

# blogposts

## MICROWORK:

# FROM JOBS TO TASKS

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# **MICROTASKING**

MARCH 2020



# Why look into microwork in Toronto?

We surfaced some of today's issues and opportunities by applying foresight methodology to microwork. This report offers strategic perspectives for employers, planners, policymakers, and employment services providers.

This article was written by the project's senior researcher [Cheryl May](#), a specialist in strategy, innovation design, and foresight.

## It's crucial to keep an eye on technology

Amazon Canada is placing itself at the centre of Canada's tech industry. In 2018, Amazon opened a 113,000 square foot Tech Hub in Scotia Plaza. In September 2019, Amazon announced a Scarborough fulfilment centre – its 12th in Canada. These initiatives represent 5,000 full-time jobs in Toronto, Scarborough, Brampton, Mississauga, Milton, Caledon and Ottawa.

Amazon offers many traditional and stable full-time jobs. Toronto's Mayor, John Tory, expressed his support for the Tech Hub:

“Amazon's expansion of its Toronto Tech Hub underscores the incredible tech talent we have in our city, and jobs like these allow us to retain and attract high tech talent locally.

– [Amazon Canada, December 18, 2019](#)

## But can tech giants rewrite the rules of work?

Microwork platforms are scalable tech ventures that earn mega-profits. The revenues of the top corporations are larger than the GDP of many countries. Amazon is one of the top four largest companies in the world by market value. The others in order of size are Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, and Alphabet (Google). Last year, Amazon's net revenue was 232.9 billion USD, up from 177.9 billion USD in 2017.

There's no doubt that microwork is a growing field, dominated by mega-corporations like Amazon and Google. The World Bank report, *The Global Opportunity in Online Outsourcing*, provides an in-depth look at the state of online outsourcing worldwide.

“ The microwork market is dominated by two firms, both of which follow open services platform business models: Amazon Mechanical Turk and CrowdFlower. Industry experts suggest that these firms currently have combined annual global gross services revenue of about \$120 million; together, they form about 80 per cent of the microwork market.  
– The World Bank, June 1, 2015, page 3

## Is microwork part of the future of work?

Understanding the technology industry and technology jobs is critical for workforce planning. New jobs are emerging through infotech and biotech advances. New forms of work are the result of globalization and socio-economic change.

What TWIG considered in this project is the work that is enabled by technology platforms, called microwork. The report features [points of view](#) on microwork, [essays](#) and [foresight findings](#). Finally, we arrived at [five strategic perspectives](#), which are ways to think about the future. They are the final output of [the foresight method used for this project](#).

The OECD's Employment Outlook 2019, considers the labour market and the future of work:

“ The complex interplay of globalization, technological and demographic changes is generating many new opportunities but also challenges for many workers across the OECD. Identifying who is likely to benefit and who may lose out of these deep changes is essential to inform policies contributing to the development of a more inclusive labour market.  
– OECD, The Future of Work, 2019



OECD's infographic data based on data on Employment Outlook 2019.





# Five questions about microwork

As part of the research for this project, Marco Campana talked with Toronto-based employment service providers. When it comes to microwork, he found that they have more questions than answers.

This article was written by [Marco Campana](#), a member of the microtasking research team. Marco is a consultant specializing in employment, immigrant and refugee services. His focus is on helping agencies to harness technology in client service delivery.

## What employment service providers are asking

Based on conversations with Toronto employment service providers, microwork is still a relatively unfamiliar form of work. Employment and other community-based agencies need to help job seekers [navigate what appears to be an emerging labour market reality in Toronto](#). But it's a challenge.

And not surprisingly, we are finding more questions than answers as a result of this project. However, awareness is growing about this almost hidden, but growing segment of the gig economy. Indeed, all the [signals](#) collected for this project suggest that we should be paying close attention.

The labour market is changing, and service providers have the ongoing job of balancing both employer and client needs. Conversations generally reflected two main areas of concern:

- How can my agency prepare clients for microwork?
- Even if we may not agree with it, the reality is that we have to know to inform the clients and work with employers.

## Five questions

Employment service providers are curious to know more about microtasking platforms. They also want to know whether the employers they work with are using or will use microtasking in their supply chain. Here are the five main questions and a breakdown of the subset of questions related to each one.

### Q1: Is microwork that big a deal?

It's hard to know how big microwork is, or is going to be in the city.

So, how much should human service agencies with limited resources give their attention to microwork in Toronto?

## Q2: What do clients need to know about microtasking?

Service providers want to know to prepare clients. If clients do want to explore microwork as their main income source or as a side gig:

- How should we prepare clients for microwork?
- What skills will be useful?
- What is the technology requirement?
- How do you look for microwork?
- What are legit platforms?
- Are there risks, pitfalls, etc.?
- What are microwork employers (or “requestors”) looking for
- Other than IT skills, how to prepare to be a microworker?

Research analyst, [Alastair Cheng](#), notes that the employers and industries currently using these platforms are [primarily tech companies](#).

If microwork is on the rise, service providers need to understand what IT clients need to know. How do service providers prepare clients with IT experience?

So, it's not just about microworkers. IT clients might also be doing the outsourcing for the company that employs them.

## Q3: How do you prove the work you've done?

For reporting purposes, most agencies are focused on getting someone a full-time job. So that's the measure of program success. Microwork disconnects workers from employers. They work on tasks, on a web portal (or app) and are never in contact with employers/requestors.

How do you document this type of work? What proof does a worker have that they did work for a company? Microtaskers work through the portal and cannot get references. But, employers are still looking for traditional references.



## Q4: How do I address questions about microwork with employers?

The Internet Institute's members have produced relevant research such as [Platform Sourcing: How Fortune 500 Firms Are Adopting Online Freelancing Platforms](#). Employment service agencies are well versed in the broader gig economy and are preparing clients for this shifting work reality. But the conversation about microwork or task-based work hasn't come up.

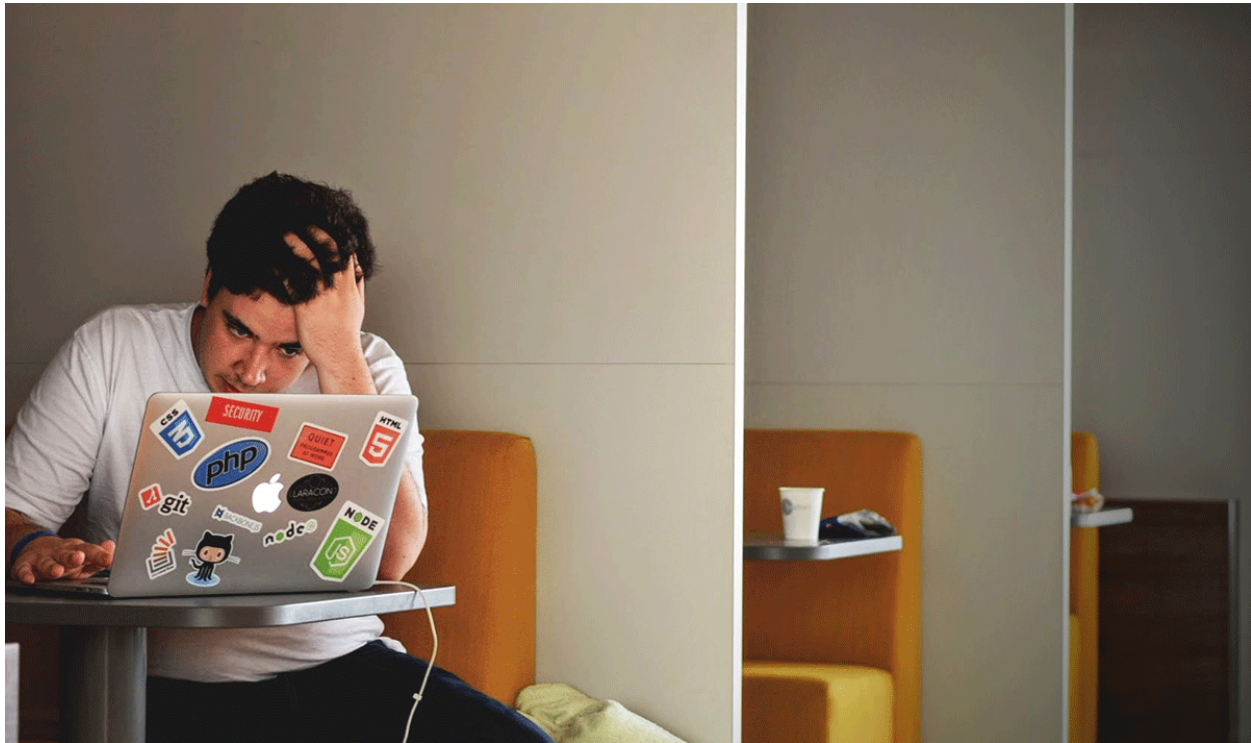
Employment service agencies work with Toronto employers and connect them with talent. Is microwork an area where they want to build suppliers? Can agencies help source microwork talent? What's the potential role here?

Microwork is not traditional full-time employment. How can service providers talk to employers about microwork? It would be helpful to work with them. If they're looking for this type of worker, then agencies can prepare clients for that reality.

## Q5: Should we cover questions about microwork in our employment training programs?

Employment service providers update curriculum and workshops to ensure clients have the most accurate picture of the Toronto labour market. They are also starting to provide training on the higher-skilled aspects of gig work. Should they incorporate microwork into their training program?

These are all important questions our community and city needs to be able to answer, sooner rather than later.



# Microwork's popularity among students

Many students may want to do this as a way of making extra pocket money or to support themselves while in school. As a student, when I was reading about microtasking I was able to relate to this.

This article was written by a BA student studying City Studies, Urban Public Policy and Human Geography at the University of Toronto. She participated in the microtasking signals sprint in her Urban Political Geography class in September 2019 and the December 2019 microtasking session.

I found conversations, research, and other information on microtasking in the GTA through social media. The primary platforms I used were Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter. On these platforms, users discussed how microtasking allowed them to make extra money. The discussions on some of the threads also included what microtasking is, and the applications used to microtask.

I also spoke with friends and classmates to see if they had heard about microtasking, or did similar work to microtasking. When browsing the internet some of the microtasking jobs and small jobs I saw were on my YouTube feed. Some of these microtasking jobs showed up when streaming online shows and websites. One-off tasks usually don't pay, however, they do guide you to more sources and links if you want to continue answering surveys or want to earn money.

As a group, we also concluded that microwork was more prominent in the United States than Canada. U.S companies are the primary source of microtasking jobs however, many jobs are open to anyone regardless of their location.

## What factors are behind microwork's popularity?

Some of the data found after doing research on microtasking:

- Tasks are available around the world
- People must have basic computer knowledge and an electronic device
- No particular knowledge is needed in order to participate in microtasking
- Making extra cash along with a regular job or other responsibilities are benefits of microtasking
- Microtaskers are often students or stay at home parents
- Looking at gender, more women microtask, however, for youth and students, it was a mix

Many students may want to microtask as a way of making extra pocket money or to support themselves while in school. As a student, when I was reading about microtasking I was able to relate to this. It does give you some money for doing small tasks that you can do on your own time and can access through a laptop. For stay-at-home parents, microtasking is a way to make some money when not busy with other responsibilities.

One clear advantage of microtasking is that each task takes a small amount of time and you can pick up tasks when you have time. This is very different from having a part- or full-time job. Microtasking also gives you flexibility as it allows you to decide what tasks you want to participate in.

I found this interesting, as it gives users flexibility but also a choice. In conclusion, microtasking is a job that is accessible to almost everyone. It is a way to make extra money or have a side hustle. In our collective signals, we did see some people who did this as a full-time job but it was not common. Microtasking as a side gig was more common.

## More information needed

When scanning articles, I found it difficult to find information about microwork's popularity more specifically in Toronto. I was able to see some opportunities listed on online news articles, blogs, and social media feeds. When speaking to my colleagues, I found they encountered the same issues. We found some sources for Toronto but started to realize that microtasking was not specifically in Toronto. Microtasking was more of a global gig/job. Another challenge was finding specific opportunities. Microtasking is not advertised as a single job. Instead, microworkers find work through an application that lists jobs. An example is [Timebucks](#), which is a website that allows you to select surveys you want to answer.

Questions that came up were:

- Why are youth, students, and stay-at-home parents microtasking?
- Is this because this type of work is more flexible and more accessible to them?
- For students, could more frequent social media use and comfort using technology be a factor?
- Are young people the major target for microtasking?

Microtasking is a form of precarious work because of the low pay rate. It was interesting to talk with other students who are combining a regular job with this type of work to make a living or extra money. It could show that extra income is wanted and needed by people to meet their expenses. This made me think deeper about the types of jobs people have and how much they are being paid. It also made me consider how the concept of precarious work differs from country to country. Finally, I question whether precarious work will become more common across all age groups in the future.



# Microtasking as a quick fix to ease the cash crunch

Something that I found to be interesting is a sense of encouragement to take part in the sharing economy overall.



This article was written by Valeria Gallo Montero, a BSc student at the University of Toronto studying Urban Public Policy and Human Geography. She participated in the microtasking signals sprint in her Urban Political Geography class in September 2019 and the December 2019 microtasking session.

Overall, microtasking is a sharing economy trend and a quick fix to ease the cash crunch. The appealing aspects are:

- Convenient to complete
- Easy to complete
- Quick cash
- Done anytime and anywhere

In particular, I found microtasking targeted toward young adults. Therefore, the target group includes students, recent graduates, and individuals in need of extra income. The appeal of an additional “convenient” income stream is a draw. Moreover, microtasking had a lot of positive feedback from users. People dealing with the high cost of living in Toronto see it as a solution that meets their economic needs. So microtasking is a convenient way to earn extra income and it can be fit around a demanding student schedule or anyone’s busy daily life.

## A quick fix, not a stable income

Given this, microtasking seems like a straightforward, quick fix to ease the cash crunch many Torontonians face. It is, however, a helping hand. It is not a permanent or a stable income to depend on.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of information about microtasking for people who are considering it or involved in it. There is very little information about:

- Disadvantages of this type of work
- Legal policies
- Socio-economic considerations

Furthermore, there should be more public knowledge of the legal aspects of this type of work. People need clear information about the employment structure and rights. Also, protection, rights and responsibilities, and health and safety standards are missing from public policies for individuals who engage in microwork.

Something that I found to be interesting is a sense of encouragement to take part in the [sharing economy](#) overall. The sharing economy extends from peer-to-peer sharing to crowdsourcing, to microwork. Many people like the idea of helping each other out. In some ways, I felt it could be compared to the “good old days” when neighbours could ask each other for favours. This is a connection that I find interesting to think about.



# TWIG's microwork reading list

Roundtable participants requested a short microwork reading list. So we reviewed our database of over 500 related signals and related literature. The following 12 resources will help anyone interested in microwork get up to speed quickly.

This article was written by the project's senior researcher [Cheryl May](#) with input from researchers [Marco Campana](#) and [Alastair Cheng](#).

Following the sprint, the research team identified 12 trends that surfaced in the signals. We reached out to experts in the fields of employment, labour market, workforce trends, and equity to develop the drivers behind the trends and hosted [two virtual roundtables](#). The experts also identified the need for a short reading list.

Together with my fellow researchers, Marco Campana and Alastair Cheng, we reviewed over 150+ articles, reports, research papers, and other media. Together with the signals data provided by students, this represents a harvest of over 500 signals. The following 12 resources will help anyone interested in microwork get up to speed quickly. TWIG's full microwork library, representing the top 100 resources, is available at [microtasking.ca](https://microtasking.ca).

Digital automation encompasses the various technologies like machine learning, often considered in the context of AI. In this study, we are using 9% to 46% as estimates for the Canadian workforce susceptibility to automation. The statistics come from recent reports by the [OECD](#) (9%) and [Brookfield Institute](#) (46%).

The literature on this topic varies. Because our focus is foresight, we have set aside the question of how much job loss automation will produce. The related trend depicts the ongoing incorporation of “AI” into both business and other aspects of life. Accordingly, growth in AI drives growth in microwork. Anthropologist Mary L. Gray and computational social scientist Siddharth Suri emphasize this point in [Ghost Work](#), a seminal book that belongs in your microwork reading list. If you like to listen, the [Ghost Work podcast episode](#) with Gray also merits attention.

Research-based on automation data flags job transitions out of automated roles, and a diminished share of value-added for labour. Autor and Salomon's [Is automation labour-displacing?](#) conveys results based on OECD data since 1970. Added to this, a recent study by economists James Bessen, Maarten Goos, Anna Salomons, and Wiljan Van den Berge, posits that automation is a slow process, making it difficult to prompt a public response.

The Bank of Canada study, [The Size and Characteristics of Informal \(“Gig”\) Work in Canada](#), added additional questions to the consumer expectation survey as a way to gauge participation rates. One-third of respondents report participating in gig work. In the context of precarious work, gig work is most typical among people who are historically affected by unemployment rates. In other words, young people, part-time workers, and specific regions.

The Oxford Internet Institute's [Online Labour Index](#) (OLI) tracks supply and demand flows. It does this by tracking projects and tasks across platforms. Canadian demand and supply stats can be viewed using the primary visualization tool and worker supplement on the linked page. The platforms monitored by the OLI encompass everything from web development to microtasks. So, the researchers view this data as indicative of the dynamics in the broader platform freelancing market. Still, the employers and industries that are currently using these platforms are [primarily tech companies](#).

OLI-related publications provide details about the online freelance labour across countries and occupations. Likewise, the Internet Institute's members produce other research. As an example, [Platform Sourcing: How Fortune 500 Firms Are Adopting Online Freelancing Platforms](#), provides helpful context.

Scoping out “microtasking” has been an ongoing challenge. One of the reports that shaped the scope of this work is the ILO's [Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work](#). (p. 16-22). The report draws on a clear picture of crowdsourced work based on a 2017 survey of crowdworkers.

Despite the ILO's incredible work, getting apples-to-apples data about worker demographics is challenging. The World Bank produced *The Global Opportunity in Online Outsourcing*, a 2015 global assessment of outsourcing as a driver of growth in developing countries.

## Three more for your microwork reading list

Your microwork reading list will also benefit from the following three current recommended resources. They cover the broader context of microtasking as a global phenomenon.

1. [How many people microwork in France? Estimating the size of a new labour force](#)
2. [Professor Dr Oliver Serfling's Crowdfunding Monitor \(Germany\)](#)
3. [The platformisation of work in Europe](#), Foundation For European Progressive Studies



## Q&A with Kristy Milland

Marco: What do you think the state of microwork in Toronto currently is?

Kristy: The state of microwork is invisible.



This article was written by [Marco Campana](#), a member of the microtasking research team. Marco is a consultant specializing in employment, immigrant and refugee services. His focus is on helping agencies to harness technology in client service delivery. He interviewed [Kristy Milland](#) in February 2020.

## The state of microwork

**Q: What do you think the state of microwork in Toronto currently is?**

*Kristy:* The state of microwork is invisible. I know [Statistics Canada is trying to figure out how to measure it](#). How do we measure it just in the Canadian labour market? How many people are doing this? Who is doing this? And so the problem right now, I think, in assessing the market here is that no one knows.

In my experience, which is with the Amazon Mechanical Turk's community, I was the only one in Toronto. There were others in Ontario, there were others throughout Canada. But as far as I knew, on Mechanical Turk, I was the only Torontonians that was part of the community.

Now, that leaves out between 40,000 and 90,000 people. [One of them could be from Toronto, but it seems to be pretty low scale](#), as far as something that is kind of the stereotypical platform like Mechanical Turk. When discussing the state of microwork, there are a lot of platforms that we don't know about. And the reason is the platform is only here for the work and then gone once it's done.

So who is doing that kind of microwork? Probably a larger percentage of people. Especially if you start looking to people [who might be doing it as immigrants or students](#). People who are looking for jobs and maybe are typically or traditionally excluded from the labour market. And they are the people that are the hardest to reach. The hardest to find and count.

On Mechanical Turk, there's a decent percentage of people who are doing microwork on a beer money basis. So they're here and there, up to a full-time basis. I think there are way more at the bottom end of that. But there are definitely people out there doing it. And I think the major problem is how do you even ask them if they do this work?

**Q: So when you say the bottom, do you mean the beer money folks?**

*Kristy:* Yeah, beer money is going to be the largest amount of people. And these are the people who are going to identify as a microworker and are the least likely to think about it as being work.

So, again, it's hard to find them and reach them as a result. But I would say, people who dabble in it, even for a short amount of time and give up on it. They're going to be the greatest number of workers at any given time.

When you look at that, it's also about [the definition of microwork](#). For example, surveys on sites like SurveyMonkey. These sites pay you in gift cards and things like that. That's still microwork.

And when you start including that, the numbers are going to go up dramatically. Especially if you look at specifically surveys or contests, which I personally also view as microwork. Because they entail a lot of work on social media. Maybe you run a website, things like that. So if you start to broaden the definition of microwork, and include people tiny tasks for money, you'll include a larger number of people.

**Q: The Toronto Workforce Innovation Group's stakeholders are broad; government, employers, social service groups, labour groups. What do you think they should be doing to prepare Toronto for microwork in 10 years?**

*Kristy:* As a law student, legally we are woefully unprepared. And that is not just labour legislation. It's also tax, health, and safety legislation. We need to sit down with the laws we have in place and question are these going to be adequate. Because it goes beyond microwork. It goes to all independent contractors. Microwork is a small section of this bigger problem.

You mentioned social services, individuals who do microwork. They're paid so little. Obviously they don't do microwork because they could do something else, right? So these are people in desperate situations. They're the ones who are more likely to access the welfare state. And as a result, they're going to be a larger drain on government funding, but they make so little they don't pay back into it.

And also their employers don't pay into it, right? They have no ability to give back. They're not built for giving back. So the problem becomes who's going to pay for this and protect these workers.

I am permanently disabled because of my work. Who pays for that? I didn't have workers comp, but live in Ontario and have health coverage. But who pays for that health coverage? I was paying income taxes, and I was paying a lot of income taxes, but for workers who might have been making less than I was, who's paying to make these services available to me? And if we're not helping workers who are hurt, then we're losing workers and suddenly our unemployment goes up. And these are people in now on welfare and ODSP. This is a spiralling problem.

There are so many great suggestions on this from academia, but addressing it is about labour legislation. Who is responsible for these people and for paying into the state to give them benefits? Who takes care of these people when they're hurt, sick, or unemployed? And then looking beyond that, how do these people pay their taxes? And how did the companies that employ them pay taxes if they're not necessarily in Canada? 10 years is a very good timeline to start thinking about this. Because if we don't start looking at this quickly, the government is going to be in dire straits financially. Both in supporting these people and in the fact that just the money won't be coming in.

**Q:** So the state of microwork will have an impact on governments being able to even pay for services if their tax base is decreasing and this becomes a much bigger thing.

*Kristy:* Absolutely. And the Conservative government already thinks we're a mess. I can only imagine how bad it's going to get when over 50% of workers are independent contractors, and thus not privy to all of these legislations.

**Q:** One of the things we've looked at is whether the gig economy might lead to higher-skilled or higher-wage work. Have you seen any hope for that in microwork that you've been looking at? In your case, it happened. But are you an outlier?

*Kristy:* I am definitely an outlier, who came from a middle-class family, went to exceptional schools, and was in a gifted program. Having a leg up and I think that set me apart in the microwork economy as well. I came into it using a computer since I was born, which a lot of people my age didn't.

So I was programming, creating websites, building communities, and considered a super Turker.

There's a group of us, less than 1% of the workforce. We come in with some sort of privilege, whether it be programming or confidence. There are so many things that make you a better microworker, but even I hit the ceiling.

I do not see that gig work necessarily gave me any opportunities. I made opportunities for myself. And I'm the one that was able to do that to leverage.

For example, the media helped get out there and then that helped me get into law school. But there's some interesting work coming out of the US. It started with SamaSource attempting to use gig work to improve the skills of people in rural areas who couldn't get work. It gave them an opportunity that they would never be able to find otherwise.

There's Saiph Savage [at UNAM in Mexico](#). She started to look at how we can use gig work to help people with their English, reading, or writing.

There are opportunities for that. But if we want to improve the state of microwork, it needs to be operationalized. You can't just do that by going to Mechanical Turk. There are people who might say: "I'm focusing on writing this week. Because I want to get better at it. You're going to get rejections if you're not already good at it."

You already have to have the skills in order to be able to leverage the work that uses those skills. It'll be interesting to see how Saiph works with that.

But otherwise, how do you put AMT on a resume? And I have, I did, but I've removed it. Because explaining what I had done all those years wasn't a benefit. Instead, I pretend I'm 27 and have only worked for a minute. It led to more questions than anything. What is Amazon Mechanical Turk? And now I've spent a 15-minute interview explaining that. They're all horrified, but they don't know anything about me.

So, yeah, it doesn't lead to bigger things. It's not like starting in an Amazon warehouse and working your way up. James Blair, who works at Amazon is now head of AWS or something. He started on the warehouse floor. I would love to see a Mechanical Turk worker get hired at Amazon.

And we have programmers. 70% of the workers in the US have a college education. Over 80%, I think it might even be 85% of Indian workers have a degree. These are not people that shouldn't be able to work somewhere else, do something better, and move up in the hierarchy. But they don't. The only platform I've seen that happen on is Lead Genius. They allow you to work your way up to project manager and stuff like that. But even that has a ceiling. I don't see people that have worked there in executive positions. I'm looking at something like Lead Genius, and thinking- how can we use this kind of work? There's an interior design platform in Italy, I think it's called 99 designs. When a student goes to an interior design college, they sign up there and build their portfolio.

And then once they have a portfolio, they can go into the real world. It's horrible but mandatory. Because it gives them an opportunity.

**Q: Mechanical Turk and other platforms aren't interested in developing their workforce. They're just expecting people to come with it. What can public institutions build in terms of support and skills development for microworkers? Especially if it becomes a precarious, and bigger number trend in the future.**

*Kristy:* When I think about this, I kind of think about things like UBI [Universal Basic Income]. And I'm not a huge proponent of UBI. Because I think the money goes back to the same rich people. But this would be a situation where universal basic services come into play. Like free internet and free computer equipment upgrades with a fast connection, for example. Then, your wages would go further. Maybe that's tied to something like social services? Training is hard. Definitely, English language training would be important for immigrants, and individuals who do not have a great education and want to do higher paid tasks. Like the move from Mechanical Turk to Upwork.

And then, I think, research as to what the high paying tasks are on sites like Upwork or similar, more niche sites will provide courses to individuals who want to do more than just labelling an image black and white or colour. Especially for younger workers.

Ontario has a powerful sector in the cooperative sector. So I would love to see government funding for cooperative gig work and microworking. Because if we can do that, we can support workers who are creating their own platforms. We can also offer training in marketing, social media, website design, etc and get them to own their own platform.

Now you have Canadian companies, paying Canadian taxes, employing Canadians to do this work. In many ways, they can be more competitive, offer greater quality services, and draw in customers. And that's super easy to do. There are people now who are affiliated with *The New School*.

They are looking at this in the Cooperative Platformation movement. Google is paying them a million dollars to create modules. Because they want people to build cooperatives.

I think Canada could lead this sector because our cooperatives are well supported. Legislatively, there's a really well-built infrastructure. If we could get workers into those roles, and leaders are willing to do this, we'd solve a lot of problems right off the bat. And then you'd have a community of workers, willing to answer questions about the state of microwork.

Right now, we're relying these workers are relying on unaccountable companies in other countries. We don't know who they are. The biggest issue with the state of microwork is the people who use the platform. Like customers of the platform and businesses, for example. Because they're in the same boat. If we provide accountable, Canadian solutions to both of these groups, we'll benefit everybody involved. I think it would really move the industry up in stature and make it better all around. It's also something that we might be able to respect a little more than (we do) right now.

**Q: Do you see room for a positive future? It sounds like in 10 years, this could be a more positive future where Canada has a more active nonprofit and workforce sector built with microworkers. Is that fair to say?**

*Kristy:* Yeah, absolutely. I think Amazon Mechanical Turk, for example, I liken it to Paypal. It's a platform. PayPal and Amazon Mechanical Turk don't instinctively say: "we're going to have bad actors and bad pay! It's going to be terrible!"

There are some things that are built into the system which can lean one way or the other. That's problematic, but it's just a platform and microwork is a form of work. And it's about how you use it and how you build the platform, and how you access it as a customer (a business). That's what makes the state of microwork bad or good.

So whether it's positive or not depends on the actors involved. That of course, is tripartite: employers, employees, and then the government. The state of microwork is up to them.

**Q: How do microworkers identify themselves in the context of occupations? Do they see themselves as a distinct type of worker category or is microwork just how they work in whatever field they're in.**

*Kristy:* I think it definitely depends on I would say the class system and microwork. So, if they are low paid microworkers, they're associated with where they work. For example, a lot of the low paid workers will be on Crowdfunder or Amazon Mechanical Turk. And so they will refer to themselves as Turkers, or as Crowdfunder Workers.

If they are higher paid, they will work on multiple sites, and see themselves as entrepreneurs, independent contractors, or consultants. It depends a lot on how much they're making, how they're working, and how much they're working. But people who do this for beer money are hobbyists. They won't think about it at all. If you ask them what their job this will tell you their main job. You say: "what about this?" They'll say: "It's just something I do at night while watching TV". They will have zero identity.



It's kind of multifaceted how they see themselves. I've never heard anyone call themselves a microworker. Crowd Worker maybe. I think that would probably be the most common term I've heard from workers themselves. Otherwise, it's always: "I'm a Turker" or: "I do work on Upwork". But again, the higher the pay, the more likely they are to say: "entrepreneur". Those American Dream type terms.

Myself when I put it on my resume, I put microwork consultant or microtasking. Micro Tasker is one I've heard before, but again, I think it's pretty rare. It's mostly Crowd Worker.

**Q: Delving more into the demographics is a key part of TWIG's state of microwork investigation. We want to see if there are groups below the surface who do this kind of work, but not naming it. Any thoughts or suggestions for TWIG as they move forward-thinking about this?**

*Kristy:* Identifying them is going to be difficult. I know Statistics Canada is doing focus groups right now. I would highly recommend getting in touch with them and seeing what kind of data they're producing. That might help. I had a chat with them about the state of microwork. Because they're really struggling with the state of microwork. But they might help you find these people, figure out what terms they are using, and what sources there are to get access to them. That is probably your best bet.

When discussing the state of microwork, It's really tough to nail down workers, but they're going to be the ones that you most need. There's not a lot being done in this, which is a shame.

## Kristy Milland

Kristy Milland is currently working towards her Juris Doctor degree at the University of Toronto. Previously, she was community manager of [Turker Nation, the oldest community for Amazon Mechanical Turk \(AMT\) crowd workers](#). In this role, Kristy had her finger on the pulse of the Turker population, with a deep understanding not only of how to get the best work quality on the platform but the labour issues that surrounded microtask crowd work. As a gig worker on AMT, Kristy experienced the precarity of this form of work first-hand. She took it upon herself to get as much attention to the issue as possible so that nonprofits, unions, academics, government, and industry might take up the cause and determine how to make crowdwork a job people could be proud to have.

She has spoken around the world about the ethics and exploitation of crowd work, how to use Amazon Mechanical Turk effectively while still respecting the workers, and the importance of regulation of crowd work as more and more jobs are being taken away from skilled, educated workers and given to the crowd. She has stepped back from her activist role to focus on law school. Her research interests involved whether the current legislative schemes of Canada and the U.S. concerning labour and employment were of use to gig economy workers, and, if not, how they could be changed to ensure that all gig workers could be protected from exploitation.

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# City of Toronto: Inclusive economic development

The City of Toronto commends the Toronto Workforce Innovation Group (TWIG) for its focus on ensuring that the future of work in the city is made up of good, sustainable, inclusive employment; especially its emphasis on a prosperous future where residents are able to contribute their skills, education and talent.

This article was provided by [Economic Development & Culture](#), the City of Toronto, in January 2020.

TWIG is a key participant in the future of work conversation, and the exploration of [microwork in the labour market](#) interests the City of Toronto.

Over the past few years, inclusive economic development was an emerging theme across a number of City of Toronto divisions. To be prosperous and sustainable in a globalized economy, the City of Toronto must succeed on a number of fronts. Examples include affordable housing, accessible public transit and full-time, well-paying jobs.

[The Economic Development & Culture Divisional Strategy 2018-2022](#) establishes goals, which support Toronto's business and culture sectors. It also ensures that all Torontonians can benefit from a vibrant economy. The two most important goals of the strategy are "Inclusion and Equity" and "Talent and Innovation". Both goals support the creation of good jobs in Toronto.

Toronto's success decades from now will be measured on how we worked with our partners. Achieving our vision and carrying out our mission requires the City of Toronto to work with residents, other governments and institutions, the private and not-for-profit sectors, and Indigenous peoples.

Addressing many of the challenges facing Toronto – such as gun violence, a shrinking middle class, regional transit, and precarious employment – will require us to work collaboratively.

In a recent meeting, over 150 GTA-based policy development professionals created policies which align with the new Corporate Strategic Plan.

Equity and inclusion principles cut across all our programs and services, including economic development. One example of such a program is the Indigenous Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (ICIE), a federal government-funded program.

The future of work will look different than it does today. The City of Toronto is collaborating with our partners – including TWIG. This will ensure that jobs in the future are sustainable and all residents have the opportunity to benefit from Toronto's economic success.



# Statistics Canada: Digital platform worker initiatives

A research update from Statistics Canada highlighting related studies in 2017 and 2019.



This article was provided by Statistics Canada in February 2020.

In 2017, Statistics Canada released [survey-based employment estimates](#) on the 'gig' economy including the number of providers of peer-to-peer ride-hailing services in Canada. More recently, Statistics Canada [published historical estimates](#) on the number of gig workers based on tax information. On behalf of Employment and Social Development Canada, Statistics Canada is currently conducting a qualitative study to learn more about online platform employment, particularly about the profile, motivation and working conditions of digital platform workers in Canada. This particular research focuses exclusively on online platform workers whose jobs, projects or tasks are delivered online.

Looking forward, Statistics Canada will play a leading role in modifying international standards for measuring forms of employment, including online platform employment, to ensure that new and changing work arrangements are reflected.

Statistics Canada was pleased to find out that the Toronto Workforce Innovation Group is contributing to the analysis of microtask work and look forward to continuing a dialogue to promote the release of statistical information on this segment of the working population for various jurisdictions.

## Related reports

### Statistics Canada, [The sharing economy in Canada \(2017\)](#)

In an attempt to measure the impact of the sharing economy, Statistics Canada asked people living in Canada the extent to which they used or offered peer-to-peer ride services and private accommodation services.

Statistics Canada. 2017. *The sharing economy in Canada*. The Daily. February 28. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11-001-XIE.

### Statistics Canada, [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data \(2019\)](#)

Using data from the Canadian Employer-Employee Dynamic Database and the 2016 Census of Population, a new study found that the share of gig workers among all Canadian workers aged 15 and older increased from almost 1 million workers (5.5%) in 2005 to about 1.7 million workers (8.2%) in 2016.

Jeon, S.-H., H. Liu, Y. Ostrovsky. 2019. *Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data*. Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series, no. 437. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 11F0019M. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.

### [Platform Workers in Europe: Evidence from the COLLEEM Survey \(2018\) >](#)



Estimates indicate that on average 10% of the adult population has used online platforms for the provision of some type of labour services. However, less than 8% do this kind of work with some frequency, and less than 6% spend a significant amount of time on it (at least 10 hours per week) or earn a significant amount of income (at least 25% of the total).

### [US survey from the Bureau of Labour Statistics on platform work >](#)

May 2017 estimates of electronically mediated workers as decoded by the BLS. The estimates include all people who did electronically mediated work, whether for their main job, a second job, or additional work for pay.