

## Towards a Community-Defined Framework for Responsible Digital Piecework Requests

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**Summary.** Our understanding of the poor treatment of digital pieceworkers informs our desire to create alternative, sustainable employment options for full-time data-focused piecework. We describe the results of a three day reflection by employees of our alternative data pieceworker organization, DataWorks, on traditional digital pieceworker platforms. From their experience, we saw that little has changed – despite extensive coverage – in the way of worker protections on digital piecework platforms (e.g., Amazon MTurk). Subsequently, we are in the process of developing fair-use guidelines for academic researchers employing digital pieceworkers, to hold researchers accountable for fair labor practices. Our experience is with US-based professional data pieceworkers and we want to learn from researchers studying pieceworkers in different contexts to learn what experiences might be analogous and which we might be overlooking (e.g., language, currency.).

The mistreatment of digital pieceworkers [1] (contract and fulltime) has been brought to light often in recent history, in both academic [2, 3, 4, 5] and popular circles [6, 7, 8]. However, little responsibility has been claimed by the organizations and individuals who hire workers for these activities, ranging from content moderation to image labeling. While the contracting organizations would not likely refer to themselves as “employers” of the gig workers, we term them such since they perform all responsible actions of an employer, save providing worker protections. These employers range from large tech companies, e.g., Facebook, to singular academic researchers. They are accountable to different authorities, from The US Department of Labor to an institutional review board (IRB). However, regardless of the oversight body, guidelines and enforcement have yet to materialize in any meaningful way. Besides the traumatizing content that is endemic to digital labor (sexually explicit and violent [4, 9]), digital pieceworkers are subject to situations that defy modern conceptions of fair labor: oblique employment status, pay falling well short of minimum wage, limited opportunities for recourse with employers, and of course: a lack of associated employee benefits.

While digital pieceworkers globally are subject to permutations of these sub-standard conditions, the employing entities are often headquartered in the “Global North”, the composite nations of which are often purported to have stronger worker protections and better worker experience. However, these alleged benefits fail to materialize even for workers physically present in, and citizens of, those legal jurisdictions [10, 11]. We recently witnessed this firsthand, with a group of four data workers who are professional practitioners in the kind of tasks found on these platforms. The workers are employees of DataWorks, a university partnership in Atlanta, GA, USA, that employs individuals from marginalized communities in the city and trains them in middle-skill data work. Workers are full, compensated (\$17/hr) employees of the university with benefits, and work a standard 35-hour week; they are trained on client projects from nonprofits and civic organizations around the city. However, for 8 hours over three days they worked on three piecework marketplaces as digital gig workers – Amazon Mechanical Turk, Microworker (both US-based), and ClickWorker (Germany). Our goal was to have them understand their organization-based work in relation to these platform alternatives and to help us (as researchers) see these platforms from a professional pieceworker perspective.

The workers’ experiences were not unsurprising given the reputation of these platforms. However, we noted a lack of meaningful improvement in working conditions since the advent of associated literature examining just that. Specifically, the workers described five major issues with the platforms:

**Insultingly low payment.** While the meager wages of platform work is not new, one worker put it succinctly: *“[the pay is] a slap in the face if this were to be my job.”* Another concurs: *“The pay should have some kind of minimum -- maybe start everything at 25 cents.”* We note that it would take completing 29 tasks properly at this rate to meet US federal minimum wage.

**Unclear directions.** One worker described the instructions as generally *“difficult to understand”* and wondered if they were aimed at a specific type of person (distinct from the worker) because it was so difficult to make sense of them. Another worker noted the lack of useful feedback, after they were *rejected* for a task and the only feedback was *“well done.”* The same worker notes they were kicked off one of the platforms with a note to contact the company *“but no other information”* or justification for the disbaring.

**Trauma inducing activities.** We highlight one incident, representative of the kinds of indirect trauma experiences by the workers. One worker began a study about traumatic incidents, that asked the worker to disclose some highly traumatic incident that occurred to them. When the worker continued through the survey, they were greeted with their description of the traumatic experience at the top of every page. The

worker relayed how they were constantly confronted with this re-exposure and, speaking after the study was complete, related that it was "a lot to unpack that trauma for 30 cents."

**Malicious postings and dangerous web activity.** "Some of them are kind of weird," a worker surmised, describing postings that asked the worker to upload selfies and another that asked for a copy of the worker's government ID. "Think it's kinda sketch but I'll do it," another worker said of tasks that required them to open new browser windows to a provided link.

**Lack of transparency around payment.** One worker related how they were fairly certain they'd done three tasks correctly (Googling a particular term and recording when a given website appeared in the results) but did not receive payment for any of them. Further, all workers reported they were confused about when they would be paid for approved work, what the approval timeline was, and were unable to find useful information to address it. On the platforms making it difficult to see what tasks were even completed, including the name of the task, to track payment, one participant remarked on this inflexibility of the platform: "Yo what? That's the most basic thing!"

On the experience at large, one participant questions: "Can you even use this...can you put it on your resume, is it respected work?" We are interested in alternate models for piecework contracting for just this reason: to raise the profile of digital piecework and protect pieceworkers. We question whether the platforms the participants used should even be allowed in academic research, until fair requestor practices – to protect and elevate workers – can be enforced. However, our work so far is centered in the United States; we are curious to hear whether these platforms facilitate meaningful employment in other regions of the world, particularly the "Global South".

If so, we are eager to learn what additional challenges are faced by workers in the "Global South" (e.g., currency, language, employment issues). We want to incorporate these concerns into the preliminary guidelines we currently working on designing to enforce more ethical use of piecework platforms in academic research. We hope, too, to share the both the successes and challenges of digital piecework encountered in DataWorks, as an alternative piecework venues, and gain some preliminary understanding of whether such a model would be suited (or not) to other geographies. Ultimately, we hope to learn from other scholars about how they understand the affects of digital gig work in the "Global South" and whether it matches the promise of such work in the United States, as described by one worker (on why they might considering working on piecework platforms): "Money aside, it gives a sense of freedom -- it's up to you what you want to make. Don't have to do anything anyone says except what you want to do. It's a way to make money fast."

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