

The “Gig Economy” and Mental Health

Submission of evidence for the Government’s Review of Employment Practices in the Modern Economy

May 2017

Executive Summary

Working within precarious conditions of employment has psychologically harmful effects, so suggest the findings of “Can Music Make You Sick?” - the largest nationwide study of its kind into the working conditions in the UK music industry conducted by MusicTank/ University of Westminster*. The last decade or so has been marked by a significant rise in various forms of flexible employment, due particularly to the exponential growth of the so-called digital economy and its underlying business models. However, the sustainability of this transformation in labour relations has wide societal implications that are currently under debate. Research into the working conditions of the UK music industry indicates the necessity **to consider the future of work not only from an economic or employment law perspective, but from a mental health one, too**. The Government’s review into the “Employment Practices in the Modern Economy”, launched in October 2016, is timely and welcome. The reviewers are thus encouraged to reflect on the deeper and less discussed impact of precarious working in the gig economy on the workers’ mental health.

Introduction

The UK Government’s inquiry into the Employment Practices in the Modern Economy is a much-needed initiative in response to numerous issues spurred by the expansion of the so-called “gig economy”, where flexible patterns of employment prevail in contrast to permanent jobs. The number of self-employed workers in Britain has increased by 1 million between 2008 and 2015¹, while so-called “zero-hours contracts” have also reached a record high². The transformation in British labour relations and departure from traditional forms of employment is part of a global trend emerged as a result of the new technology-enabled business models, i.e. the digital economy, and the decrease in full-time long-term job offers the last decade or so. Apart from the increase in earlier forms of flexible work, such as part-time employment or fix-term contracts, new patterns of atypical work contracts and “on demand” work have also proliferated³.

* *Disclaimer: this document should be regarded as an individual submission by the authors, not representing an official position of the MusicTank/ University of Westminster nor the opinions of the research commissioners Help Musicians UK.*

¹ ONS Trends in self-employment in the UK: 2001 to 2015 (2016): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/trendsinselfemploymentintheuk/2001to2015> (accessed May 2017).

² ONS Contracts that do not guarantee a minimum number of hours: May 2017 (2017): <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/contractsthatdonotguaranteeaminimumnumberofhours/may2017> (accessed May 2017).

³ EP Briefing: The future of work in the EU (2017): [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)599426_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI(2017)599426_EN.pdf) (accessed May 2017).

"Work is increasingly being carried out on online platforms connecting buyers and sellers, or by large project teams across borders and time zones [...] Active labour-market policies are needed to cater for the changing reality in the world of work. This concerns social security systems, which must adapt to new, constantly changing, requirements"⁴.

These shifts have given rise to tensions around the access to high quality essential services by workers of the "gig economy". These include issues such as the adequacy and sustainability of social protection, fairness of working conditions, balance between flexibility and security elements, and the risks for both workers' and employers'⁵. While the significance of self-employment for economic recovery, innovation and competitiveness is viewed as key, "the relationship between self-employment and social security has long been problematic, contested and complex"⁶. A recent BBC article reported on the struggle of a successful blogger and a single parent to qualify for tax credits⁷, as the self-employed have always been evaluated differently under benefit regulations, making their claims for support more difficult. In the meantime, the UK Parliament's Work and Pensions Committee stated pursuant to its inquiry into the "gig economy" that expansion of self-employment in many cases is bogus and should be interpreted as the companies' "free-riding on the welfare state"⁸. ***This submission draws particular attention to the impact on the population's mental health caused by precarious forms of work - the "gig economy"***. The link between the two has been observed in various sources⁹. **A detailed insight into the problem is provided below in the research findings from the study "Can Music Make You Sick? Working Conditions in the UK Music Industry", commissioned in 2016 by the charity Help Musicians UK** and carried out by Sally Gross and Dr. George Musgrave.**

**** Disclaimer:** This research was commissioned by Help Musicians UK (Registered charity number 228089). The commissioners had a collaborative role in the design of the study, however, had no role in: the conduct of the study; the collection, analysis and interpretation of data; the decision of the submission of the manuscript; or in the preparation, review or approval of the manuscript. The views expressed here are those of the authors and not those of the commissioners.

⁴ EP Briefing: The future of work in the EU (2017):

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)599426_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI(2017)599426_EN.pdf) (accessed May 2017).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ SSAC Occasional Paper 13: Social security and the self-employed (2014):

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/358334/Social_security_provision_and_the_self-employed_FINAL_24_SEPT_.pdf (accessed April 2017).

⁷ Kleinman, Z., Blogger fury over tax credit rejection (2016): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-37275604> (accessed April 2017).

⁸ WPC "Gig economy" companies free-riding on the welfare state (2017):

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news-parliament-2015/gig-economy-report-published-16-17/> (accessed May 2017).

⁹ Among which EP Briefing: The future of work in the EU (2017):

[http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)599426_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI(2017)599426_EN.pdf) (accessed May 2017),

Hutton, W., The gig economy is here to stay. So making it fairer must be a priority, *The Guardian* (2016):

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/03/gig-economy-zero-hours-contracts-ethics> (accessed April 2017),

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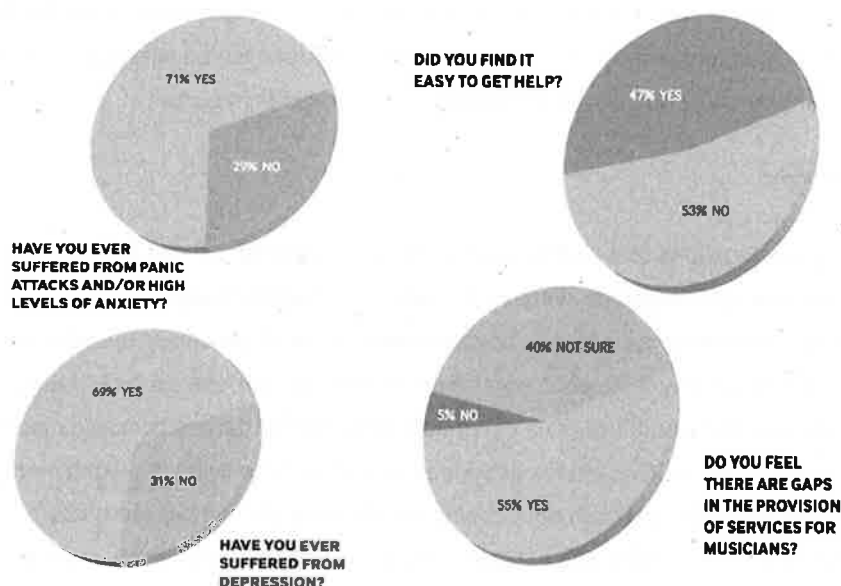
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"Can Music Make You Sick?" Study

"Can Music Make You Sick?" was the largest nationwide study of its kind exploring the psychological impact on musicians of seeking to forge careers within the UK music industry. A survey of over 2200 music industry stakeholders, alongside detailed qualitative interviews with artists and industry professionals, demonstrated the cripplingly high levels of depression (68.5%) and anxiety (71%) amongst music makers, and crucially, explores *the source* of their mental ill health. The research suggests that the conditions of their self-employment are often *the cause* of their psychological distress.



The focus of the research was to hear directly from musicians and others working within the wider music industry, about their working conditions and how they felt these affected their mental well-being. In this first phase, Music Tank, which is part of the University of Westminster, launched an industry-wide survey to ascertain the scale of the "problem" within this workforce. 2,211 musicians and other music industry professionals completed the initial survey. Next, the researchers interviewed thirty musicians from across the United Kingdom comprising:

- An even gender split.
- A wide variety of musical genres (including Pop, Soul, Jazz, Urban, Reggae, Classical, Rock, Dance, Folk, Opera, Dubstep and Musical Theatre).
- Proportionate geographical spread (London [50%], Manchester [10%], Newcastle [8%], Bristol [8%], Birmingham [8%], Edinburgh [4%], Glasgow [4%], Belfast [4%], and Cardiff [4%]); and...
- broad age ranges, and stages in their careers (from artists just starting out to long established professionals).

Alongside this, supplementary interviews were carried out with record label executives, music managers, and mental health service providers.

Research Findings

As suggested, of the survey respondents, 68.5% reported suffering from depression, and 71% from anxiety, making these workers three times more likely than the general public to suffer from these conditions¹⁰. Certainly, there is a popular conception of musicians as "tortured artist" and, anecdotally, this leads many to perhaps suspect numbers like this because "of course all artists are mad". However, a crucial finding from this research suggests that many musicians and music professionals locate the source of their mental ill health in the conditions of their career. Whilst some of our findings related to the specifics struggles and strains of a musical career, a number are equally applicable to other forms of insecure employment. Key points suggested by respondents included:

a. Financial instability

For many, the financial precariousness that typifies such a career – based on varying levels of income, inconsistent contracts, and frequently working for free, is profoundly psychologically destabilising. The inability to turn what appeared to be reasonable levels of perceived success into any financial peace of mind, which stems at least in part from inability to plan one's future, deeply worries these workers. As one explained "not quite being able to set goals that are concrete means it's hard to plan" (Folk singer, Cardiff). This means prolonged periods of time living in unstable rental accommodation, and worrying month to month about being paid on time as invoices were late or even not finding any paid work at all, or having to live at home. This creates what is, for many, seen as a kind of extended adolescence where they struggle to attain crucial markers of adulthood, which in turn harms their self-esteem, leading to profound feelings of both anxiety and depression. Musicians spoke of seeing their peers achieving crucial "life goals" such as buying houses, getting married, and going on holidays, and their creeping sense of self-doubt leading to feelings of depression. Interviewees often described a "relentless" pressure that they felt to stay afloat, which manifests itself in exhaustion, but also simultaneously, feelings of "guilt" and anxiety about taking any time off.

b. The Feedback Economy

For these types of workers, having a presence and a network online is fundamental. The entrepreneurial creation of a brand, seeking new work contracts, and staying connected with others

¹⁰ According to the ONS (2013), nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of people in the UK aged 16 years or over experienced anxiety or depression (using the GHQ method which asked if they had experienced these things 'recently') in 2010-11. This was consistent across the two subsequent years for which ONS data is available (ONS, 2015), with 18.3% of people (nearly 1 in 5) similarly responding in both 2011-12, and again in 2012-13. Source: ONS Measuring National Well-being: Health, 2013 (2013): http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_310300.pdf (accessed Sept 2016); ONS Measuring National Well-being: Life in the UK, 2015 (2015): http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171766_398059.pdf (accessed Sept 2016).

given the lack of any fixed place of work, is central. However, a great number of our interviewees suggested that their anxiety concerned the fact their working lives took place within a feedback economy of relentless opinion, and criticism. These workers criticise their own work, others criticise their work, they criticise themselves when comparing themselves to the successes of others, and in doing so, compare themselves to a version of themselves which they imagined they might be. In a hyper-mediated world of the Internet, this feedback loop is infinite.

Musicians talked about the difficulties of managing the torrent of feedback (both good and bad) – something which has received attention for its harmful impact on young people, and particularly young girls¹¹ and women. Related to this, social media was often the vehicle through which they would observe the achievements of others, and would come to compare their own fortunes to that of their peers and competitors. This could drastically harm the self-esteem of these workers who, as suggested, had often spent years or even decades struggling in an environment of insecure housing and negligible/ non-existent wages, and who could, at times, conceptualise these discrepancies as profound failures.

c. Relationships

The music industry is a highly networked industry and one's social and physical geographical location within this network plays a significant part in workers' ability to secure work or even to compete for work and many of the musicians we interviewed talked about the problem of the London centric character of the music industry despite the new digital practices. It was still very much expressed that you needed to be embedded within a musical network to get noticed, this was very frustrating for those who lived outside of the capital. London was felt by many to be just too expensive for them to exist in, yet without being there they felt their chances diminish. On the other hand, the relaxed and informal working culture in the creative industries, and freelance work more generally, is what many find attractive about it. However, many interviewees spoke of the blurring of relationship boundaries, and the difficulty in distinguishing "friends" from "colleagues". This inability to tell when one was in a work environment or a social environment leads them to, at times, question the authenticity of their friendships and also made several feel that they were being emotionally manipulated into working for free on occasion because it was a "friends" thing. These ambiguous relationships seemed to add to the musician's frustrations and feelings of inadequacy, and added to their anxiety.

Certainly, there was a number of additional findings concerning challenges faced specifically by a musical career which might be generalisable to other types of work. That being said, this research suggests that freelance and/or creative self-employment, typical of that found in the wider "gig economy", has a number of psychological harmful components which should be acknowledged. Just as other institutionalised workplaces have health and safety regulations, so too must this new form of employment. Workers engaged in self-employment of this kind can be economically precarious,

¹¹ Valkenburg, P.M., Peter, J., Schouten, A.P. (2006) Social Networking Sites and Their Relationship to Adolescents Well-Being and Social Self-Esteem, *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, Vol.9(5), pp.584-590

emotionally vulnerable, and suffer interpersonally. **Genuine consideration must be given to the psychological dimensions of this style of work, as highlighted by this research.**

Policy options

Policy option A: "a good business model"

Some stakeholders and commentators, including on-line platforms-based companies, defend the "gig economy" and flexible employment as a reciprocally beneficial business model, and only a "natural future of work" to be celebrated¹². Claims are advanced that offering greater employment benefits would result in less work, overall¹³. While self-employment to a certain degree is indeed a matter of choice in some cases, related to the notion of one's own independence, many, however, have been forced into such patterns of work while not having other options at a time of economic recession, ending up being driven into disadvantageous work arrangements¹⁴. The Uber drivers' case brought to the Employment Tribunal¹⁵ and other cases¹⁶ prove that models of work with reduced social security guarantees are often not desirable from the workers' perspective. The recent UK Parliament Work and Pensions Committee's inquiry, mentioned above, concluded that the growth of the "gig economy" should be viewed as a way to escape the welfare state model and self-employment is often abused. The need to reinforce workers' rights in response to drastic changes in the labour market brought along by the digital economy, that led "to more temporary jobs and more people being treated as independent contractors"¹⁷ has also been seen internationally. The EU has just presented its proposals in addressing this issue¹⁸, involving in many cases social dumping and unfair competition¹⁹.

In the "gig economy" the so-perceived flexibility is often asymmetric, the burden being on the worker's side²⁰. The concerns that such working conditions are bad for workers since they put a strain on them

¹² BBC Gig economy chiefs defend business model (2017): <http://www.test.bbc.co.uk/news/business-39051721> (accessed May 2017), Dizik, A., The next generation of jobs won't be made up of professions (2017): <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20170424-the-next-generation-of-jobs-wont-be-made-up-of-professions> (accessed May 2017), RSA The evidence proves self-employment is great. Celebrate it! Press release (2014): <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2014/04/the-evidence-proves-self-employment-is-great-celebrate-it> (accessed May 2017), etc.

¹³ BBC Gig economy chiefs defend business model (2017): <http://www.test.bbc.co.uk/news/business-39051721> (accessed May 2017).

¹⁴ SSAC Occasional Paper 13: Social security and the self-employed (2014): https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/358334/Social_security_provision_and_the_self-employed_FINAL_24_SEPT_.pdf (accessed April 2017), EP Briefing: The future of work in the EU (2017): [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI\(2017\)599426_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/599426/EPRS_BRI(2017)599426_EN.pdf) (accessed May 2017).

¹⁵ ET Case 2202550/2015 & Others (2016): <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/aslam-and-farrar-v-uber-reasons-20161028.pdf> (accessed April 2017).

¹⁶ BBC Bike courier wins 'gig' economy employment rights case (2017): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-38534524> (accessed April 2017), RCJ Case No: A2/2015/0196 Pimlico Plumbers (2017): <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/pimlico-plumbers-v-smith.pdf> (accessed April 2017).

¹⁷ EP Employment: MEPs to discuss plans to reinforce workers' rights (2017): <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20170407STO70803/employment-meps-to-discuss-plans-to-reinforce-workers-rights> (accessed 2017).

¹⁸ EC The European Pillar of Social Rights in 20 principles (2017): https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en (accessed May 2017).

¹⁹ EP Employment: MEPs to discuss plans to reinforce workers' rights (2017): <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/news-room/20170407STO70803/employment-meps-to-discuss-plans-to-reinforce-workers-rights> (accessed 2017).

²⁰ WPC "Gig economy" companies free-riding on the welfare state (2017):

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/news-parliament-2015/gig-economy-report-published-16-17/> (accessed May 2017), Hutton, W., The gig economy is here to stay. So

while trying to access social and financial services, as compared to full-time workers in permanent employment, have been raised on various occasions. The sustainability of such business and work model can thus be questioned. This also emerges from empirical evidence delivered in and conclusions drawn from the above presented study, highlighting the psychologically harmful effects of working within precarious conditions of employment, and as such, suggesting **the necessity to consider the future of work not only from an economic or employment law perspective, but a psychological one too**, since that leads to wider societal impact and public spending costs.

Policy option B: increasing tax for self-employed

Recently, the UK Government has considered a tax increase for the self-employed that, after a remarkable public outcry, was postponed for review at a later stage in 2017. As pointed out in the analysis of Policy Option A, the precarious conditions of employment and the underlying uncertainty of the likely levels of income and social security benefits generate a series of tensions with which a "flexible worker" is left to cope. Tax rates are part of the ecosystem of self-employment that should be designed in the way that supports the well-being of the self-employed rather than creating new challenges. The above presented research indicates that the conditions of self-employment are often *the cause of psychological distress*. Based on that, **heavier tax duties, as a source of additional challenges, would not work towards improving the mental health issues that are frequently inherent to flexible patterns of work**, which in turn might have various societal implications due to their impact on productivity and a stable family life, among other aspects. It is also worth mentioning that the creative industries – the category under which the sample of the study "Can Music Make You Sick? Working Conditions in the UK Music Industry" falls – where freelancing or other patterns of flexible work are widespread, have been so far disadvantaged as compared with other sectors in terms of the overall support and attention assigned in the public policy, as articulated in the current debates around the Government's Industrial Strategy Green Paper (2017)²¹.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

1. Fostering fair working conditions and promoting fair business models

The Government should adopt policies that disincentivise the spread of working arrangements that result in precarious working conditions. This should be combined with revisions to work contracts that avoids basic employment rights along new expanded conditions that could, for example, include time spent working(hours), output of work, i.e. products value and income earnt – along more equitable lines.

2. Supporting the self-employed, avoiding more burdens

making it fairer must be a priority (2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/03/gig-economy-zero-hours-contracts-ethics> (accessed April 2017).

²¹ BBC Industrial strategy 'must help' UK creative industries (2017): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-39604320> (accessed May 2017).

The Government should avoid actions that will place more financial and/or administrative burden on the self-employed. The Government should direct its efforts in designing policies that support this category of the workforce which operates in continuous uncertainty with regards to income and work employment.

3. A Universal Basic Income

The Government should revise the universal income for self-employed workers to enable them to keep working and meet their essential needs. The self-employed should be covered by a universal basic income scheme.

4. Education is Key

Ensuring a greater awareness of the mental health challenges facing those working within the "gig economy" is vital. These educational processes need to take place on a variety of levels.

Within higher education and elsewhere, there needs to be a concerted effort to embed mental health within the curriculum of the courses on offer, to ensure awareness of the challenges that might be faced, and enable appropriate preparatory steps by those likely to be employed as flexible workers.

5. Access to mental health support

Access to mental health support for self-employed people should be improved, paying particular attention to stress and anxiety management.

This submission is prepared by:

Sally Gross, Principal lecturer in Music Business Management, School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster,

Laima Janciute, Research Fellow, Policy Observatory at the Communication and Media Research Institute(CAMRI), School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster,

Dr. George Musgrave, Senior Lecturer in Music Business Management, School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster,

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