Editorial Introduction

Digitally mediated care work is a growing segment of the service sector in Australia in the context of increasing demand for personalisation of care and an ageing population. Yet little is known about the experiences of care workers in the gig economy. The growing number of care platforms in Australia indicates a need to better understand the lived experiences of those offering care services via platforms and the implications for the care economy. This briefing paper summarises the key findings from interviews with care workers using platforms to organise care work.

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Care work in the gig economy

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Introduction

Digital platforms that intermediate care work are growing in tandem with increasing demand for care services. Care platforms may provide workers with new opportunities to work, earn additional income, or improve skills (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). There is, however, a growing concern about the prevalence of precarity, insecurity, and exploitation of workers in the gig economy (Heeks et al., 2021; Veen et al., 2020). As yet, limited empirical evidence on emergent forms of digital platform work such as care work exists to illustrate the impacts. In this briefing paper, we provide novel empirical insights into the experience of care workers using digital care platforms for work in Australia.

Background: Digital care platforms and care work

Digital platforms provide a mechanism to connect consumers of a service with individual providers of the service, bypassing an employment relationship. These platforms claim to offer a matching service to platform users, not labour services to the client, nor employment to the worker. The ensuing work tends to be short-term, temporary, and is negotiated among multiple parties, giving rise to the term ‘gig’ work (Khan et al., 2023).

Care work in the gig economy generally consists of paid caring activities undertaken in private households, and includes domestic work, disability support, elder care, and childcare. The clients accessing care workers via platforms are usually individuals or households requiring care services in their homes. The platform workers are individuals willing to perform the care work and use a digital platform to mediate the work arrangement (Khan et al., 2023).

Methodology

The paper presents a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 38 care workers offering services on digital platforms operating in Australia. The findings, presented below, provide insights into the motivations of care workers for using digital platforms, the challenges in obtaining a secure income via digital platforms, and how they enact agency in negotiating work arrangements. This
brief also provides a summary of the potential risks associated with platform-based care work in Australia, and identifies issues that need to be addressed by governance of platform work and policy development.

Why and how do care workers use digital care platforms?

Care workers, like most platform workers, turn to digital platform work to earn extra income, access a wide range of work opportunities and to gain control over their work hours (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; Veen et al., 2020). They particularly seek the ability to choose their own clients and negotiate work arrangements that suit their individual circumstances (Khan et al., 2023). Care workers chose platforms because they are easy to register on and appeared to have lots of available jobs without having to pay high agency fees to find work. Unfortunately, they found that most platforms charged subscription fees to gain access to all work opportunities.

Platforms govern their relationship with care workers through the terms and conditions on their websites (McDonald et al., 2021). Only 14 out of 38 care workers interviewed had read the terms and conditions, with half of them indicating that they skim read them or found them confusing but registered anyway. Similar to other forms of gig work (Jarrahi et al., 2020), algorithms dictated what job opportunities workers could see and which worker profiles clients could view. Factors such as location of workers, client reviews and ratings, number of jobs previously completed, or membership status determined which opportunities were displayed to care workers and which workers were visible to clients. Clients were responsible for shortlisting, interviewing and negotiating payment terms with workers. Consequently, to organise care work through digital platforms, workers and clients engaged in a series of interactions via the platform and privately, before commencing the work arrangement (Khan et al., 2023). This is distinct from how work is organised in sectors such as transport or food delivery (Heiland, 2021). Figure 1 outlines the process of how workers registered on platforms and engaged with clients to organise platform-based care work.

![Figure 1 Process of organising platform-based care work](image)

Platform-based care workers operate in a feminised, local, but largely hidden labour market in which norms of social reproduction and the relatively low wages of non-platform employees in the care sector establish the basis for income expectations and wage negotiations (Charlesworth & Malone, 2017). The process of negotiation with clients to determine the responsibilities, rights, conditions, and boundaries of the work arrangements was integral in the workers’ experience of organising care work via platforms. The process involved a balance of maintaining their self-interests while establishing positive social relations with clients.

Maintaining Self interests

Care workers interviewed enjoyed some autonomy and the potential to exercise agency in ways that aligned with true self-employment (Galière, 2020). Care workers could decide, for example, which clients to follow up, how much to charge, and what kinds of work they are prepared to accept or decline. Workers did decline work where the personal costs outweighed the benefits.

"You’re only going to give me $15. I think, no, it’s not worth it. It’s not worth me driving there for two to three hours to do that for $15". (Carer#34)
At the same time, care workers experienced competition to obtain work (Wood et al., 2019), and clients who were unable or unwilling to pay the requested rates. Care workers therefore had to adopt strategies to establish their professional worth. For example, workers spent considerable unremunerated time and effort to curate their profiles to justify charging higher wage rates than their competition.

Social relations

The care workers interviewed indicated that social relations with clients were critical in shaping their decisions to modify advertised wage rates or accept repeat work with the same clients.

“I only worked there for two days and for those two days it did my head in.” (Carer#14)

Like creative workers who depend on regular clients (Alacovska et al., 2022) positive relationships, friendships, and rapport with the clients was emphasised in work decisions. The care workers interviewed also attributed a sense of safety, wellbeing, and security of work to their positive relations and interactions with clients.

“If somebody is not comfortable with you, that job won’t go ahead” (Carer#33)

“I try and stay with people that I sense aren’t going to have money issues. Again, meeting them you get a sense of if they’re a professional couple or if they’re sensible or if they’re well organised” (Carer#30)

At the same time, social relations undermined self-interests where care workers agreed to take on regular work for less pay with clients they were comfortable with (Khan et al., 2023). Similarly, care worker perceptions that “some families were struggling” informed care worker decisions to push rates down or take on more work and tasks than originally agreed.

Potential risks associated with platform-based care work

Digital platform workers in the care sector operate in a feminised, and largely invisible and undervalued labour market (Charlesworth & Malone, 2017). Care workers engaged in efforts to establish professional worth by curating their profiles, negotiating with clients, and they paid out of pocket to either gain access to platform features or ensure social protection. These practices undermine worker autonomy and reinforce existing disadvantages for workers in the care work sector. Notably, clients could filter and shortlist ‘matched workers’ according to personality, interests, or even cultural background and religion in ways that were invisible to the worker (Williams et al., 2021). Pricing and client reviews, over which workers may have little influence, affect shortlisting and client perceptions of fit.

Workers often pay for priority positioning to potentially access more work opportunities, raising questions about the fairness of access to work opportunities (Myhill et al., 2021). Workers also rely on their intuition and positive relationships with clients to mitigate the risks of offering home-based care services often at the cost of fair income and social protection. Unregulated interactions between workers and clients create potential for direct exploitation and discrimination of workers, and limited platform governance of work arrangements leaves little recourse for workers (and clients) to resolve disputes. Practical implications and policy development areas

Left unaddressed, the potential risks associated with platform-based care work identified in this brief could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. Platform governance and policy development is needed to address:

- the impact of opaque algorithms and platform features that determine access to work,
- the role of the platform clients in shaping conditions of work and experience of workers, and
- the potential for discrimination, exploitation, risks to personal safety and wellbeing of digital platform work undertaken in private homes.

Conclusion

This brief provided insights into how platform work in a feminised sector is experienced by workers and influenced by platform features and interactions with clients. Platform workers attempted to protect their self-interests while maintaining positive social relations with clients to negotiate favourable work arrangements and obtain repeat or ongoing work opportunities. Potential risks associated with platform-based care work emerged through care worker experiences, which highlighted areas requiring policy response.
References


