The gig economy: market research interviewing

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Employment conditions In market research call centres

NB: I only have experience of working in market research (and, briefly) telemarketing call centres, i.e. "outbound" calling. Also, my own period of employment by a number of companies in London took place between the years 2000 and 2011 inclusive. But I am still in touch with fellow-workers, who tell me that broadly nothing has changed.

NB: "Agency" in this context means market research company, not employment agency.

This sector of the gig economy is underpaid, with high levels of employee stress and ill-health, and with a high incentive to cheat and/or cut corners in order to remain in employment. In this highly casualised labour market, it would be impossible for a trades union to gain a foothold. Employers can and do breach health-and-safety laws with impunity. There is no grievance procedure.

Many of these companies run weekly recruitment sessions, making existing workers feel under even greater pressure to prove themselves.

Remuneration

We were paid (PAYE) by the hour, at slightly above the then Minimum Wage, but way below the London Living Wage. Holiday pay was added @ 12.5%; there was no sick pay or maternity leave, as we were not under contract. In fact, most of us moved between call centres, in an attempt to stay in work. It did not pay to move around too much, though: the initial induction/assessment day was unpaid – until the new interviewer had put in a stipulated number of hours with that agency.

In most cases there was not a higher rate for weekend, bank holiday or unsocial-hours shifts. In order to make ends meet, some of us waived our rights under the European Working Time Directive, and put in 50+ hours a week. This is a long time to spend staring at a screen in an overcrowded, noisy and stressful environment.

Given our low pay, many of us opted to travel by bus rather than Tube, adding as much as three hours to the working day. Because of the uncertainty of work, and the moving from agency to agency, season tickets would not have been cost effective. I came into London from the suburbs by rail; my fares increased annually, but my pay did not. In the end I decided I was better off not working, and applying for Pension Credit, given the number of concessionary prices and fees I became eligible for.

One company, , in 2008 advertised for interviewers @ £8p.h. hour, a pound p.h. more than I was earning in another London call centre. However, when I arrived for my one-day induction/assessment day, one of my fellow trainees asked about holiday pay; our prospective employer said that it was factored into the £8p.h.

Another company , only paid the Minimum Wage. We were meant to top this up with the bonuses earned for the number of interviews completed. The system encouraged cheating: most interviews are preceded by "screening questions" to check whether the interviewee fits certain criteria. It is unlikely that your call will be monitored by a supervisor at this early stage in an interview, so interviewers could easily be tempted to interview people who "screened out".

Anyway, a high "strike-rate" would ensure plenty of work in the future. Put it another way: you could only make a living wage by cheating.

Another London company, paid by cheque in 2008 rather than BACS. We had to collect this within a two-hour window around lunchtime on a Wednesday; the company would not mail the cheques out. This meant that if an interviewer had only done a few hours' work for RSM, and were now working some distance away, it might not be worth their while to collect the cheque. A member of payroll staff at RSM brazenly told me that the company held a large number of uncollected cheques.

At , there were three pay-grades, based on strike-rate. When I left Continental for several months to work elsewhere, I was demoted to the lowest grade on my return.

Precariousness

Of course the flexibility of what one might term zero-hours non-contracts is advantageous to those who need time off for auditions, exams, caring responsibilities, etc., but I would argue that the employers are the main beneficiaries.

In the case of market-research calling, a project can terminate in the middle of a working day because the project managers have run out of "sample" to call, or because the project is completed. Interviewers need to be briefed on a project before working on it, so those who have been left high and dry by the termination of one project cannot be moved onto another one. Instead, they may be sent home early, without their pay being made up to the end of the shift. Given the cost of travel in London, those workers might well end up out of pocket that day.

On more than one occasion, when I was calling a foreign country, I reminded my supervisors that a public holiday was coming up in that country, only to be ignored – and then to come in to work that day and find that the shift had indeed been cancelled. Again, no compensation.

Similarly, it was not unknown for us to check in for a shift, only to be told it had been cancelled "at the last minute". Again, no apology, no compensation for travel costs or loss of earnings (some of us might have turned down offers of work with another company).

Another example of how managers can exploit this job insecurity for their own ends: a former employee at Continental Research/BDRC told me that one Saturday, the Phone Room Manager was so desperate to complete the job on time, that he announced to the staff that they would have to work till 7 that evening, instead of 6. Anyone who failed to comply would not get work the following week. One interviewer needed to collect her child from a child-minder, but the manager was adamant.

Another colleague told me of market-research company X, where interviewers had to commit to their availability for the following week by Wednesday, but were only given their schedule (if any) last thing on a Friday, by which time it was too late for them to find work anywhere else if none materialised for them at X.

Even in slack periods, such as July/August, it would be difficult to sign on as unemployed, given that work could crop up again at any time, and the signing-on process is lengthy. By the same token, it's hard to beef up one's CV through some form of education or training, or a volunteer commitment running concurrently with work. Interviewing is so badly paid, that it's essential to take all the hours going. An online course, e.g. Open University, would be hard to contemplate, given the number of hours an interviewer already spends in front of a screen.