

by Lindsey D. Cameron and Kalie M. Mayberry

Gig work online activism



When we think about activism, most of us imagine boycotts, strikes, marches, and other long-standing forms of organized protest. But if you're one of the hundreds of millions of gig workers around the world who start their workday by opening an app, if your office is your car and your boss is an algorithm, what does activism look like?

Gig workers represent a large and growing segment of the global economy, and unlike traditional employees, most will never encounter a manager or coworker face to face. This poses challenges to traditional forms of labor organization, but our research demonstrates that gig workers have nevertheless pioneered a new form of activism — building vibrant communities through digital channels such as online forums, Facebook groups, and WhatsApp threads.

Moreover, this virtual action can drive real-world impact: these communities have facilitated substantial social movements, from #DeleteUber, which led to hundreds of thousands of app deletions in 2017 to protests organized on private WhatsApp



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groups by Urban Company workers fighting unfair account deactivations to DoorDash drivers' #DeclineNow movement, which has seen more than 80,000 members collectively organizing to improve their pay.

As independent contractors, gig workers cannot formally unionize. Grassroots, independent associations such as Rideshare Drivers United and Gig Workers Rising have championed large-scale efforts, including establishing a gig workers' bill of rights and offering members health benefits, but they have had limited impact on the daily activities of workers.

To fill this gap, a range of online forums has emerged, providing spaces for gig workers to build community, express solidarity, air dissent, and organize collective action among their dispersed workforce. In other words, in the absence of unions and traditional labor protections, these digital communities have enabled a new form of activism. It's time for labor scholars and practitioners alike to expand our understanding of what activism means to reflect this new reality.

To begin to explore the structures underpinning activism in the gig work era, we analyzed more than three years of online forum data and conducted more than 100 interviews with drivers, customers, and restaurant managers who use the popular food-delivery app DoorDash. Through this research, we identified three factors that enable online forums to foster activism.

First, these online forums serve as a "living memory," or a repository of past issues and successes that people can read and respond to at any time. This means that rather than being quickly forgotten or ignored, workers' concerns remain top of mind and are easily disseminated across the community.

For example, Mario, a delivery driver, shared a series of widely read posts in a Facebook group encouraging drivers to decline lower-paying orders in order to boost everyone's pay per order:

Just [a] heads up guys. When you decline the cheap orders for \$4 and \$5 they assign it to another dasher for a higher rate. ... We should help each other. ... [My] acceptance went down from 50 percent to 28 percent, but I won't do \$4 or \$5 [orders].

These posts generated dozens of comments from other drivers, many of whom committed to following Mario's advice and used the hashtag #DeclineNow to signify alignment with a larger movement.

Insight into the experiences of other drivers is especially valuable because the algorithms that assign orders and set pay on these platforms are notoriously opaque. While an individual driver may struggle to identify patterns, the ability to compare their experiences to those of other drivers enables workers to take strategic, collective action.

Second, as with many social media platforms, the forums serving as community organizing platforms for gig workers can quickly become echo chambers, amplifying emotionally charged content and even causing posts to go viral. For example, a Reddit post titled "Feel like a clown sitting in my car with no orders and declining \$3 orders" quickly received more than 300 comments and upvotes. Similarly, after a change to the algorithmic management system reduced a driver's matches, he wrote a post calling for a strike that received nearly 500 upvotes and more than 300 comments.

Third, activism on these online forums is not limited to workers: While traditional forms of organizing, such as unions, are explicitly focused on workers, customers and business managers are also highly active in many of these communities. For example, customers can upvote posts describing bad behavior by platforms on customer review sites and coordinate campaigns through advocacy organizations, such as the Better Business Bureau, to put pressure on platform companies. Similarly, restaurant managers use online spaces to share information about how to negotiate lower fees, improve search engine rankings, and even build alternative delivery platforms.

Taken together, these features enable workers to gain a deeper understanding of how the algorithmic management system functions, learn how to optimize their own efforts, and, in turn, become motivated to help other drivers. In other words, these features create the environment necessary to spark a movement.

For example, one driver we spoke with, Tanner, described how an online forum catalyzed an awakening moment for him: After returning home from yet another low-paying, long-distance ride, he shared,

I went to the DoorDash Reddit, and I was seeing all these people that are saying, “Yeah, my acceptance rate is zero. My acceptance rate’s one. Mine is nine.” I’m like, wait, you mean I don’t need to [keep up my acceptance rate]? So, after that, [my acceptance rate] plummeted. It didn’t really affect my pay.

(According to the DoorDash website, the acceptance rate is the percentage of deliveries a driver accepts out of the 100 most recent offer opportunities received.)

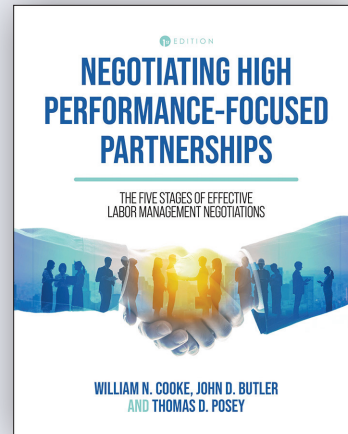
Tanner went on to become a frequent poster himself, illustrating the power of these online communities to help workers share what they’ve learned — and to inspire others to follow their lead.

As such, as gig work becomes ever more widespread, gig workers and organizers (who are often gig workers themselves) should proactively leverage the power of digital spaces to mobilize activism. That means moving beyond traditional, union-based tactics and embracing strategies optimized for a distributed workforce, such as recruiting online via WhatsApp groups and forums, sharing updates on social media, and maintaining community spaces and resource databases on Discord, Reddit, and other platforms. It may also mean conceptually redefining what a “successful” movement is because accurately measuring the impact of a coordinated effort against algorithmic management — a moving target — is no small feat.

Moreover, our research demonstrates that digital communities can make it much easier to build multisided coalitions, meaning that labor organizations can leverage these tools to foster alliances not just among workers but also among workers, customers, and managers. For example, the online forum TurkOpticon, which was developed through a collaboration between academics and gig workers, allows workers to share notes and give negative ratings to clients who consistently misrepresent work assignments or fail to pay workers.

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Finally, given the vital role these forums play in supporting gig worker activism, gig workers and labor organizers should push for regulations that designate online communities as “safe” spaces for whistleblowers — spaces that platform companies cannot threaten or shut down and where workers cannot be penalized for sharing information or organizing collective action. In the United States, for instance, organizers should push the White House’s Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds and the Department of Labor to enforce whistleblower protections on online platforms to ensure that workers who post on these forums are not subject to retaliation from their employers. ■



Negotiating High Performance-Focused Partnerships: The Five Stages of Effective Labor Management Negotiations

by William N. Cooke, John D. Butler,
and Thomas D. Posey

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From Cognella Press ...

Negotiating High Performance-Focused Partnerships: The Five Stages of Effective Labor Management Negotiations investigates labor-management contract negotiations in an operational context. The textbook is designed to guide readers through five key stages of contract negotiations, aiming to align human resources and negotiation strategies with broader business objectives for optimizing workplace performance and institutional competitiveness.

The book addresses the detailed processes and dynamics of negotiations, emphasizing strategy development, meticulous planning and preparation, opening discussions, the core bargaining phase, and the crucial final stages of achieving agreements. Readers learn about building authentic union-management partnerships, interest-based bargaining for mutually beneficial outcomes, and pragmatic handling of economic packages. These topical areas are presented within the broader framework of promoting effective, high performance-focused workplace operations.

Negotiating High Performance-Focused Partnerships serves as a vital tool for those involved directly or indirectly in organizational collective bargaining and negotiations. It is ideal for courses and programs in human resource management, labor relations, and organizational behavior.

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