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Talent Retention Strategies in the Gig Economy: Challenges, Frameworks, and Future Directions

Annu Sharma[1], Pallavi Kumari[2], Parth Kumar, Pooja Kumari, Prahlad Kumar

NIET Business School, Greater Noida, India[1]

NIET Business School, Greater Noida, India[2]

Abstract *The rapid expansion of the gig economy has introduced a new and structurally distinct form of work arrangement that challenges the foundational assumptions of traditional human resource management. Platform-mediated, project-based, and on-demand work has created a vast global workforce of independent workers who operate outside the conventional boundaries of employment, yet whose skills, engagement, and continued participation are critical to the operational success of the platforms and organisations that rely on them. This paper examines the concept of talent retention in the context of the gig economy, arguing that conventional retention frameworks developed for permanent employment relationships require fundamental reconceptualization when applied to contingent workers. Drawing on theories of psychological contract, self-determination, and organisational commitment, the paper identifies the principal drivers of gig worker disengagement and attrition, reviews the retention strategies being adopted by leading platform organisations, and evaluates their effectiveness. The paper further addresses the structural tensions between platform flexibility and worker security, the role of algorithmic management in shaping worker experience, and the implications of emerging regulatory frameworks for gig worker retention. Research gaps and future directions are identified, with particular attention to the under-studied dimensions of gig work in emerging economies.*

Keywords: Gig Economy, Talent Retention, Freelance Workers, Platform Labour, Psychological Contract, Human Resource Management, Independent Workers, Worker Engagement

1. INTRODUCTION

The nature of work is in the midst of a structural shift of historic proportions. The conventional employment relationship, which was the hallmark of the industrial and post-industrial labor market for the greater part of the twentieth century, is gradually making way for a more fluid, fragmented, and platform-based approach to the organization of work. The gig economy, which is defined by short-term contracts, project-based work, and on-demand labor facilitated by digital platforms, has emerged from its marginal status to become a mainstream phenomenon in the labor markets of developed as well as developing economies. It is estimated that the share of the labor force engaged in the gig economy is between 15 and 25 percent in the larger labor markets, a figure

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which is expected to rise substantially in the future as the footprint of digital platforms expands across the labor market and as the attitudes of different generations toward the labor market continue to evolve.

The organisations that employ the gig workforce, whether it is a ridesharing platform like Uber or Ola, a freelance marketplace like Upwork or Fiverr, a delivery platform like DoorDash or Swiggy, or a professional services platform like Toptal or Gigster, are thus confronted with a retention challenge that is both different from, and more difficult than, the challenge confronting traditional organisations. For traditional organisations, retention is a challenge that is addressed through a mix of monetary, career growth, cultural, and legal/contractual factors that bind employees to organisations. For organisations employing the gig workforce, however, most of these factors are either absent or significantly diluted, since the gig workforce is not an employee but a contractor, is free to work for multiple competing organisations, faces no legal barriers to exit, and is at arm's length from the culture of the organisations they work with (Sundararajan, 2016).

However, the business case for retaining gig workers is compelling. The high turnover rate among gig workers is a significant cost for platform organisations. The recruitment of new workers is a costly affair, and the quality of service provided by the existing pool of gig workers is much higher than that provided by new entrants. Moreover, the reputation of a business depends on the quality of the workforce. For the clients of a freelance platform, the continuity of the working relationship with the same set of familiar and trusted individuals reduces the transaction costs. Therefore, the question of what influences the engagement of a gig worker with a particular organisation/platform and what can be done to retain the engagement is a matter of significant practical and theoretical importance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Gig Economy: Definition and Characteristics

The 'gig economy' is a term that embraces a variety of different work arrangements, and there are a number of key features that characterize this type of work. For example, it is often task-based or project-based rather than job-based; it often involves individuals classified as independent contractors rather than employees; it often involves a degree of mediation by digital platforms; and it often involves pay by output or task completion rather than by hours worked (Friedman, 2014). Within this broad definition of the 'gig economy,' there is a very wide range of different work, including both low-skilled location-based service work such as food delivery and driving passengers, and high-skilled location-independent knowledge work such as software development, design, and management consulting.

This diversity has significant implications for talent retention. The determinants of engagement and the potency of retention strategies vary considerably across different segments of the gig workforce. For commodity service workers whose jobs are routine, easily substitutable, and location-specific, retention is largely an economic issue. For high-skill knowledge workers whose jobs are rare, complex, and creative, whose skills are highly mobile across jobs, and who have many alternative work options, retention is an even more multifaceted concept that encompasses not only the quality of projects offered by the platform but also its reputation, its capacity to provide a sense of community or professional network, and its support for career advancement (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017).

A third feature of gig work that distinguishes it from traditional employment is its inherent ambiguity of status. The fact that gig workers are classified as independent contractors, rather than employees, has important implications for their access to employment rights, benefits, and their psychological relationship with their employers, all of which are key aspects of traditional retention. Independent contractor status means that gig workers are responsible for their own insurance, pension, and tax arrangements; have no right to paid leave, sick pay, or redundancy compensation; and have no protection against summary dismissal from a platform. All of this

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creates a structural insecurity that is a key aspect of gig workers' psychological relationship with their employers, which is a critical background condition for all aspects of retention.

2.2 Challenges in The Gig Economy

The emergence of the gig economy has significantly changed the way employment relationships are conducted, thereby posing a challenge in retaining employees. The gig economy is characterized by short-term, flexible, and platform-based work arrangements. This new phenomenon in the employment market disrupts conventional HR management by undermining long-term organizational attachment. The literature suggests that gig workers work in isolation, which makes retaining them a dynamic issue.

One of the major challenges cited in the literature relates to job insecurity and income instability. Gig employees often experience unstable income levels, which creates a sense of insecurity. This impacts their long-term association with an organization. In addition, a lack of stable employment contracts and benefits such as health or retirement schemes also impacts organizational loyalty. Another major issue cited in the literature relates to a lack of organizational identification. Gig employees often work on short-term contracts, which impacts their emotional attachment to an organization.

The second major challenge cited in the literature relates to a lack of opportunities for career development. Unlike employees, gig employees are often not provided with training or opportunities for professional development. This impacts their satisfaction levels, which in turn impacts their loyalty. Another major issue cited in the literature relates to algorithmic management and performance measurement. This is an emerging issue, which impacts worker engagement.

3. Theoretical Frameworks for Gig Worker Retention

3.1 Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological contract theory, developed by Rousseau (1989), provides one of the most useful frameworks for understanding the retention dynamics of gig work. The psychological contract refers to an individual's subjective beliefs about the mutual obligations that exist between themselves and their employing organisation, formed through perceived promises and expectations rather than formal contractual terms. In traditional employment, psychological contracts typically include implicit commitments around job security, career development, and organisational loyalty that, when perceived as fulfilled, generate commitment and reduce turnover intentions.

In gig work, the psychological contract takes a distinctly transactional form: workers exchange task performance for compensation and flexibility, with limited expectation of relational commitments from the platform. However, research suggests that even within this transactional framework, psychological contract breaches — perceived failures by the platform to fulfil even its limited implicit obligations — can generate strong negative responses including reduced effort, platform switching, and negative word-of-mouth (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019). Common sources of psychological contract breach in gig work include unexplained changes to remuneration algorithms, arbitrary deactivation of accounts, inadequate dispute resolution mechanisms, and failure to provide the volume of work implicitly promised during onboarding. Platforms that manage gig worker expectations carefully and honour their implicit commitments consistently are more likely to retain workers than those that treat the transactional nature of gig work as a licence for arbitrary treatment.

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3.2 Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), proposes that human motivation and well-being are supported by the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel self-directed and volitional in one's actions), competence (the need to feel effective and capable in one's activities), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to and valued by others). SDT provides a powerful lens for understanding gig worker engagement and retention because it shifts attention from extrinsic incentives (pay rates and bonuses) to the intrinsic motivational foundations that determine whether workers find their gig work genuinely satisfying or merely instrumentally acceptable.

Autonomy is frequently cited by gig workers as the primary attraction of their work arrangement, and platforms that honour worker autonomy by allowing genuine flexibility in scheduling, task selection, and work method tend to generate higher levels of intrinsic motivation and continued engagement. Competence needs are addressed through platform features that enable skill development, provide meaningful performance feedback, and create opportunities for workers to take on progressively challenging or rewarding assignments. Relatedness — the most frequently neglected of the three needs in gig platform design — requires investment in community, peer connection, and the sense of being valued that transforms a transactional exchange into a meaningful work relationship (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

3.3 Organisational Commitment and Identification

Organisational commitment theory distinguishes between affective commitment (emotional attachment to the organisation), normative commitment (a sense of obligation to remain), and continuance commitment (remaining because the costs of leaving are perceived to be high) (Allen & Meyer, 1990). In conventional employment, all three forms of commitment contribute to retention. In gig work, continuance commitment is structurally weak because exit costs are low; normative commitment is also limited given the arm's length nature of the relationship. The primary retention lever available to platform organisations is therefore affective commitment — cultivating a genuine sense of belonging, pride, and emotional connection between workers and the platform brand.

Platform identification — the degree to which a gig worker incorporates the platform into their professional self-concept — is a related construct that has been shown to moderate the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention. Workers who identify strongly with a platform's values, reputation, and community are more likely to remain engaged even in the face of transient dissatisfactions. Building a strong platform identity and a compelling professional narrative around gig work — positioning the platform as a community of skilled professionals rather than a marketplace of interchangeable contractors — is therefore a strategically important retention mechanism (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019).

4. Drivers of Gig Worker Attrition

The need to understand the reasons for disengagement or platform switching by gig workers is a basic requirement for developing an effective strategy for retaining them. Research has identified several major factors for disengagement of gig workers. These factors are considered to be of primary importance.

The most common reason cited for disengagement of gig workers is economic dissatisfaction. In cases where the economic returns are less than what was anticipated, owing to an increase in platform fees or a decrease in prevailing rates owing to an increase in the number of platform workers, disengagement or switching to alternative platforms is considered. In addition, the lack of transparency in platform remuneration algorithms

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often results in frustration for platform workers who do not understand how their earnings are being generated. This creates a sense of powerlessness, which acts as an additional factor for economic dissatisfaction.

Flexibility erosion represents a second major driver of attrition, particularly among gig workers whose primary motivation for choosing gig work is schedule autonomy. Platform practices that impose scheduling requirements, penalise workers for declining assignments, or use algorithmic incentives to covertly constrain worker choices undermine the autonomy that attracted workers to the gig model in the first place. When workers perceive that their practical flexibility has been eroded to the point where gig work resembles conventional employment without its protections, their motivation to remain diminishes sharply (Veen, Barratt, & Goods, 2020).

Social isolation and the absence of community represent underappreciated drivers of gig worker disengagement, particularly among high-skill knowledge workers who value collegial relationships, professional community, and a sense of belonging to something larger than individual transactions. Gig work is inherently isolating: workers operate independently, rarely meet platform representatives in person, and have limited organic opportunities to connect with peers. Platforms that fail to address this isolation risk losing workers not to competitors but to conventional employment, where workers sacrifice flexibility for the social and psychological benefits of organisational membership (Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Yet another important contributor to attrition is platform governance failure, such as poor dispute resolution, unfair deactivation of accounts, and a general sense of unfairness in platform rule enforcement. Gig workers who have a poor experience, which they perceive as unfair, are likely to react with exit rather than voice, especially when they don't have the formal redressal options available to employees. The fairness of platform governance, both in terms of procedural fairness (i.e., are the platform's rules enforced fairly?) and distributive fairness (i.e., are rewards commensurate with contribution?) is a key driver of worker loyalty (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019).

5. Talent Retention Strategies for Platform Organisations

5.1 Competitive and Transparent Compensation

The most basic retention driver that platform organisations have at their disposal is that of competitive remuneration with transparent earning mechanisms. When a platform organisation is able to effectively communicate to its workers the manner in which they are compensated, it effectively deals with both the economic and information aspects of worker satisfaction. For instance, Uber's tiered reward programmes for drivers, Upwork's increasing service fees that reward workers for their long-term engagement with lower commission rates, and Fiverr's seller levels that grant higher levels of visibility and earnings potential to experienced sellers are all examples of compensation structures that are intended to reward workers for their long-term engagement with a platform (Sundararajan, 2016).

Organizational learning is an important factor that contributes to building resilience by allowing organizations to learn and build knowledge from their experiences and crises. Learning is considered a prerequisite to building resilience since it enables organizations to anticipate crises, cope with crises, and adapt to their environment. Learning is done through various means, including knowledge sharing, feedback mechanisms, and experiential learning. Learning is related to all three stages of building resilience, including anticipation, coping, and adaptation. Therefore, learning is a key driver of building resilience.

5.2 Skill Development and Career Progression

The opportunities for professional development and career progression are a crucial factor for high-skilled gig workers when it comes to platform loyalty. Platforms that help workers develop their skills by providing access to resources, certification schemes, mentorship schemes, and challenging work opportunities convey a sense of

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commitment to workers, suggesting that they are not treated as fungible resources but rather as valuable assets. Upwork's skill tests and certification tools, Coursera's platform for upskilling, and LinkedIn's integration of learning with professional network visibility are efforts by the platform owners to include skill development within the overall platform experience. When high-skilled gig workers perceive a sense of commitment towards skill development, this strengthens their identity with the platform and increases their loyalty (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017).

5.3 Community Building and Social Connection

To counterbalance the social isolation that is an inherent part of gig work, there is a need to invest in community infrastructure. This can be done via online forums for workers to communicate with each other, regional worker groups, peer recognition schemes, and regular in-person events for workers to get together with each other and with the platform representatives. The psychological benefits of being part of a community, where workers get a sense of belonging, peer support, and a sense of identity with others who share similar experiences, provide an informal means for workers to acquire new skills quickly. This satisfies the relatedness needs of self-determination theory. Moreover, it provides workers with an affective commitment that is not possible via monetary incentives alone. The concept of Airbnb's host community forums, Etsy's seller teams, or Freelancers Union's advocacy and community approach is an alternative means of building gig worker communities that has been proven to have retention benefits (Petriglieri et al., 2019).

5.4 Benefits and Social Protection

The provision of portable benefits such as health insurance, retirement savings contributions, paid sick leaves, and accident insurance that move with workers from one platform engagement to another, as opposed to a traditional employer relationship, represents arguably one of the most structurally significant retention strategies that are at the disposal of platform organisations. The absence of such benefits not only creates a situation of economic insecurity for workers but also suggests that the platform organisation does not value workers as a key asset. Platforms that are willing to offer such benefits to gig workers, either on their own or through sector-wide initiatives, are able to differentiate themselves as employer brands within the gig labour market. Such initiatives as portable benefits models, as proposed by policy researchers and implemented by a few platform firms in the United States and Europe, are seen as a first foray in this area (Manyika et al., 2016).

5.5 Fair and Transparent Governance

Procedural and distributive fairness in platform governance are non-negotiables for gig worker retention. Platforms need to invest in rules for managing worker accounts, as well as transparent systems for appealing platform decisions. The implementation of worker voice programs, such as forums, surveys, councils, or direct interactions with platform management, provides a sense of control to workers that offsets their feeling of powerlessness as independent contractors. Trust, too, plays a role in worker retention. Platforms that recognize governance as a key retention strategy are much more likely to retain worker loyalty over time (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016).

6. Algorithmic Management and Worker Experience

A defining feature of platform-mediated gig work is algorithmic management, where automated systems allocate tasks, monitor performance, and set pricing. This model enhances operational efficiency by enabling real-time matching of supply and demand, continuous monitoring, and dynamic pricing mechanisms that optimise platform performance. It also introduces a level of standardization and scalability that traditional management cannot achieve.

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From a positive perspective, algorithmic management can reduce human bias by relying on data-driven metrics for evaluating performance and assigning work. This creates a perception of fairness and meritocracy among workers, as outcomes are based on measurable indicators rather than subjective managerial judgment. For some gig workers, this system offers greater autonomy and predictability compared to traditional supervision.

However, the literature highlights significant drawbacks. Algorithmic systems often create information and power asymmetries, where platforms control critical data while workers lack transparency about decision-making processes. Workers frequently perceive these systems as opaque and unaccountable, especially when sudden changes in pricing, visibility, or account status occur without explanation. Such conditions generate distrust, stress, and feelings of powerlessness, which contribute to worker dissatisfaction and attrition.

To address these concerns, scholars emphasize the importance of algorithmic transparency and accountability. Providing clear explanations of system logic, incorporating human oversight for dispute resolution, and auditing algorithms for fairness are essential for building trust and improving long-term retention in the gig economy.

7. Regulatory Developments and Their Implications for Retention

The regulatory environment surrounding gig work is evolving rapidly, driven by growing public and governmental concern about worker welfare, and its evolution has significant implications for talent retention strategies. Landmark legal decisions in the United Kingdom, California, and the Netherlands have reclassified certain categories of gig workers as workers or employees rather than independent contractors, entitling them to minimum wage guarantees, holiday pay, and other basic employment protections. The European Union's Platform Work Directive, adopted in 2024, further establishes a presumption of employment for platform workers across member states unless platforms can demonstrate genuine contractor independence (De Stefano, 2016).

These regulatory developments alter the strategic calculus for platform organisations in important ways. Platforms that have previously competed on the basis of low labour costs enabled by contractor classification now face the prospect of significantly higher obligations toward their workers. This creates both a compliance imperative and a strategic opportunity: platforms that proactively improve worker conditions in anticipation of or response to regulatory requirements can differentiate themselves in the gig labour market, attracting and retaining higher-quality workers while building reputational capital with regulators, clients, and the public. The regulatory trend toward greater worker protection is, in this sense, consistent with rather than opposed to the long-term retention interests of platform organisations.

8. Cross-Cultural and Emerging Economy Perspectives

The majority of academic research on gig economy talent retention has been conducted in the context of Western, developed economies, with platforms and workers primarily located in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe. This geographic concentration limits the generalizability of existing findings to the rapidly growing gig economies of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa, where the structural conditions, worker motivations, and regulatory environments differ substantially from those of the developed world.

In India, for example, the gig economy encompasses a vast and heterogeneous workforce that includes urban platform service workers in cities such as Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Delhi, as well as rural and semi-urban workers accessing freelance opportunities through platforms such as Urban Company, Dunzo, and international freelance marketplaces. The retention challenges facing platforms in the Indian context are shaped by factors including acute income insecurity, limited access to formal financial services, the social stigma historically attached to certain categories of gig work, and the coexistence of traditional employment aspirations with the practical

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attractions of flexible income. Retention strategies effective in Western contexts — stock option programmes, premium health insurance, professional community events — may require significant adaptation to address the more fundamental welfare needs of gig workers in emerging economies (Manyika et al., 2016).

The cultural dimension is also seen to moderate the effectiveness of the retention strategies implemented. In collectivist cultures like India and Malaysia, the social dimension of work is significant, and platforms that focus on building infrastructure for the communities, like the recognition of the contributions made by the workers to their communities, may see the effectiveness of these retention strategies in comparison to their effect in individualist Western culture. A gap in the literature is cross-cultural research on the motivations for gig workers across different cultures.

9. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The analysis provided in this paper has a number of specific implications for managers of human resources as well as platform managers. First, there is a need to recognize the issue of talent retention within the gig economy as a strategic issue of similar importance to acquisition. The general assumption that gig worker turnover is a natural feature of the contingent workforce paradigm is based on a failure to realize the high cost of such turnover, as well as the considerable competitive advantages that gig economy platforms could gain from higher worker retention rates.

Second, there is a need for a differentiated approach to gig worker retention. The retention drivers for commodity service workers are fundamentally different from those for high-skill knowledge workers, and a general approach to addressing gig worker retention is bound to fail to address the specific problems of either group. There is a need for platform managers to invest in research aimed at segmenting their workforce and determining their specific retention drivers.

Third, long-term sustainability in gig platform business models is also linked to a fundamental shift in the relationship between platforms and workers from adversarial extraction to a genuine partnership. Gig platforms that treat workers as disposable resources to be exploited for their own cost advantages are, in effect, undermining worker trust, skill quality, and service reliability that their business models require for long-term sustainability. Gig platforms that invest in worker welfare, good governance, professional development, and communities will develop the kinds of workers that their long-term business models require.

10. CONCLUSION

Talent retention within the gig economy is a strategically critical issue that demands conceptual innovation, as well as practical creativity, from human resource managers. The dominant frameworks for talent retention, developed within a permanent employment relationship paradigm, cannot be easily adapted to a gig economy context marked by contractor status, algorithmic management, platform rivalry, and worker autonomy. A novel paradigm for talent retention is therefore required, which recognizes the structural distinctiveness of gig economy work, yet leverages the enduring insights of psychological contract theory, self-determination theory, and organizational commitment research to identify a set of motivational drivers that might be leveraged, regardless of permanent employment status.

The research evidence reviewed in this paper indicates that the most effective approaches to gig economy worker retention are those that address all aspects of workers' needs, from economic security and compensation, through skill development and professional growth, to community, belonging, and social connection, fair platform governance, and, where possible, providing workers with a degree of social protection against the inherent

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insecurity of contractor status. Platforms that achieve this are not merely retaining their workers; they are creating a workforce that represents the most enduring source of competitive advantage within the platform economy.

As the gig economy grows in scale and sophistication, and as the interplay of regulation, technology, and demography continually modifies its form, the challenge of how best to build relationships with workers who are legally independent but organisationally indispensable is likely to loom ever larger. Providing an honest and rigorous answer to that question is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the disciplines of human resource management and organisational behaviour in the years to come.

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