it is no longer viable.

These were some of the struggles that platform workers shared with Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) researchers in a study published on Monday (Feb 28).

The participants, including Riz and Boon Lai, were given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

While the study highlighted several downsides to platform work that need to be addressed - from the lack of savings to worsening health - the fact that workers risk becoming trapped in a job they see no future in is perhaps the most concerning.

Platform workers like Riz and Boon Lai choose to enter the industry for its perks.

They get to be their own boss and are drawn in by the flexible hours, a low barrier to entry and the promise of better pay instantly.

But the study found that many see platform work as temporary, though if Riz's and Boon Lai's experiences are anything to go by, full-time platform workers could easily get sucked into social insecurity, particularly if they are low income.

The IPS researchers said: "Boon Lai may not have been a precarious worker before food delivery, but after prolonged periods of being 'stuck' in this work, his career options and social security continue to drop."

According to the latest Ministry of Manpower statistics, about 63,900 workers did platform work as their main job last year.

The researchers found that due to age and irrelevant experience, the longer a worker stays in platform work, the harder it is to leave.

What is worse is that full-time platform workers have to pull long hours to earn a decent wage, which takes time away from skills training. Of the 958 private-hire car drivers polled, 29 per cent said they spent more than 59 hours a week on the road.

So what can be done about this?

First, as the researchers acknowledged, any interventions need to take into account the wide range of platform workers out there.

Just as there are those who slog for hours, 31 per cent of the drivers polled said they worked fewer than 20 hours a week, so solutions cannot be one-size-fits-all.

Yet, drawing the line between casual and full-time platform workers can be tricky as one could switch from part time one month to full time the next month.

That is the beauty of platform work, some would argue.

To boost career mobility, one suggestion by the researchers is for more help to be given to platform workers to pivot to new jobs.

To be fair to the platform companies, they have been trying.

Ride-hailing giant Grab has long touted its GrabAcademy initiative, which provides training and career support. Just last month, it tied up with Secura Group to provide new security officer training courses and up to 200 job opportunities.

Similarly, food delivery firm foodpanda last year partnered Temasek Polytechnic and e-learning platform Gnowbe to offer courses to its riders, while Deliveroo has partnered online education platform OpenClassrooms since 2018.

But have these initiatives actually helped platform workers here bridge the ever-widening skills gap? Why are some still having trouble finding new jobs?

These are areas that warrant further investigation.

Another possible way is to secure the long-term finances of platform workers, so they can afford to plan ahead.

The three key areas being looked at by the advisory committee on platform workers - improving housing and retirement adequacy, likely through Central Provident Fund (CPF) contributions; beefing up workplace injury insurance; and enhancing representation - should help to do this.

There is also the question of whether workers getting stuck in platform work is a symptom of larger issues related to poor wages and conditions for bottom earners.

Associate Professor Irene Ng, from the National University of Singapore's department of social work, pointed this out during a panel discussion on Monday.

Fixing this may be beyond the remit of the advisory committee but, with younger people taking on more non-standard work arrangements, policymakers should keep a close eye so others do not fall into the same traps as platform workers.

Legislative changes are being considered, but this is a path that Singapore seems unlikely to take. Professor Danny Quah, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and vice-chairman of the advisory committee, said as much on Monday when he described changing the laws here as a blunt instrument.

Still, pain points, such a lack of transparency on compensation and incentive structures, need to be tackled, even if they are less pressing. The control exerted via algorithmic management is another issue raised by IPS that should be addressed.

Regulations in this regard could help to level the playing field.

The IPS study said it is crucial that there are not only government interventions, but also solutions from platform companies and driver and rider associations. Such co-created and collaborative solutions provide the best way forward, the study said.

Hopefully, given the extensive public consultations that have taken place, recommendations to be put forth by the advisory committee later this year will help platform workers like Riz and Boon Lai find the best way out of their cul-de-sacs.