

EPSRC Balance Network Seminar

Prolonging working life through ICT: The role of crowdsourcing

Abstract

The development of a fast and reliable internet, new technologies, new online payment systems and changes in work structure have driven a shift to dynamic forms of internet-enabled labour exchange such as 'crowdsourcing'. Crowdsourcing is defined as outsourcing of work to a large group through an open call, but terminology is evolving as new aspects of using internet-enabled exchanges in work-related activities emerge. Using crowdsourcing platforms and websites, workers can search and access paid work, which is often conducted remotely. Discussion at the event focused on whether a typology of crowdsourcing is possible given the diversity of activities and workers involved, and whether crowdsourcing may be useful for those working in later life as providing a more flexible way of working. It was noted that those working later in their life offer experience and skills and may have different expectations about work-life balance and the role technology could play in achieving a better balance. Understanding how engaging in crowdsourcing impacts on and influences individual work-life balance is yet to be explored fully, but evidence presented suggested that some crossover between life and work is seemingly inevitable with technology. The importance of support for older people emerged strongly in dialogue on the potential enablers and barriers to engaging in crowdsourcing.

Background/aim of seminar

The aims of the seminar were to:

- Foster interdisciplinary dialogue by bringing together key stakeholders to debate issues of work-life balance, crowdsourcing and prolonged working life; and to
- Contribute to future research that would examine crowdsourcing from a worker perspective to inform policy.

This seminar provided an opportunity to review and critically evaluate current understanding, policies and practices around crowdsourcing and how it could contribute to the achievement of work-life balance in prolonged working life. Overall, the objective of the seminar was to promote new thinking and stimulate new research agendas around this technology enabling work-life balance. The seminar was successful in starting discussions between, and a creating a network of, researchers from different disciplines and fields, who might not otherwise have met or interacted.

Overview of seminar

The one-day seminar was held on 3 March 2016 (10am – 3.45pm) and was held at the Warwick Conference Centre, University of Warwick. All presentations are available from the IER website: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/balance-network/>

Welcome and introduction, Dr Sally-Anne Barnes (Warwick Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick)

The Balance network, the range of activities being funded and the Beyond Balance conference were introduced. The seminar and its aims were outlined together with a definition of crowdsourcing. Participants were asked to declare whether: they had heard about crowdsourcing before the seminar; they think they have good ICT skills; they have the skills needed to engage in crowdsourcing; they have a good work-life balance now; they expect to be working past 55 years; and they would like to be

working past 55 years and have a better work-life balance. This provided an opportunity to start discussions.

Current trends in crowd employment, Professor Ursula Huws (University of Hertfordshire Business School)

Ursula presented the results of innovative work in progress commissioned by the Foundation for European Progressive Studies and Uni-Europa on the extent and characteristics of crowd employment in Europe. She paid particular attention to the demographics of the crowd labour force, the kinds of work they are carrying out, their working conditions and employment status. Ursula's presentation gave an overview of the crowdsourcing landscape and the terminology used. This created a shared understanding of crowdsourcing for the day as well as highlighting some of the trends in crowdsourcing platforms and available work. Issues were discussed around how to measure and capture those engaged in crowdsourcing, in order to better understand whether the numbers of crowdsourced workers are increasing and how available work is changing.

The role of human and social support in sustaining digital participation of older ICT users, Professor Leela Damodaran (Loughborough University)

Leela presented findings from a recent study, SUS-IT, on the critical role of human/social support in sustaining digital participation of older ICT users. The research found that older users find getting online easy, but sustaining interest and connectivity is more difficult as there is a need to keep up-to-date with technology changes and upgrades. Physical, cognitive, personal and social changes were also noted as issues with sustaining ICT participation. Leela's presentation provided an up-to-date understanding of older people's use of technology, their experiences and what they get from engaging with ICT. Motivations and engagement with ICT were found to improve if it is embedded in social activities and personal interests. Older people were also found to need ongoing, trusted and readily available support within the local community. Issues were discussed around whether older people would want to do crowdsourcing and how support could be provided to those engaged in this work.

Reshaping the work-life boundary?, Professor Chris Warhurst (Warwick Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick)

Chris talked about the boundary between work and life and its various forms – separation, alternation, adaptation, accommodation, amalgamation and absorption. He focused on how structure and agency shapes these forms as well as how digital technology is already affecting this boundary by enabling home-working. Chris's presentation provided an exploration of the potential impact on the future shape of the work-life boundary for older workers. It was noted that there is a need to appreciate the integration and separation of work and life. Crowdsourcing, it was suggested, offers more intangible and mobile work, so there is more likely to be work and life mix. Concerns were raised about the nature of work being an isolating experience, but also providing a better work-life balance. This issue of how crowdsourced workers are supported was again raised.

Crowdsourcing 4 good, Jayne Cravens (Coyote Communications)

Jayne talked about crowdsourcing efforts focused on supporting NGOs, causes, activism, etc. as a form of unpaid crowdsourced work. The virtual volunteering workforce completes tasks as a paid worker would, but that their participation in this form of crowdsourcing is based on interests and motivations to do good. Jayne's presentation provided an overview of lessons learnt for individuals and organisations from virtual volunteering that are applicable to all crowdsourcing activities. From an organisational perspective, crowdsourcing has been found to be an effective way of engaging a talented pool of workers, as well as reaching new audiences. From an individual perspective, crowdsourcing enables people, who might not otherwise be able to help, to get involved with online tasks. Everyone is judged on their skills, their work and their character, which may combat discrimination of older people and those with a disability. Issues on how there are no boundaries with this work were discussed.

Crowdsourcing and engagement by older workers, Dr Sally-Anne Barnes (Warwick Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick)

Sally-Anne presented findings from a small qualitative study on crowdsourcing for paid work in the UK and Europe. She focused how crowdsourcing has impacted on the work, life and careers of those engaged in this form of work. It was noted that the evidence on crowdsourced workers has changed in line with the shift from micro tasks to more complex and challenging tasks requiring skilled labour. Sally-Anne's presentation provided evidence from those engaged in crowdsourced work focusing on their motivations (intrinsic and extrinsic), as well as the skills required and developed by engaging in this work. Evidence from the crowd emphasised the importance of lifecourse considerations in determining whether an individual engaged in this work or not. For older workers, lifecourse and flexibility were important as well as providing a way to overcome discrimination in the labour market and overcoming barriers to working on-site. In terms of health and wellbeing, crowdsourcing was found to have a positive influence particularly as individuals have a choice around how, where and when to work. Issues were discussed around the lack of confidence in ICT, the need for ICT training and the importance of previous experience to engage in crowdsourcing.

Summary of discussions by Professor Anne Green

The following topics were discussed:

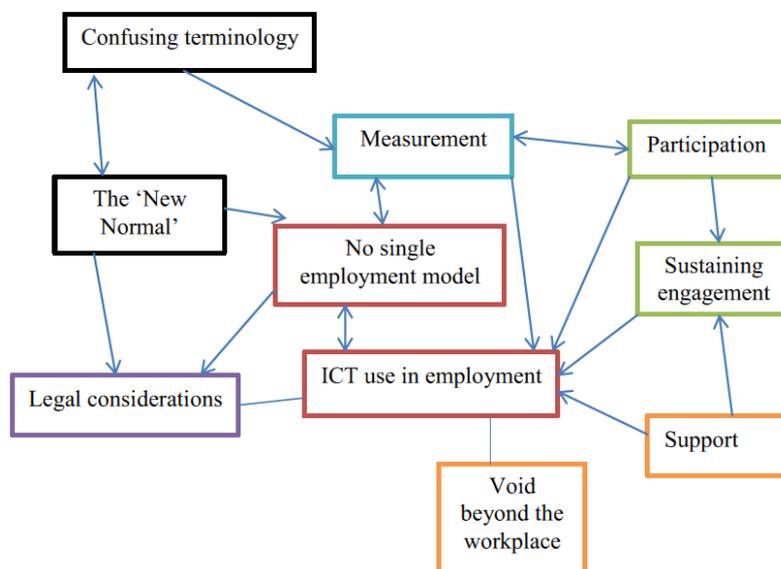
- Whether a typology of crowdsourcing was possible given the diversity of activities.
- The types of work and workers that engage in crowdsourcing.
- Whether there are opportunities to achieve a better balance in a prolonged working life by engaging with crowdsourcing or was the crossover between life and work inevitable with technology.
- The gains/benefits of engaging with paid versus unpaid crowdsourced work.
- The potential enablers and barriers to engaging in crowdsourcing – the importance of support.

The summary comprises ten key 'take away' points from the presentations and discussions.

1. **Confusing terminology:** A range of different descriptors are used in association with 'crowdsourcing' – including 'crowd employment', 'workforce on demand', 'cloudsourcing', 'sharing economy', 'digital labour', 'liquid labour', 'gig economy', 'offshoring', 'opensourcing', etc. Each of these has somewhat different connotations. Differences in terminology may lead to differences in interpretation – with commentators (and others) using the same term in slightly different ways, and vice versa.
2. **The 'New Normal':** A convergence of existing trends is now reaching critical mass – including the use of online platforms for managing work, the spread of just-in-time working, checking of emails 24/7, digitisation of tasks, multi-locational working, etc. The 'New Normal' is markedly different from the 'Old Normal' at the start of older workers' working lives.
3. **Measurement:** The use of different descriptors and confusing terminology means that measurement of crowdsourcing is difficult. There can be a partial picture from users registered with different crowdsourcing for work platforms, but 'sellers' and 'buyers' of crowdsourced labour may use multiple platforms. For the UK brand new data are becoming available from an Omnibus Survey – seeking to get a handle on the extent of crowd work - by seeking information on a range of different activities with which individuals are involved, and identifying who is involved in crowdsourcing by a process of elimination of related but different activities. In this way it is possible to identify individuals who are "*engaged in crowdsourcing but did not know it*". The rollout of the survey across Europe will provide more information for 2016 but what would be really useful is ongoing data collection (through additional questions on existing surveys) to provide insights into the changing incidence and nature of crowd work over time. Such data collection also provides insights into the 'blurred boundaries' / 'dotted lines' between what were formerly distinct activities (e.g. traditional versus online work, employee versus self-employed status, etc.)

4. **No single employment model:** It is apparent that crowdsourcing is associated with no single employment model: sellers may work for one buyer or for several buyers, online and/or offline, alongside an employee role, alongside participating in education, etc. Individuals may see crowdsourcing as a sole source of income or as a small part of overall income; they may undertake professional work or routine work, etc.
5. **Legal considerations:** The variety of different working arrangements can open up opportunities for exploitation – which is an issue for those concerned with social protection. It can be unclear as to who / what are legal entities. The sheer variety of actors and their forms can mean implementation of existing / new legislation is difficult.
6. **Participation:** Recent survey evidence indicates a relatively high level of online engagement (whether for work or other purposes).
7. **Sustaining engagement:** Given a move towards longer working lives, for older workers sustaining online engagement may be a more important focus than initial engagement. This involves understanding what is effective in sustaining online engagement and how.
8. **ICT use – including in employment:** Can ICT use in employment be ‘any time, any place, for anyone’? Use of ICT in employment demands a certain threshold level of basic literacy and also tech literacy (with the position of the threshold for tech literacy changing over time). ‘Digital by default’ delivery of benefits and of public services can seem ‘punitive’ for those lacking online skills. Rather evidence suggests that sustained engagement is best achieved through social processes relating to individuals’ / group interests.
9. **Support:** To enable contributions of older people through crowdsourcing for employment support needs to be readily available, sustainable and ideally have a reassuring human face. The emphasis needs to be on ‘contributions’, not ‘limitations’ of older people. The extent to which this is achievable in the face of public sector cuts is questionable – although any greater emphasis on co-location of services may be helpful in terms of provision of support.
10. **The ‘void beyond the workplace’:** Many employees rely (to an extent to which they may not be immediately aware) on in-house IT support provided by their employer. For those outside a formal workplace such support is not available. The challenge is how to ensure any ‘upgrade’ (in software/hardware) is not a ‘retrograde’ step for individuals concerned. It is possible that a lack of access to support could confound the possibilities of crowdsourced online labour extending working life (at least for some individuals), especially as cognitive and physical abilities diminish.

Diagrammatic overview of issues discussed (by Anne Green):



Existing outputs

- Barnes, S-A., Green, A. and de Hoyos, M. (2015). Crowdsourcing and work: individual factors and circumstances influencing employability. *New Technology, Work and Employment* 30(1): 16-31
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- Green A., de Hoyos M., Barnes S-A., Baldauf B. and Behle H. (2015) 'ICT, internet-enabled work and implications for space and entrepreneurship' in Mason C., Reuschke D., Syrett S. and van Ham M. (eds.) *Entrepreneurship in Cities: Neighbourhoods, Households and Homes*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 58-79. (ISBN 978 1 78471 199 3)
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- Huws, U. (2015). *A review on the future of work: online labour exchanges, or 'crowdsourcing': implications for occupational safety and health* (Discussion paper). European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, European Union. Available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/future-work-crowdsourcing/view>
- Huws, U. and Joyce, S. (2016). *Crowd Working Survey. Size of the UK's "Gig Economy" revealed for the first time*. University of Hertfordshire, FEPS and UNI Europa. Available at: <http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/publications/details/363>
- Sandhu, J., Damodaran, L. and Ramondt, L. (2013). ICT skills acquisition by older people: motivations for learning and barriers to progression. *International Journal of Education and Ageing* 3(1): 25-42
- Warhurst, C., Eikhof, D.R. and Haunschild, A. (2008) (eds). *Work Less, Live More? Critical Analyses of the Work-Life Boundary*. London: Palgrave.

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