

# Remote crowdworking might not be the great leveller

Submitted by: BlueSky Public Relations Ltd

Monday, 17 August 2020

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Crowdwork platforms present barriers to those with low-income and enable those who are better-off financially to dominate income opportunities, finds new research from the Nordic Centre for Internet and Society, BI Norwegian Business School (<https://www.bi.edu/>).

Crowdwork platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, enable globally distributed workers to earn additional income from small online tasks. Such tasks include data categorisation, business feedback, and content creation. Yet, although this work is claimed to be able to be done anywhere by anyone, it requires devices such as a laptop, PC, tablet, or smartphone, as well as a stable internet connection, electricity, and a place to work.

PhD candidate Gemma Newlands and Associate Professor Christoph Lutz explored the device use of online crowdworkers. After surveying crowd workers in India and the US, they found that tasks can often be designed in a way which destroys this claim of flexibility in workstyle. It means that not all crowdworkers can reap the benefits of flexible work.

They found inequalities between those who were able to invest financially to gain access to more – and better paid – tasks and those who had to invest out of necessity just to meet the basic requirements of doing the work. Crowdworkers with a higher household income were shown to have a higher hourly wage from tasks. Those who only had access to a mobile phone had significantly reduced income opportunities compared to those who could afford a laptop, due to reduced efficiency as well as limited task availability, as many tasks are unable to be completed on a smartphone.

Prof. Lutz says,

“There is a ‘rich-get-richer effect.’ Access to a better internet connection, or devices such as laptops, allows greater access to income opportunities. This income can then be used to invest in better equipment and faster internet connection to further increase productivity and income. Meanwhile, underprivileged workers struggle to benefit from this platform economy: many low-income internet users do not have access to a laptop or desktop computer, or a reliable internet connection.”

Crowdworkers can be supported by platforms and task requesters designing more mobile-friendly interfaces and tasks, subsidising or sponsoring data plan upgrades, providing workplaces, and helping workers increase productivity by combining mobile and non-mobile devices. If the platform economy is to provide opportunities for workers outside the traditional labour market, they must be able to complete tasks on the devices they have.

The findings from this research were published in *New Media & Society*.

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