

Positives outweighing negatives: the experiences of Indian crowdsourced workers

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on an empirical study of Indian freelancers working via Elance-oDesk (now renamed Upwork). In a qualitative approach, data were gathered from 24 freelancers across India through in-depth telephone interviews and analysed thematically. The core finding that 'the positives outweigh the negatives' highlighted the fact that the challenges were eclipsed by what these freelancers gained, in terms of employment opportunities, income, skill utilisation and enhancement, career progression, emphasis on merit, international exposure, flexibility and platform-based protection of worker interests. Participants' favourable experiences are explained by the nature of the Indian labour market. The study extends insights into crowdsourcing for paid work which has so far been largely researched in the West and has focused disproportionately on the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform.

Introduction

'Crowdsourcing', a neologism coined by Jeff Howe in 2006 from 'crowd' and 'outsourcing' (Leimeister & Durward, 2015), encompasses paid work, unpaid work and funding (Green et al., 2014), transacted via Internet-linked connections between strangers across the globe (Aloisi, 2015). Crowdsourced paid work can be seen as a sociotechnical system (Kittur et al., 2013) representing a digital workplace that challenges traditional business models (Aloisi, 2015). It is, in essence, an online-mediated exchange operated by platform owners and their employees (site administrators) via the worldwide web through which organisations or individuals (termed clients, buyers or requesters) access other individuals (labelled freelancers, sellers or workers) for remunerative tasks of varying temporality and complexity with commensurate qualifications and returns (Green et al., 2014). Platforms function as intermediaries with no liabilities, deliberately and carefully protecting themselves from any legal, financial or other commitments towards clients and freelancers

(Caraway, 2010), retaining as their fee a percentage of the payment between clients and freelancers (Aloisi, 2015). Platform staff are different from freelancers, enjoying employee status which gives them access to some protection and benefits (Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014). Most research on crowdsourced paid work is situated in the developed world, focused primarily on Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) and draws attention to the risks posed to workers. Presenting an empirical study of Indian freelancers' subjective experiences of working on Elance-oDesk (now Upwork¹), this article extends our understanding through its geographical location and platform base and its findings which emphasise participants' own perceptions of the gains and challenges of this form of work.

Crowdsourcing for paid work

Crowdsourcing platforms offering paid work range from low-end micro-task sites (e.g. AMT) to skilled and professional online workplaces (e.g. Elance-oDesk) and specialised, sophisticated, high-value digital spaces (e.g. Innocentive) (Kittur et al., 2013). Tasks span software, product development, design, writing, editorial services, translation, web development and more (Kittur et al., 2013; Green et al., 2014; Risak & Warter, 2015). They also involve differing skill levels, task complexity and autonomy and varying degrees of materiality and virtuality. They may be aligned with output-based or success-based payment systems (Kittur et al., 2013; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Risak & Warter, 2015).

Eliminating the transaction costs of conventional subcontracting, crowdsourcing facilitates profit maximisation, offering the advantages of flexibility, scalability and access to a broad range of skills and experiences at significantly lower prices, coupled with freedom from employment regulations, thereby appealing to firms wishing to access labour that expands and contracts on demand, without any major logistical hurdles (Caraway, 2010; Kittur et al., 2013; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014; Aloisi, 2015; Leimeister & Durward, 2015). This can be combined with conserving internal resources for critical jobs (Leimeister & Durward, 2015; Risak & Warter, 2015). Yet crowdsourcing is a complex arrangement, calling for specialised tools, technology and know-how to organise the myriad tasks and manage the workforce (Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014; Leimeister & Durward, 2015) via an invisible infrastructure located largely in cyberspace (Caraway, 2010; Aloisi, 2015). Though digital traces, rather than

¹ Elance and oDesk, originally two independent crowdsourced work platforms, merged to form Elance-oDesk in December 2013 (Empson, 2013). The purpose driving this was to combine resources and benefit from significant investments in technology leading to higher quality results and accelerated growth and scale, though the two platforms operated as separate services with no fall-out on clients and freelancers (Swart, 2013). Following the 2013 merger, Elance-oDesk realised that their impact would be even greater if they built a single site. Accordingly, in May 2015, the company was re-launched as Upwork, with the oDesk platform as the foundation, retaining the best of both legacies and adding new innovations. Upwork has 9 million registered freelancers and 4 million registered clients, with 3 billion jobs posted annually and US\$1 billion worth of work done annually (Upwork, 2015). Data collection for the study was undertaken between January and March 2015, with participants of the inquiry referring to the platform as either Elance, oDesk or Elance-oDesk, depending on their specific association, and not alluding to the creation of Upwork. Participants spoke of a few operational divergences between Elance and oDesk ongoing at the time, but as these are not relevant to the present analysis, we do not make any distinction and refer to both platforms as a singular entity in this article.

direct supervision (Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014), keep management control 'at a distance', it remains all powerful (Caraway, 2010). Relationships are fleeting and largely anonymous, with no obligation to provide support or facilities to the workforce (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014).

Crowdsourcing provides a route to employment and employability for individuals who are already employed, self-employed or unemployed, through full-time and part-time engagement, offering opportunities to build work experience, 'brush up' existing skills, uncover latent skills and develop specialist skills (albeit at the workers' expense) which may lead to further learning and training and other employment, and are transferable to other roles, sectors and settings (Green et al., 2014; Aloisi, 2015; Risak & Warter, 2015). Competing for work opportunities (Holtgrewe, 2014; Leimeister & Durward, 2015) in a context where disposability is high (Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014), workers involuntarily become entrepreneurial under pressure to protect their interests, though they may also settle for the least remuneration (Holtgrewe, 2014; Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014; Leimeister & Durward, 2015). While work organisation and incentive structures vary across platforms, depending on the task and skill required, all workers rely on their reputations as a metric for acquiring future work and continuing on the site (Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014; Aloisi, 2015; Risak & Warter, 2015). Reputation, a function of work quality, work efficiency, work ethic, integrity, communication skills, time management and so forth, is built up initially through self-portrayals and later by client ratings and reviews, notwithstanding the accompanying subjectivity (Caraway, 2010; Green et al., 2014; Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014).

Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft (2014) underscore the 'borderless' nature of crowdsourcing, indicating that crowd employment platforms are largely hidden from view, operating outside the scope of legislation (Felstiner, 2011; Aloisi, 2015; Leimeister & Durward, 2015), often going 'off-state' and not subject to potential democratic oversight (Urry, 2014). Risak & Warter (2015) emphasise that sorting out legal complications entails addressing which law is applicable, given the multiple nations involved, and identifying who the contractual parties are and what the nature of the contract between them is. Aloisi (2015) states that crowdsourcing calls into question the scope of labour laws which focus on 'employees'. Reflecting Jeff Bezos's concept of 'humans-as-a-service', crowdsourcing dehumanises workers and devalues work, facilitating the growing casualisation and informalisation of the economy, with non-standard forms of employment predominating (Caraway, 2010; Aloisi, 2015; De Stefano, 2015). Costs and risks, including those of infrastructure, are shifted onto workers, with employers escaping accountability to and scrutiny from governments and unions (Holtgrewe, 2014; Kneese, Rosenblat & boyd, 2014; Aloisi, 2015). Workers' rights are at risk, including the possibility of forced labour, discrimination and child labour, a situation that is complicated by distinctions between different platforms (Aloisi, 2015; De Stefano, 2015).

Organising these workers, also described as 'freelancers' or 'sellers', can be difficult (Risak & Warter, 2015) since, as well as being spatially dispersed, they are 'hidden' and 'isolated' from each other, from employers and platform administrators as well as from journalists, labour activists and watchdogs (Caraway, 2010; Irani & Silberman, 2013;

Kneese, Rosenblat & Boyd, 2014). Indeed, crowdsourcing is sometimes perceived as a means of avoiding labour laws, unions and collective bargaining, with freelancers being used as strike-breakers (Risak & Warter, 2015). Nonetheless, there have been some attempts at providing sellers with a voice. Caraway (2010) speaks of freelancer-driven sites where forums related to several platforms are maintained. Turkopticon, developed by Irani and Silberman, is a web-based initiative through which AMT workers call their employers to account and engage in mutual aid. Turkopticon disrupts the invisibility and silence of AMT's workforce and alters the balance of power between workers and employers, assisted by witnessing journalists and researchers who use it as a starting point to push labour questions out (Irani & Silberman, 2013).

A perusal of the available literature on crowdsourcing in the developed world indicates a cautious stance towards the phenomenon. Are such concerns warranted in a developing world context? We explore this using India as our test bed. Globally, India is ranked second after the USA among freelancer nations (Elance, 2013). In terms of the rate of growth of freelancing, it is seventh among the top ten earning countries, with the USA and the Philippines placed first and second, respectively (Upwork, 2014). An international study highlights that Indian freelancers top the list in matters of the volume of work completed, though US freelancers gain the most by way of earnings as their charges are considerably higher. Nonetheless, Indian freelancers earn US\$500 million annually (Kumar Mukul quoted by Menon, 2015). Nationally, Indian online marketplaces such as worknhire.com, freelancer.in, freelancerindia.in, wsession.com and creativefreelancersindia.com have a base of between 40,000 and 120,000 aspiring crowdworkers (Menon, 2015). The aim of our study was to understand freelancers' motivation to join and work on these platforms. In addition, the research aimed to move away from the skewed research focus on AMT by developing extended insights based on another site: Elance-oDesk.

Method

A qualitative strategy was selected due to the study's focus on subjective experiences. Qualitative methods are well-suited to depicting social phenomena from the point of view of those being researched (Bryman & Burgess, 1999), bringing an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the problem (Creswell, 1998) and allowing for holism, complexity (Creswell, 1998), causality and chronology (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to be captured.

Being virtual and invisible, with no office in India, the possibility of an organisational access to freelancers on Elance-oDesk was ruled out. We posted the research call on various social networking sites as well as searching the Internet for blogs, personal testimonies and so on, of freelancers working on crowdsourced sites. As a result of these efforts, responses were elicited from about 70 Elance-oDesk freelancers from across India. During the initial interactions via phone or email, we described the study in detail, addressing queries and doubts. Interview appointments were fixed with 47 participants who expressed their willingness to be involved. Not all of those who agreed to interviews completed the process and the inquiry concluded with 24 participants.

Participants were located all over India, necessitating data collection via telephone interviews. The unstructured conversational process was disciplined by focusing on the key questions underlying the research through an interview guide. Yet this did not preclude exploring emergent issues which could generate important insights (King, 2006). Interviews, held at the convenience of the participant, generally lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted by the first author in English. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim by the research staff.

Twenty-four freelancers (15 men and 9 women) whose ages ranged from 21 to 44 years participated in the study, from 13 Indian cities. Apart from two students, the participants were graduates (9) or postgraduates (13). Tasks undertaken included data entry, research assistance, content writing, marketing and public relations, business analytics and numerous information technology applications. While 15 were full-timers, saying that this was their only employment and source of income, nine were part-timers (two of whom received more than half of their average monthly income from the platform and two were students). Full-timers' average monthly earnings ranged from Rs. 10,000.00 to Rs. 400,000.00. Fifteen participants worked independently, interfacing with clients only, with the rest combining solo and teamwork² in varying proportions. Two participants doubled up as clients on the platform.

Thematic analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) informed the study findings. 'Immersion' (Crabtree & Miller, 1992) let us to discern categories and patterns in the data. The categories and patterns that dovetailed together in meaningful yet distinct ways were developed into sub-themes. In the next step, sub-themes which held together were formed into themes. Themes that were linked in a coherent but discrete manner were joined into major themes. Finally, the relationship between the major themes allowed the core theme to be captured.

Findings

The core theme that emerged, encapsulating participants' experiences, was that of 'positives outweighing negatives'. The freelancers on Elance-oDesk we interviewed emphasised multiple gains, including employment opportunities, income, skill utilisation and enhancement, career progression, emphasis on merit, international exposure, flexibility and protection of workers' interests provided by the platform in relation to minimum wages, assured payments for work undertaken, authenticity checks, behavioural pointers and mechanisms for redress. Participants reported high degrees of satisfaction linked to these benefits to the extent that the challenges associated with their work, though acknowledged, were regarded as offset. The two major themes subsumed under this core theme, namely appreciating the positives and recognising the negatives, are presented below.

Appreciating the positives

While all participants described the various benefits they derived from crowdsourced work, the scope of their engagement with Elance-oDesk and the level of satisfaction

2 Participants stated that teams are usually assembled by clients.

which they experienced were contingent on their interface with the local labour market and/or personal circumstances. Full-timers chose the platform either because it was the best option given the poor employment avenues in their cities or because family commitments involved frequent relocations and childcare, precluding regular employment outside the home. Among the former were participants whose full-time engagement was equivalent to working full-time on a regular job. The participants elaborated that the opportunities enjoyed on the site by way of tasks and remuneration were far better than those in the local market. That the work on the platform provided them with sufficient returns for a comfortable life was underscored.

Before this, I worked for an export company here in ____ (Tier 3 Indian city) ... exporter of silk sarees. The environment over there was so frustrating, and the end of the month, the manager lady used to pay us like she is giving us some loan. So that made me mad about those jobs. And then I decided I will do (this). If I have to do change in ____ (this city), I will do freelance because that is going to pay more, and at least I will have peace of mind. I don't have to reach my job at 9 o'clock and wait for the boss to leave the office then I return home at 6 or 7 pm ... I could not move because of my parents.

Among the latter were participants whose full-time engagement on the platform was either equivalent to working full-time on a regular job or the only form of paid work they had taken up at the time. Women with family commitments entailing frequent relocations and childcare found the site an attractive means of continuity with the world of work. Staying in touch with the job market and maintaining their skills in order to keep up their employability were described as important factors. Married women who had not yet started families but whose spouses held transferable positions considered the platform a viable substitute for regular employment and worked full-time. While women with childcare responsibilities engaged with the platform as their sole source of livelihood and career development and put in at least 25 to 30 hours of work per week, alongside their domestic roles.

Understanding how the site functions and operating within its ambit were necessary to ensure payments. When contracts were undertaken on the platform, participants had to learn to respect the stated stipulations: initiating work only after clients had deposited funds into the platform's escrow account,³ enabling site-linked tracking for hourly projects and opting for the advocated option of milestone-based payments coinciding with phases of task completion for the long-term fixed projects. If these precautions were adopted, returns were guaranteed. Moving off the platform after initial discussions without a contract, initiating work in the pre-contract stage prior to clients funding the escrow account and opting for end-stage returns in long-term fixed projects left freelancers vulnerable. Not only could clients disappear without paying them but redress via the site would be limited to situations falling within the purview of the stated conditions. Participants valued the surety of their

³ An escrow account is one managed by a third party, where deposits are safeguarded until payments become due.

returns, highlighting the contrast with the uncertainty in the local labour market where one may not be paid at all, be paid late or less than had been agreed. In fact, planning for 'increments' was also reported. One participant recounted how he chose projects and managed his work in such a way that his monthly income increased annually by Rs. 10,000.00.

We start our project, we ask client to escrow the amount, and then I will start the work. [I have seen others say] My client has said I will pay this much money but he is not paying. In those cases, I found that the contractor has never discussed all the terms from the very start. If you set it properly, it is very good. Earlier, I was working for local manufacturers but they were not paying me much ... Rs. 10,000.00-12,000.00 per month. But now, I have just tripled that amount. So I am happy.

Full-timers saw Elance-oDesk as a marketplace where merit was the sole deciding factor. Evidencing one's abilities through task performance was portrayed as the basis for success. This leads to 'repeat clients' who return with more work, enabling participants to gain further contracts by responding to invitations for jobs rather than having to bid for projects.

While all full-timers appreciated being able to operate from home and avoid difficult commutes as well as escaping from the micro-politics, supervisory controls and interpersonal issues that accompanied organisational life, those taking on independent contracts also enjoyed the flexibility of setting their own daily schedule and pace. Being their own boss was emphasised as an advantage, particularly for those who preferred working solo, though the importance of self-discipline was underlined.

Nonetheless, women's inclination towards long-term engagement with the platform varied. As their personal situations settled, some women indicated that they wanted to continue working on the site at the same or higher rates of involvement but others returned to full-time employment in the offline world with little or no platform-based work. Among the latter group, one woman said she felt she would be even more successful in the real world as her work on the platform had contributed to considerable skill development. Another woman favoured the face-to-face interactions of a physical organisation and decided that having two sources of income simultaneously would be unethical given the real-time job contract she had signed. Two women were launching entrepreneurial ventures of their own off the platform, though they planned to take up tasks on and source projects from the site. Having experienced tremendous professional growth through their work on the platform, these women felt inspired to start their own organisations and capitalise on their potential, though an off-platform route was perceived as a more viable initial path.

Among the part-timers were four participants who considered Elance-oDesk to be an erratic source of work where getting jobs depended on the availability of suitable projects and the outcomes of the competitive bidding process. These participants, who held regular full-time appointments off the platform, were pleased with the additional income received through crowdsourcing, though they did not consider it to be an option for full-time employment given its uncertain nature. That is, while their own

regular jobs provided stable returns and a secure tenure, the platform was seen as supplementing their position.

See, it is very unsure. You may not get the job, the money will be too less. So how to make it full-time? It is too much risky.

These differences between full-timers and part-timers appeared to emerge from individual variations in how they approached and dealt with the site. Full-timers, owing to personal and/or situational factors, seemed more entrepreneurial in navigating the platform and more resilient in coping with its challenges. Thus, a more hardy or optimistic individual and/or a person whose circumstances left him or her with no choice but to rely on the platform were more successful. Part-timers' pessimistic views seemed to stem from limited effectiveness on the site arising because of personality as well as circumstances. As well as making them less likely to persevere, being comfortable due to a stable job seemed to contribute to participants' restricted efforts to enhance their positive experiences on the platform.

There was some divergence among the remaining part-timers. One admitted that the site held the potential to provide returns beyond those he was currently receiving from his full-time position in the local labour market and he was planning a transition to full-time engagement here. Two participants in the part-time group saw the platform as a stop-gap arrangement till they settled into their desired careers. Students regarded their involvement on the platform as a means to build skills which would boost their profiles in the regular job market.

That both clients and freelancers could evaluate each other was seen as an advantage of Elance-oDesk. While highlighting the importance of reputation, participants spoke of its 'levelling' quality. The profile is an essential feature of the platform. Both clients and freelancers on the site must be able to exhibit a positive image to be selected by the other party because this is the only means by which they can know each other. Self-presentation is initiated when joining the platform and represents that party's public face at that point in time. Freelancers draw on their resumes and work experience as well as self-descriptions and the results of platform-mandated skill tests. Clients provide insights about themselves and their organisations, sharing their scope, achievements and potential. Depending on the length of their engagement with the site, clients detail their interface with freelancers in terms of projects and rewards offered. Participation on the platform contributes to this image through ratings and feedback. Freelancers can rewrite their self-portraits based not only on their work but also on client ratings and feedback and platform parameters, all of which contribute to their reputations. Clients' comments refer to task performance, work ethic and interpersonal interactions. Platform parameters include quantitative indicators of work undertaken in terms of number of jobs, number of hours and success rate, and in-house certifications (in addition to keeping track of client comments and overall behaviour). As well as self-descriptions, clients' profiles include freelancers' comments. That is, freelancers provide feedback about their experiences with clients, discussing the nature of the work and the quality of the interaction. Once a job is completed, clients rate and comment on freelancers, who, in turn, then provide feedback on the client. Sometime later, these responses become publicly available, with

implications for further success since clients and freelancers consult the displayed profiles to make their choices.

Yes, people (freelancers) really take care because once the project is done, the client will rate them and give some verbal review. So it will actually help them to gain next project ... get them better paid. So, on the profile, they will only mention whatever positive has happened. And in case some dispute has happened, client as well as contractor try to hide it. So usually people don't like to put up negative reviews because they are afraid that they will also get negative reviews in return.

Participants outlined two implications of the feedback process. First, since mutuality defines appraisals, neither party wishes to malign the other, recognising that reciprocity could harm their profiles. Given that reputation is critical to effectiveness on the platform, both parties are sufficiently controlled not just during their interactions but also while wrapping up the contract. This is an important reason why misbehaviour on the site is contained, being also disciplined by the platform's careful monitoring. Second, novices are disadvantaged because they neither have a platform-linked profile to bank on nor can they enjoy the privilege of being 'fussy' or 'picky' about their choices when they have yet to build their image. With this drawback being more pronounced for freelancers than for clients who have jobs and money on their side, the formers' vulnerability is often exploited. In the attempt to develop their profiles and so progress on the site, freelancers fall prey to clients who take them off the platform or entice them with 'sample' work, only to disappear without making payments once the task is completed. With no site-based documentation or with only a pre-contract position, freelancers are ineligible to seek platform intervention.

The opportunity to work independently was appreciated by 15 participants. Those working in teams did so more due to the nature of their projects, which made group tasks unavoidable, rather than from a voluntary stand. A few participants who had earlier been members of teams shared that they had ceased doing so, choosing solo tasks exclusively, due to coordination issues associated with different time zones. Operating on one's own precluded having colleagues, except for the linkage with clients. That interactions on the platform were restricted coloured the situation further. Yet being isolated was perceived as unwelcome by only two full-timers, with other freelancers saying that they were happy to work alone. Participants maintained that the purpose of being on the platform was to work, which rendered the matter of socialising irrelevant. In their view, the need to mingle with others was well addressed off the platform through relationships with family and friends (and colleagues in the case of part-timers and students).

Successful full-timers who engaged in team-based projects reported coordination or supervisory roles. They held that their profiles inspired confidence in clients who put them in charge of projects. Such opportunities were described as enhancing their skills with long-term effects on their resumes and careers. One participant, while expressing satisfaction with the elevated status, pointed out that the extra effort thus engendered often takes away from actual task completion, necessitating greater inputs towards the latter end.

Exposure to foreign clients and freelancers added to participants' gains. They could interact with people across the globe, learning about their work and culture. The work ethic of the West in terms of punctuality, precision and quality was praised.

All participants revealed satisfaction with Elance-oDesk on a variety of counts. First, the platform conducted authenticity checks of everyone signing up. Freelancers' accounts were activated only after verification formalities had been completed, drawing on the submission of a government identity document such as a passport copy, income tax number and bank account. Participants found this practice reassuring since it meant that, though they were dealing with strangers, all parties' identities had been confirmed, thus lowering their risk of being misled. In addition, clearing skill tests linked to the platform and to the selected domain were mandatory at the time of joining to establish a baseline ability.

Second, the site specified the least permissible remuneration for both hourly and fixed projects. While Elance had stipulated minimum returns prior to oDesk, the rates were US\$3.00/hour and US\$20.00/fixed for Elance and US\$3.00/hour and US\$30.00/fixed for oDesk.

Third, the platform monitored freelancer and client behaviour to ensure compliance with rules pertaining to gaining/posting jobs, interacting with freelancers and clients during the course of work as well as maintaining appropriate communication content and decorum on discussion forums. Maligning others, using abusive language, repeated poor performance, lying, fraud and so forth constituted misbehaviours. Tracking mechanisms on the site could identify unwanted acts, inviting sanctions ranging from warnings, suspension and eviction from the site. The platform later also barred clients from requesting sample work which had been associated with cheating newcomers. Reflecting cultural discounting (Ross, 2000), freelancers usually undertook these assignments believing that they would result in further paid opportunities and be instrumental in developing their profiles, but generally found that clients disappeared once the completed task was handed in.

Fourth, there were redress options available on the platform for addressing the grievances of freelancers and clients, including task-related, payment-related and interpersonal issues. The outcomes of these redress processes determine subsequent actions to be undertaken or overseen by the site administrators. Our participants underscored the importance of following set procedures and maintaining proper documentation as the key to successful grievance resolution. In particular, they emphasised the significance of maintaining interactions on the platform in order to avail themselves of redress avenues. All communication on the site is recorded and constitutes the only evidence that platform administrators will consider when grievances are raised. Entering into projects off the platform thus proves very risky for freelancers. Clients may post jobs on the platform and then, in order to save the site fee, suggest moving off the platform to complete the agreement and initiate the work. Freelancers, seeing the advantage of avoiding having to consider the site fee when quoting a price, consent to clients' plans. Complications arising under such circumstances are out of the purview of the site administrators. Projects agreed upon and executed within the site may involve discussions off the site, for example,

through Google Hangouts or Skype, if these channels are considered conducive to facilitating the communication required by the task. In order to protect themselves, freelancers engaging in such discussions summarise the contents and upload them onto the project work stream on the site to provide a documentary record that will be available in case of complaints.

Fifth, the platform helpdesk was portrayed as prompt and pleasant, responding to queries and feedback efficiently and cordially. Issues such as the site not working properly or being too slow could be brought to their notice.

Recognising the negatives

Getting projects on Elance-oDesk was described as challenging, though full-timers (particularly those who engaged full time with the platform) were more adept at it than part-timers, due to their higher interface with and hence greater familiarity with the site. The process of acquiring a contract involved checking job posts and preparing bids which showcased one's skills, experience, performance and appropriateness for the task. To this end, building a profile, maintaining a positive image, marketing oneself both in general and for a particular job, as well as being entrepreneurial were important facilitators. While all freelancers undertook these activities diligently, full-timers were more tuned into scanning job posts frequently, and hence preparing bids in a timely manner. Spending more time on the platform facilitated this process. Not only did this improve their chances of getting work but also honed their prowess at successful bidding through more exposure to appropriate strategies. Further, the completion of work to the client's satisfaction resulted in enhanced profiles, as a result of the accruing ratings and feedback and added experience. Full-timers were at an advantage since they relied totally on the platform for work and so were able to build up their reputations more effectively. Obviously, better images strengthened their bids. Even so, full-timers indicated that checking and bidding required constant alertness and strategising that was unavoidable if their income and career had to be sustained.

Generally, based on a stock of their current work, full-timers would plan when to begin scanning job posts and preparing bids so that they could maintain continuity in their work and income. These phases were described as requiring time and effort over and above that called for by ongoing tasks. Since bids were generally circulated during the Indian night (as they mostly originated in the West) and required quick responses, participants had to extend themselves by staying up at night to check posts and put together appropriate responses to them. Applying for a job involved carefully reading the post, comprehending its requirements and crafting a proposal that highlighted the participant's suitability on the basis of skills and experience, drawing on his or her resume and platform profile including site parameters, client comments and so on, as well as addressing the issues raised in the call. In other words, freelancers had to sell themselves while simultaneously adapting to the client, keeping time in mind.

Part-timers were impeded in this by their relative lack of time which impinged on their ability to check posts and put up bids. Their resulting limited success on this front then affected their experience, returns and reputation on the platform and their assessment of its effectiveness. Freelancers' views of bidding can be summarised as 'a frustrating

process but a necessary evil'. They further assert that 'there is a space for everyone but if one fails to provide the correct representation then one could be overlooked'.

Bidding is very time-consuming and challenging because ... the requirement from customer would – minimum it is two sentences and maximum it is two, three, more pages. So we need to read the requirement ... respond such that we make the customer reassured that we've really read the document and we are really capable. Major problem is that projects are posted between 12 am and 3 am. And earlier you bid – it is first in, first out – you bid first, your bid is first in the customer's dashboard.

Two factors complicated the challenges of bidding. First, the platform maintained a ceiling limit on the number of bids possible within a defined time period. Freelancers could only increase the range of their bids by paying for a premium account (though success rates could also be increased through skill improvements evidenced via platform-based certifications) and/or by 'unbidding' (i.e. releasing existing bids in favour of more desirable new ones). Second, the race to get work led freelancers to lower the pay rates in their proposals, on the premise that clients' cost savings agenda would tilt towards less expensive bids where there were multiple bidders with comparable competences. This situation gave rise to considerable dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Freelancers were unhappy with the anticipated downgraded returns and perceived 'input-output inequity', though many of them decided to freeze a particular rate for themselves. That the site also specified minimum rates was seen as helpful – to stall a complete downslide to the absolute bottom. Interestingly, the platform permits all those bidding on a project to see the others in the competition (with solicited returns being viewable to those with premium accounts) and to know the final awardee.

An important concern for our participants was picking between fixed and hourly projects on Elance-oDesk, a choice that seemed to be determined largely by personal factors. Hourly work ensured that payments were made once the time agreed upon in the contract had been clocked and this was favoured by some freelancers. Here, once the hours are completed, clients cannot hold back the authorised amount citing dissatisfaction with the job. In case clients default on payments, the matter can be escalated to the site administrators. But taking up hourly projects requires freelancers to enable the platform software that tracks their work (forgetting to do so means forfeiting remuneration for tasks that have been completed). Fixed projects could entail inequity in that the freelancer may end up doing more work, in terms of time and effort, compared with the compensation offered. Nevertheless, a number of participants preferred this option, citing several reasons: feeling disconcerted due to the tracking involved in hourly projects, having a single lagged deadline for fixed work which allows tasks to be spaced out over time, in contrast to the numerous tightly scheduled deadlines of hourly jobs, and being able to turn in better quality work on fixed projects due to the availability and flexibility of time. The risks of not being paid for fixed projects are offset by setting up contract conditions properly at the outset and documenting them, along with all subsequent interactions, on the platform. Freelancers can negotiate agreements that ensure their compensation on task completion, with the

condition that work begins only after the money is credited to the platform escrow account and released upon task submission. In case of long-term projects, payment-linked milestones corresponding to each phase of the task can be created and work can be initiated only after the money for that milestone is credited into the platform escrow account, to be released on its completion. In this way, the freelancer receives periodic remuneration for his or her efforts and does not feel totally short-changed if the client quits a project midway. Eight participants indicated no specific leaning, choosing either hourly or fixed contracts, depending on the nature of work being offered.

Fraud is a common problem. Being cheated by clients who disappeared after project completion without making payments was reported by 13 participants. Such instances of fraud were more frequently specified by freelancers early in their crowdsourcing experience, especially when, in their naivety, they had agreed to move the work off the site and hence had no documentation to flag a violation. Notwithstanding their sense of disappointment and unfairness, freelancers considered this to be an important initial learning and stopped taking jobs off the platform.

I had a few bad experiences – you are entirely new to the whole freelancing thing then you do sort of get cheated at first. The good thing is that you have this escrow sort of guarantee that they provide you with and the client is expected to transfer the amount or at least part of the amount before the job and release it when the project is completed. So my first job was a huge failure. I had no idea about this whole escrow thing. I started the work and did not get paid.

Once experienced, some freelancers are willing to work off the site with repeat clients they trust. Having established to their satisfaction that complications will not mar the work relationship, the task or the payment, these participants move off the site, eliminating the platform fee for themselves and their clients. Having ground rules about returns such as a particular percentage of the agreed amount being credited to the freelancer's account prior to commencing the work, time-bound payments linked to phases of task completion and so on facilitates this option. Cheating of more experienced freelancers was reported, though less often and was usually within the platform. Such cases were true of fixed projects and not hourly projects where the platform's financial processes and tracking software ensure that payments occur. In these instances, since documentation was available within the platform, disputes could be raised and site administrators extended every support to sort out the matter, directly and repeatedly communicating with the errant client insisting that the amount be paid. While their efforts bore fruit sometimes, generally after concerted attempts, a 100% success rate did not emerge. The negative experience left participants demotivated, even if it ended favourably.

Communication gaps with clients and other freelancers arise due to the mediated nature of interaction and divergences in cultures, languages and time zones, with adverse effects on task performance. Convincing clients via email, chat, Skype, phone or video conferencing can be difficult. Coordinating communication across disparate time zones during teamwork can be onerous, and this, along with consideration of interpersonal issues, led many participants to choose independent jobs exclusively or opt for group projects as infrequently as possible.

Another major downside of working on the site was exposure to racism. Our participants reported discrimination from both clients and fellow freelancers. On the platform, such biases were usually covert and veiled, with obvious instances inviting reprimands from site administrators. Off the platform, offensive comments were direct and even abusive but participants could not seek redress because of the lack of proof. Clients' racist behaviour referred to doubts over participants' competence, sometimes expressed with a view to reducing the latter's payments. Freelancers' negative acts seemed to stem from competition linked to both skill and remuneration. Apart from seeing Indians as capable and hence threatening, freelancers considered the lower rates offered by competitors in the developing world as undercutting them and spoiling their chances of earning. Several dynamics complicate this situation. First, clients are motivated to seek freelancers on the platform to take advantage simultaneously both of talent and cost savings. While clients usually appoint the cheapest freelancer among those with the appropriate skill level, there are instances where clients specify that they are seeking bids from developed countries because of the associated expertise. Second, the hourly rate quoted and selected makes a difference to freelancers' earnings since those with lower bids, generally from developing countries, are more likely to be chosen. Whereas freelancers from developed countries see themselves as being undercut and disadvantaged, freelancers from developing countries, despite recognising their labour cost arbitrage, are happy with their earnings since these translate into larger amounts and afford decent standards of living due to the conversion rates. Third, freelancers' financial preferences cohere with their personal circumstances and social (including national) context.

Interpersonal issues, apart from racist overtones, were described by 13 freelancers, emerging mainly from clients since interactions with fellow freelancers were restricted. Whereas misunderstandings due to communication, language and cultural gaps were common to both clients and freelancers, other reasons varied across the two groups. In relation to clients, freelancers spoke of dispositional dissimilarities, clients' misgivings about freelancers' competence or integrity and clients' concerns about freelancers' output, giving a number of examples of clients making unexpected new demands or altering the brief. In relation to other freelancers, apart from competitiveness, unpleasantness arose in the context of teamwork, where it was linked to role ambiguity within the group, sycophancy towards the client and divergent working styles.

Notwithstanding the negative aspects, the primacy of positive experiences on Elance-oDesk stood out, with participants emphasising that their gains eclipsed and offset the challenges. Accordingly, participants' mixed responses to collectivisation are not surprising. Some were against the idea of unions, holding that the market basis of the site, which privileged merit, obliterated the need for an association and that collectivisation brings in unnecessary dynamics such as nepotism, alignments and so forth. These responses reflect dismissive stereotypes about trade unions as well as individualistic values.

I am against the idea of a union. I kind of like it (the platform) right now because it is completely based on merit. Nobody like a freelancer union officer or someone you can bribe or 'oil' and then get a better job or something like that.

Those open to the idea of unionisation in general put forward possible obstacles. First, they discussed procedural blocks. On the one hand, there are many practical impediments to any quest for uniformity given that freelancers are from different countries, each with its own laws and policies. On the other hand, since participation on the platform does not imply an employer-employee relationship, platforms and clients are not obliged to provide for freelancers and hence the issue of unions to fight for rights does not arise. Second, they described the ways that site characteristics affected the situation. It was argued that the competition which marked participation on the platform foreclosed the surfacing of associations since trust and support between freelancers were limited. Other obstacles were related to the freelancers' personal situations. With about 70% of freelancers on the platform being in regular employment (and hence not supposed to earn elsewhere), unionising this group seems impossible. The remaining 30% who are full-timers may not feel the need to collectivise, being happy with the platform. Overall, few participants thought that interactions among freelancers were curtailed by the site administration because such connections could bring together and trigger collective action. Notwithstanding these barriers, those open to the idea spoke of the utility of unions in allowing freelancers the opportunity to share and jointly represent common concerns as well as ensuring that minimum payments on the platform were in line with each country's circumstances.

Discussion

Indian freelancers' positive experiences on Elance-oDesk are best viewed in the light of the features of the local labour market. Though India is counted among the emerging economies of the world, employment conditions in the subcontinent remain poor (India Labour and Employment Report [ILER], 2014). India's labour market lies primarily within the informal sector (Rustagi, 2015),⁴ which accounts for 92% (i.e. over 430 million people) of the country's workforce (ILER, 2014). Informal employment is predicted to expand as ongoing and future job growth remain primarily of a precarious nature (Kapoor, 2014; Rustagi, 2015). With the informal sector beyond the ambit of most labour legislation (Kapoor, 2014), often existing at the interface between legality and illegality (Chen, 2007), regulations pertaining to decent working conditions and social security do not apply here (Kapoor, 2014; Rustagi, 2015). Even in the organised sector, most laws do not apply to establishments employing fewer than ten workers, thereby excluding the majority of Indian firms. Furthermore, establishments have worked out a number of ways of getting around relevant regulations, to the detriment of labour. Recent changes to labour legislation neither facilitate job creation and security nor address employee interests and well being, worsening the dismal scenario (Kapoor, 2014). The poor availability of jobs, the nature of the employment contract and the problems associated with working conditions (Rustagi, 2015), even more pronounced among particular social categories and in smaller cities and towns and rural areas

4 The authors have adopted the term 'informal sector' because of its conventional usage in India to refer to a long-standing part of the national economy. Despite the parallels, the term 'precarious work' was not selected due to its more recent appearance and Western representation.

(ILER, 2014), precipitate underemployment and unemployment (ILER, 2014) and violation of worker rights (Kapoor, 2014). Results from the 2011 Census highlight the especially high unemployment numbers for young people aged between 15 and 29 years. Not only are 40 million youth seeking work, with the unemployment rate standing at above 15% and 30% for young men and women, respectively (Kasturi, 2015), but there is a growing concern that many of this group are well educated and looking for jobs commensurate with their abilities (ILER, 2014). Apart from being unable to use and further their skills, Indian employees describe exploitation via work intensification, deprivation of their statutory or agreed wages and rights and threats to their health and safety as well as the possibility of sudden and unexplained job loss (ILER, 2014). Managerial practices reflecting a feudal mindset (Budhwar, 2000) further demotivate the workforce (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2012). Good quality employment is 'rare', with access to it 'extremely unequal' (ILER, 2014:25). Yet most workers in India cannot afford to be unemployed (ILER, 2014). In this context, crowdsourced employment, despite falling within the informal sector rubric (De Stefano, 2015), with its entrepreneurial slant where self-promotion and self-protection predominate, is an attractive alternative. It provides meaningful work which effectively utilises and even develops one's skills and facilitates career progression as well as pays sufficiently to afford a decent quality of life, accompanied by satisfactory working conditions. Merit and international exposure are added benefits. Since crowdsourcing creates new opportunities for income and social mobility in a context where local economies may be stagnant and local governmental structures discourage investment (Kittur et al., 2013), its gains are perceived as outweighing its challenges. Having to arrange and pay for infrastructure, ensure periodic skill acquisition and upgrades and manage long-term financial investments and goals as safety nets are considered to be minor issues. That Elance-oDesk has numerous platform-based mechanisms to ensure workers' interests (e.g. minimum wages, redress options, etc.) adds to the complimentary impression.

Culturally, participants' experiences on Elance-oDesk contrast with traditional Indian social dynamics. Whereas Indian society is feudalistic, privileging personalised, identity-based relationships where hierarchy and sycophancy operate and favouritism and network-linked exchanges predominate (Sinha, 2015), crowdsourcing is seen as both emphasising merit, where competence and performance are accorded primacy, and greatly levelling client-freelancer differences through the system of mutual feedback. Participants appreciated the underpinnings of objectivity and equality, even though the crowdsourced environment involved job uncertainty and called for constant self-monitoring, self-presentation and self-marketing and exposed them to clients whose position was inherently more powerful, due to their hold over contracts and remuneration, not to mention race and class, as they were usually from the developed world. Besides, the platform allows for the pursuit of materialism which has been found to characterise Indian society, despite the widespread stereotype of spiritualism (Sinha, 2015). Preoccupation with materialism is even more pronounced in post-liberalisation India, with the emergence of a growing middle class which seeks further upward mobility (Fernandes, 2004).

Through the lens of Western scholars, freelancers engaged in crowdsourcing are precarious workers providing immaterial labour (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007) in an online global job market (Caraway, 2010). Being entrepreneurial is commonly associated with

these conditions (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007; Cohen, 2015). On the one hand, entrepreneurialism has acquired romantic connotations of initiative, energy, boldness, independence, self-reliance and risk-taking (Keat, 1991), being seen as a remedy for broader societal problems. On the other hand, entrepreneurialism underscores self-sufficiency and personal responsibility for success, being linked to the rise of neoliberalism and aligned with the retreating welfare state, unfettered markets and lean corporations (Cohen, 2015). Entrepreneurialism's embodiment of an autonomous, self-regulating and responsabilised subject (Gill, 2011) is gaining normality (McRobbie, 2002), despite its accompanying uncertainty, variable income and limited statutory entitlements (Vosko, 2009), with its supporters emphasising the relevance of self-promotion and self-marketing skills as the key to advantage (Cohen, 2015). Indian crowdsourced workers, like the participants in our study, who appreciate these arrangements contribute to their greater generalisation, thereby democratising and perpetuating exploitation (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007), with the gains blinding them to, or at least tempering their disenchantment with, the challenges. Experiencing this predicament favourably, essentially because of contextual influences, the embrace of precarity displayed by Indian crowdsourced workers resonates with Vanni & Tari's (2005) view of an active agent managing life from the interior. Perhaps for Indians, whose interface with the informal sector has been more familiar due to its perennial presence in the country (ILER, 2014), juxtaposed also with both the intersectionality of social categories and an orientation of fatalism (Sinha, 2015), the entrepreneurialism and merit entailed by crowdsourcing, feeding into reputation, are perceived as the critical levers of success, fuelling an internal locus of control and a sense of mastery in freelancers. This, in turn, furthers individualism, which is not only part of the Indian psyche (coexisting with the much-stereotyped collectivism) linked to the materialism inherent indigenously, but also heightened due to accentuated Western influences percolating through globalisation (Sinha, 2015). Being thus enthused, the lack of interest in collectivisation of some Indian crowdsourced workers is not surprising but remains consistent with the general apathy towards unions evident in the subcontinent. Driven by status-conscious considerations, Indians articulate negative attitudes towards collectivisation which they typically associate with blue-collar factory jobs (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). Predictably, then, the concerns voiced abroad about the rhetoric of celebratory discourses on emergent employment issues (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007) are debunked and denied by Indian workers, though heeded by their compatriot labour activists (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009).

While participants' narratives alluded to some challenges similar to those described in the Western literature (costs borne by workers, non-standard employment, legal matters and impediments to collectivisation), in addition to their experiences of racism and cheating, the platform-based protection mechanisms offered by Elance-oDesk promote freelancer interests, countering, to some degree, the disenfranchisement commonly associated with crowdsourcing. Nonetheless, as another manifestation of offshoring, crowdsourcing sustains neo-colonialism (Holtgrewe, 2014), evidencing the hegemony of the global north. Race and class dynamics are compounded by cross-cultural differences. Aversive racism from clients and fellow freelancers, calling into question workers' competence, bid amounts and remuneration rates, accompanied by divergences linked to ethos, language and time, bring a negative tenor to work-related

interactions and make it more difficult to complete tasks that are already complicated by their virtual and often asynchronous forms.

Despite the positive perspective provided by Indian crowdsourced workers, related to their context and to the platform being studied, the negative experiences they report, reflecting and extending those in the extant literature, cannot be glossed over. Our findings give added weight to the recommendations available in the literature. De Stefano (2015) summarises these well when he calls for the decommodification of crowdsourced work, emphasising the human and labour character of work necessarily informed by its legal dimensions (Aloisi, 2015). This links the discourse to the critical importance of regulation of non-standard employment, incorporating greater transparency in platform functioning and promoting higher involvement of self-organisation and unions to ensure worker voice alongside platform self-regulation (De Stefano, 2015). Such endeavours can cohere well with calls for and attempts at mobilising precarious immaterial labour which demonstrate innovative strategies such as co-research, online networks and flexicurity (Brophy & de Peuter, 2007). Taking these forward through an internationally coordinated approach (Risak & Warter, 2015) seems appropriate given the global reach of crowdsourcing.

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Appendix

Interview guide

1. What motivated you to take up crowdsourcing and work on Elance-oDesk?
2. Please share your experiences of work on a crowdsourcing platform, specifically Elance-oDesk, in terms of the site, tasks, clients and fellow freelancers.
3. Please share your experiences of interacting with site administrators, clients and fellow freelancers on Elance-oDesk.
4. What are the benefits of working on a crowdsourced platform, specifically Elance-oDesk?
5. What are the challenges of working on a crowdsourced platform, specifically Elance-oDesk?
6. How do you describe your overall experiences of being a paid crowdsourced worker, specifically on Elance-oDesk?
7. How do you perceive your future vis-à-vis crowdsourcing, specifically on Elance-oDesk?
8. What is your view on collectivisation vis-à-vis crowdsourcing?

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