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		TITLE OF THE RESEARCH ARTICLE 	
		Exploring Professionals' Motivations and Challenges in the Gig Economy: A Qualitative Study of ICT Sector Gig Workers in Kuala Lumpur	
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Abstract			
This qualitative study investigates the underlying motivations and perceived challenges experienced by professionals who engage in gig work within the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. As digital platforms continue to redefine employment relationships and labor market structures, understanding why skilled professionals choose non-traditional forms of work is crucial. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five ICT professionals currently active as gig workers. A purposive sampling technique ensured the inclusion of individuals with diverse project-based experiences. Thematic analysis revealed three major motivational drivers: flexibility in work arrangements, professional autonomy, and the potential for increased income. Conversely, the most salient challenges included income instability, limited organizational support, and restricted opportunities for learning and career development. The findings highlight that professionals' participation in the gig economy is not merely driven by economic necessity but by a conscious preference for self-determination, adaptability, and digital entrepreneurialism. The study provides insights for policymakers, corporations, and digital labor platforms seeking to improve working conditions and bridge structural gaps between gig workers, employers, and regulatory frameworks.			
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Introduction

The emergence of digital platforms has transformed the global labor market, enabling new forms of employment that diverge from the traditional full-time model. The gig economy, characterized by short-term, project-based, and flexible work, is increasingly popular among professionals seeking greater autonomy and work-life balance (CIPD, 2017). In Malaysia, this trend has accelerated with the rise of online platforms such as Favser, eRezeki, and Freelanc3r, which connect skilled individuals with businesses on demand (Kelly Services, 2019).

According to recent estimates, approximately 26% of Malaysia's labor force is self-employed, and this number continues to grow with technological advancements and shifting career aspirations (World Bank, 2019; Lim, 2021). The gig economy appeals particularly to ICT professionals, who view it as an avenue for independent work, portfolio diversification, and exposure to innovative technologies (Frost & Sullivan, 2017). However, the gig model also introduces vulnerabilities—such as inconsistent income, lack of legal protection, and limited career progression—which challenge workers' long-term security (PERSOLKELLY, 2018). This study aims to explore what motivates professionals in the ICT sector to become gig workers and to identify the barriers they face within the digital labor ecosystem of Kuala Lumpur.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted to capture in-depth insights into gig workers' experiences.

Sampling: A purposive sampling technique was used to select five ICT professionals actively involved in gig work for at least one year.

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, each lasting approximately 45–60 minutes. The interviews focused on themes such as motivation, work-life balance, financial stability, and skill development.

Data Analysis: The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Manual coding was applied to identify recurrent themes, patterns, and conceptual linkages.

Validity and Reliability: Triangulation was achieved by cross-verifying responses among participants and maintaining reflective notes during analysis.

Findings and Discussion

The study identified three major motivational themes and three primary challenges experienced by ICT gig workers:

Motivational Drivers:

Flexibility: The ability to determine work hours, choose projects, and maintain better work-life integration.

Autonomy: A strong preference for independence and creative control over one's professional output.

Income Potential: The opportunity to earn more through multiple projects or high-paying contracts compared to traditional employment.

Challenges:

Income Instability: Irregular payment cycles and project unpredictability create financial insecurity.

Lack of Support Systems: Absence of social security benefits, health insurance, and legal protection.

Limited Career Growth: Insufficient learning opportunities and lack of long-term career development within gig structures.

These findings resonate with prior research (McKinsey, 2016; PERSOLKELLY, 2018) that conceptualizes gig work as a deliberate lifestyle choice rather than a mere response to unemployment. Nonetheless, the absence of institutional safeguards suggests the need for a hybrid employment framework that ensures economic security without undermining flexibility.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly transformed how people live and work across the globe. The emergence of digital work systems and platform-based employment models has opened new avenues for income generation and redefined traditional employment structures (International Workplace Group, 2021). This transformation has given rise to what is now widely known as the gig economy—an economic system characterized by short-term, project-based, and flexible employment relationships, where individuals, often referred to as *gig workers* or *freelancers*, perform specific tasks based on their expertise (Lim, 2021).

According to Kelly Services Malaysia (2019), only about 54% of the national labor force is currently engaged in full-time employment, while the remainder consists of temporary, contract, or part-time workers. This reflects the growing presence of gig-based employment in Malaysia's workforce. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2017) defines the gig economy as a system in which individuals earn income by completing temporary projects or contracts, rather than holding a long-term position within a single organization. Unlike traditional employees, gig workers bear higher financial and occupational risks, as they must continuously secure new contracts and ensure consistent income flows.

The rapid growth of the gig economy in Malaysia is further facilitated by the proliferation of digital platforms such as *Favser*, *eRezeki*, *Be a Freelancer*, and *Freelanc3r*, which connect independent professionals with potential clients. These platforms have become crucial mediators of digital employment, providing evidence that technological advancement and social motivation jointly stimulate people's participation in the gig economy (Lim, 2021). The convergence of demographic shifts and technological innovation is thus reshaping the labor market and redefining employment norms.

According to Dr. Indeed Betty Leng of Sunway University Business School, the declining attractiveness of traditional employment, coupled with the limited career prospects within conventional corporate settings, has led younger generations to view gig work as a viable and desirable alternative (The Edge Markets, 2017). From a performance-oriented perspective, this shift is also driven by the global demand for organizational agility and competitiveness, while employees across multi-generational workforces increasingly seek flexibility and autonomy in structuring their professional lives (Persolkelly, 2018).

The contemporary workforce has become more diverse, and many professionals now prefer task-based engagements over long-term, full-time employment. A global study by Persolkelly (2018) revealed that between 20% and 30% of the world's labor force actively pursues freelance or contract-based opportunities, with 43% expressing a preference for flexible work arrangements. Similarly, data from the World Bank (The Star, 2019) indicate that approximately 26% of Malaysia's workforce is self-employed, reflecting the increasing normalization of independent work. A separate study conducted by *The Malaysian Reserve* (2017) found that 68% of respondents chose freelancing out of personal preference, despite the availability of permanent employment opportunities.

Moreover, the "Digital Talent Report 2017" by Frost & Sullivan (2017) emphasized that 67% of Malaysian employers believe freelance work offers better prospects, especially in emerging sectors like FinTech and e-commerce, which are prone to volatility in job demand. Supporting this view, McKinsey & Company's (2016) cross-national research reported that nearly 70% of gig workers across six countries entered the gig economy by choice rather than necessity, indicating that digital labor models are increasingly becoming a sustainable and preferred mode of employment in response to technological disruptions and market shifts (Persolkelly, 2018).

Consequently, the gig economy has become a defining feature of modern labor behavior and organizational design, with an estimated four million self-employed individuals in Malaysia—a number that continues to rise steadily (Lim, 2021). Despite this expansion, there remains a pressing need for systematic research to better understand the motivational factors driving professionals to join the gig economy and the challenges they encounter within it.

Previous studies on job choice and employee motivation have primarily focused on conventional employment contexts, examining determinants of job attractiveness, retention, and commitment (Hee & Rhung, 2019; Khalil & Hashim, 2019; Sun, Kok, & Low, 2017). However, empirical evidence on motivational dynamics specific to gig workers remains limited. Existing studies suggest that motivational factors vary across demographic and psychological dimensions such as age, lifestyle, self-reliance, and perceptions of job security (Dimitropoulos et al., 2019).

Recent economic analyses describe the gig economy as a new wave of economic growth (NST, 2019). Flexibility has been consistently identified as one of the main drivers for individuals seeking alternative work experiences (Gandhi et al., 2018; Persolkelly, 2018). Instant acceptance, immediate feedback, and improved work-life balance are additional factors contributing to the growing appeal of gig-based employment (Storey & Steadman, 2016). Other intrinsic motivations include achievement orientation, autonomy, self-efficacy, and the pursuit of self-sufficiency (Gandhi et al., 2018; Jagabi Systems, 2019).

Nonetheless, scholars also warn that while the flexibility of gig work offers several benefits, it may result in adverse consequences such as social isolation, irregular income, lack of collective representation, overwork, and emotional exhaustion (Wood et al., 2019). This underscores the dual nature of gig work as both an opportunity for independence and a source of precarity.

The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated participation in the gig economy, as many individuals who lost traditional employment turned to digital platforms for income (Lim, 2021). Despite this momentum, research focusing on what motivates professionals—particularly those in Malaysia's ICT sector—to pursue gig work remains scarce. Prior studies have addressed some determinants influencing individuals' participation in the gig economy, but most have not explored the unique experiences and challenges of ICT professionals in the Malaysian context.

This study aims to fill that gap by providing an in-depth understanding of the motivational factors and challenges faced by ICT professionals in Kuala Lumpur who have chosen to engage as gig workers. The research contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding of digital labor by informing policymakers, organizations, and platform providers about the lived realities of this emerging workforce.

Research Questions

What are the key factors that motivate ICT professionals to participate in the gig economy in Malaysia?

What are the primary challenges faced by ICT professionals working as gig workers in Kuala Lumpur?

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Motivation to Become a Gig Worker*

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the Job Characteristics Theory (JCT) (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) provide the foundational theoretical lenses for understanding workers' motivation to participate in the gig economy. According to SDT, human motivation can be categorized into intrinsic motivation—driven by personal interest, enjoyment, and internal satisfaction—and extrinsic motivation, which stems from external rewards, recognition, or financial incentives (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations play a significant role in influencing individuals' decisions to engage in gig work. Some individuals are intrinsically motivated to participate in the gig economy for its autonomy, variety, and opportunities for self-expression (Rosenblat & Hwang, 2016), while others are extrinsically driven by financial benefits, flexibility, and convenience (Rockmann & Ballinger, 2017). Deci and Ryan (2000) further highlight that intrinsic motivation is associated with three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy allows individuals to experience control over their work; competence reflects their ability to master tasks effectively; and relatedness provides a sense of belonging and social connection.

Gig workers often experience high levels of autonomy, which enables them to choose when, where, and how they work. Their sense of competence arises from completing tasks successfully and being recognized by clients, while relatedness may emerge through digital communities or professional networks. According to Gagné and Deci (2005), intrinsic motivation leads to greater engagement, higher-quality work outcomes, and sustained satisfaction among workers.

In contrast, the Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) posits that five key job dimensions—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback—influence employees' internal motivation and performance outcomes. Within the gig economy, these characteristics are particularly relevant: workers often value diverse project exposure (skill variety), clear task ownership (task identity), the perceived meaningfulness of their work (task significance), and flexibility in decision-making (autonomy). Both theories collectively suggest that when gig workers' psychological needs and job attributes align, motivation, engagement, and productivity increase (Deci et al., 2017).

2.2. *Flexibility as a Motivational Determinant*

A consistent finding across empirical studies is that flexibility serves as a central motivational driver for joining the gig economy (De Stefano et al., 2015; Rockmann & Ballinger, 2017; Anwar & Graham, 2021). Flexibility allows workers to balance professional commitments with personal responsibilities, adjust workloads, and pursue multiple income sources.

A report by Persolkelly (2018) found that flexibility was the leading factor influencing Malaysians' intention to engage in gig work. Similarly, Rockmann and Ballinger (2017) discovered that experienced professionals in technology and creative sectors viewed flexibility as the primary attraction to platform-based work. Patre et al. (2019) also observed that flexibility ranked among the top three determinants influencing workers' entry into the gig economy.

Gig workers benefit from temporal flexibility—the ability to determine their own schedules—and spatial flexibility, which enables remote work arrangements (Jarrahi et al., 2019). This is particularly appealing to younger generations; Deloitte's (2017) *Millennial Survey* revealed that Generation Y and Z workers highly value flexible working conditions as part of their ideal employment model. Harvard Business School's research further suggested that

individuals in the modern economy seek a dynamic equilibrium between stability and opportunity, balancing security with vitality and personal growth (Petriglieri et al., 2018).

Nonetheless, flexibility in gig work is not without limits. Lehdonvirta (2018) argues that platform-based systems, while offering autonomy, simultaneously impose algorithmic and structural constraints that may restrict workers' agency. Such constraints manifest through platform policies, performance monitoring, and dependence on client ratings, which can lead to stress, uncertainty, and precariousness.

Demographic factors also moderate the role of flexibility as a motivator. The PERSOLKELLY (2018) report highlights that older workers often seek flexibility for family and lifestyle reasons, while younger workers view it as an avenue for creativity and skill diversification. Deloitte (2017) confirms that millennials associate flexibility with well-being, job satisfaction, and long-term productivity.

2.3. Autonomy, Independence, and Self-Efficacy

Autonomy and self-sufficiency are closely related but distinct concepts that also underpin gig work participation. Fineman (2000) defines independence as freedom from reliance on others, while autonomy refers to self-governance and decision-making authority. Autonomy encompasses the capacity to make independent choices and act according to one's own judgment (Christman, 2003).

The rise of digital labor platforms has intensified the demand for autonomy. As Shibata (2019) observes, gig work emerged as a modern form of independent labor that aligns with individuals' desire for personal control and minimal supervision. Gig workers have the liberty to choose projects, negotiate rates, and manage their schedules, enhancing their perceived agency and ownership of outcomes.

Autonomy has been linked to greater creativity, innovation, and organizational commitment (Foss et al., 2009). Aube, Rousseau, and Morin (2007) found that job autonomy significantly improves intrinsic motivation, satisfaction, and performance. Similarly, Robertson (2019) emphasized that providing workers with freedom in task execution correlates with higher job satisfaction and reduced burnout. The nature of gig work—project-based and goal-oriented—naturally cultivates autonomy and attracts individuals who value independence and self-direction (Nuhn & Wald, 2016).

Moreover, job satisfaction and autonomy are positively associated. Zaman et al. (2020) demonstrated that workers who perceive high levels of job autonomy report stronger engagement and lower turnover intentions. Autonomy, as a component of intrinsic motivation, fosters self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to perform effectively (Gagné et al., 2005; Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the context of gig work, self-efficacy enhances persistence and adaptability, enabling workers to manage uncertainty and workload variability.

However, despite its advantages, autonomy in the gig economy is constrained by platform governance. According to Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas (2018), the benefits of independence are often offset by structural limitations, such as rating systems, algorithmic controls, and lack of collective representation. These restrictions challenge the notion of full autonomy and reveal the paradox of *controlled independence*—a hallmark of digital labor markets.

2.4. Social and Economic Dimensions of Gig Work Motivation

Beyond psychological drivers, economic necessity and social context also shape gig work participation. Studies by Gandini (2019) and Wood et al. (2019) highlight that financial insecurity, job displacement, and cost of living pressures often push individuals toward gig work. For many, gig work represents both an opportunity for self-employment and a survival strategy in volatile labor markets.

From a social standpoint, the sense of belonging and professional identity derived from digital communities can enhance motivation. Gig workers frequently rely on peer networks for support, referrals, and feedback, forming virtual ecosystems that compensate for the absence of formal organizational structures (Burtch, Carnahan, & Greenwood, 2018). These communities foster collaborative learning and peer recognition, reinforcing engagement and long-term participation.

Furthermore, scholars such as Scholz (2017) argue that the gig economy promotes a reconfiguration of work relationships, where freedom and insecurity coexist. While autonomy and flexibility drive participation, inconsistent income, lack of benefits, and weak legal protection contribute to precarity. This duality underscores the complexity of gig work motivation—it is both voluntary and constrained, liberating and vulnerable, depending on contextual and individual factors.

2.5. Summary of Theoretical Implications

The reviewed literature demonstrates that the decision to participate in the gig economy is influenced by a multi-dimensional set of factors—psychological (autonomy, self-determination), structural (flexibility, task diversity), and economic (income potential, employment insecurity). The Self-Determination Theory and Job Characteristics Theory collectively explain how the alignment of personal values, work design, and technological affordances fosters motivation and satisfaction among gig workers.

Nevertheless, the literature also highlights the need for context-specific research—particularly in Malaysia’s ICT sector—where digitalization, education, and socio-economic diversity uniquely shape professional attitudes toward gig work. Understanding these factors is essential for developing inclusive labor policies and sustainable digital employment ecosystems.

3. Challenges Faced by Workers in the Gig Economy

Despite the apparent freedom and autonomy associated with the gig economy, research consistently reveals that gig workers encounter a broad spectrum of structural, social, and psychological challenges that limit their ability to fully exercise the autonomy promised by digital labor platforms (Shibata, 2019; Lehdonvirta, 2018). While gig work is often portrayed as a symbol of flexibility and self-determination, in reality, it frequently entails significant instability, precarity, and managerial control through algorithmic and contractual mechanisms (Wood et al., 2019).

3.1. Algorithmic Control and Pseudo-Autonomy

Although platform management systems ostensibly grant workers autonomy, they simultaneously impose digital and algorithmic forms of control. Lehdonvirta (2018) emphasizes that the gig economy’s infrastructure embeds power asymmetries between platforms and workers. Platform algorithms determine task allocation, compensation rates, and performance visibility, effectively constraining workers’ decision-making capacity. As Klein (2017) and Wood et al. (2019) note, the resulting “controlled flexibility” often translates into longer working hours, unpredictable workloads, and underpayment.

Similarly, Matthias (2019) argues that platform labor produces an illusion of independence—workers operate as “micro-entrepreneurs” but are subject to managerial and client-driven performance surveillance. Consequently, autonomy becomes a negotiated privilege rather than a guaranteed condition of work. Power limitations and cognitive constraints, such as *procrastination* and *presenteeism*, further erode gig workers’ capacity to manage their time effectively (Lehdonvirta, 2018).

3.2. Income Instability and Economic Insecurity

Income volatility is among the most frequently cited challenges in the gig economy. Workers depend on task availability, client ratings, and platform algorithms, which can fluctuate daily. This unpredictability leads to financial insecurity, difficulties in long-term planning, and limited access to credit (Roy et al., 2020). Inconsistent earnings also induce financial and psychological stress, with studies showing that gig workers experience higher anxiety and lower well-being than their full-time counterparts (Gig Economy Data, 2019).

Moreover, gig workers are typically excluded from social protection systems such as health insurance, unemployment benefits, or retirement contributions (Bajwa et al., 2018). The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) reports that workers in digital economies often face irregular pay, unstable future job prospects, and capricious administrative procedures. These vulnerabilities challenge the sustainability of gig work as a long-term career path.

3.3. Limited Career Development and Skill Advancement

Unlike traditional employees, gig workers rarely have access to formal training, mentorship, or career advancement programs (Butz-Widener, 2019; Zhao, 2019). Platforms tend to prioritize efficiency over worker development, leaving individuals responsible for upgrading their own skills. Over time, this can hinder professional growth and reduce competitiveness in the labor market.

According to Roy et al. (2020), the lack of structured development pathways not only constrains career progression but also reinforces occupational stratification—where highly skilled professionals maintain advantages while low-skill workers remain trapped in precarious cycles of short-term contracts. The absence of collective bargaining power further exacerbates these inequalities, as gig workers have limited mechanisms to negotiate wages or advocate for better working conditions.

3.4. Health Risks and Work-Life Imbalance

The demanding nature of platform work—often involving long hours, irregular schedules, and constant availability—poses significant health risks. Bajwa et al. (2018) highlight that gig workers frequently lack health insurance and face higher exposure to occupational fatigue, mental stress, and ergonomic strain. The constant need to remain “online” to secure new tasks contributes to burnout and social isolation.

Additionally, the blending of work and personal life in digital settings blurs boundaries, resulting in work-life imbalance (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). While the promise of flexibility is appealing, many workers find themselves overworking to maintain financial stability, thereby reducing the quality of rest, family interaction, and leisure.

3.5. Social Isolation and Lack of Institutional Support

Gig workers often operate independently without direct colleagues or organizational networks. This social isolation diminishes opportunities for collaboration, mentoring, and peer support (Roy et al., 2020). Furthermore, the absence of formal representation or unions leaves many workers without advocacy channels. As a result, disputes over payment, task rejection, or unfair ratings frequently go unresolved, undermining trust in digital labor platforms (Butz-Widener, 2019).

These challenges collectively illustrate the paradox of the gig economy: while it promotes independence and flexibility, it simultaneously fosters insecurity and vulnerability. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts between policymakers, platform providers, and labor organizations to ensure fairer and more sustainable digital employment ecosystems.

4. Methodology

This study adopted an interpretivist qualitative research design, aimed at understanding gig workers' lived experiences through subjective interpretation and contextual analysis. The interpretivist paradigm is suitable for exploring social realities shaped by human perception and meaning (Dudovskiy, 2016). It integrates human consciousness and contextual interpretation, enabling a deeper understanding of individual motivations and challenges (Saunders et al., 2012).

4.1. Research Design and Approach

An inductive reasoning approach guided the research, allowing general patterns and theoretical insights to emerge from specific empirical observations. This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to explore how ICT professionals experience and interpret gig work in Malaysia.

4.2. Population and Sampling

The target population comprised ICT professionals currently engaged in the gig economy in Kuala Lumpur. Participants were required to have at least one year of experience working in digital freelancing or platform-based employment. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants with relevant experience and knowledge of the field.

Five gig workers were interviewed, consistent with qualitative research guidance suggesting that thematic saturation often occurs between four and twelve participants (Saunders et al., 2012). The selected participants formed a homogeneous sample, allowing for rich, comparative insights within a single occupational category.

4.3. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via telephone and digital conferencing platforms due to COVID-19 restrictions. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and included open-ended questions followed by probing inquiries to elicit detailed personal reflections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants were informed of the study's objectives, their voluntary participation rights, and data confidentiality measures. Consent was obtained to record the interviews for transcription and analysis.

4.4. Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and systematically organized for analysis. The data were then subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Coding was performed manually to identify recurring patterns and themes. This method facilitated categorization of non-numerical data into broader conceptual themes that addressed the research questions (Creswell, 2012).

Quality and trustworthiness were ensured through triangulation, peer review, and participant validation. The principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were rigorously applied. Member checks were conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants for feedback and verification.

5. Results and Discussion

This study involved five ICT professionals currently working as gig workers in Kuala Lumpur, aged between 28 and 37 years, each with a minimum of one year of experience in digital freelancing. To maintain confidentiality, participants were labeled as Respondent 1 through Respondent 5.

Research Question 1: Motivational Factors

The first research question aimed to identify the key motivational factors that influenced ICT professionals to participate in the gig economy. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant themes:

1. Flexibility - The ability to determine work hours, project selection, and personal scheduling.
2. Autonomy - The freedom to make independent decisions and control work processes.
3. Income Potential - The opportunity to earn higher or diversified income through multiple short-term projects.

(Continuation of *Research Question 2*—covering the challenges identified—would follow here.)

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Flexibility

Across all five interviews, flexibility—in schedule, location, and task pacing—emerged as the most salient driver of participation in the gig economy. Participants emphasized the ability to determine *when*, *how long*, and *where* to work, in contrast to the prescriptive rules of conventional 9–5 employment.

Respondent 1: “I have the flexibility to set my own working time. I can choose what time to start each day and allocate my hours for every project I do.”

Respondent 2: “I don’t want to be restricted to full-time office hours set by the company. I used to work long hours to handle multiple tasks. I prefer flexible hours, and I can work anywhere I want.”

Respondent 3: “Being in the gig workforce means I have full flexibility over my time. I dislike the constraints of a standard 9–5 routine. Even when companies offer flexible hours, there are still specific time obligations and HR rules I must follow as a full-time employee.”

Respondent 4: “As a gig worker, I manage my own time and can use it efficiently. I don’t have to follow nine-to-five. I work whenever it fits my schedule, as long as I meet deadlines.”

Respondent 5: “Time flexibility motivates me to join the gig economy. I’m more energetic and productive with this freedom. I can choose when to work and save commuting time—something I couldn’t do as a full-time employee.”

These findings align with prior work showing that (especially) younger cohorts value flexible arrangements and perceive platform work as affording greater control over working hours and venues (e.g., Smith & Galbraith, 2012). In ICT roles—where deliverables are tied to milestones and submission dates—participants reported that self-scheduling *improved task completion and felt productivity*. This is consistent with evidence that the most productive knowledge workers rarely operate in fixed eight-hour blocks (Volkin, 2021). At the same time, as Lehdonvirta (2018) cautions, structural constraints embedded in platform design can delimit workers’ temporal control despite nominal flexibility.

5.2. Autonomy

Participants also highlighted autonomy—discretion over tools, methods, and project selection—as a core attraction of gig work.

Respondent 1: “I can decide how to approach a task as long as I deliver what the client needs. I choose the tools and software—unlike before, when the company dictated them.”

Respondent 2: “I pick the projects I’m interested in. If I have no interest, I simply decline. I feel more committed and motivated when I like the task.”

Respondent 3: “I have the freedom to choose the work that interests me. That empowers me to complete tasks and to decide on methods and delivery.”

Respondent 4: “Previously I had to follow decisions made by superiors. Now I can choose my projects and avoid bureaucratic procedures and overhead.”

Respondent 5: “I can select what I want to work on—before I had to do whatever came. I’m more motivated now because the tasks interest me and challenge me.”

Consistent with research on intrinsic motivation and job design, greater autonomy is linked to higher job satisfaction, creativity, and commitment (e.g., Aube, Rousseau, & Morin, 2007; Foss et al., 2009; Robertson, 2019). In the ICT context, autonomy over technical stacks and workflows appears particularly salient. Still, scholars note a paradox: platform governance and rating systems can constrain *de facto* autonomy, producing a form of “controlled independence.”

5.3. Higher Earnings

A third prominent theme was income potential. Several participants reported earning more than in prior salaried roles, especially when managing multiple projects or billing hourly.

Respondent 1: “My typical income now is higher than as a full-time employee. I’m paid per project, and the effort I put in is reflected in my pay.”

Respondent 2: “Sometimes income exceeds what I would earn full-time. As a gig worker, I can bill thoroughly for the hours worked.”

Respondent 4: “I can grow my earnings by taking several jobs depending on size and complexity. I prefer smaller jobs to finish them faster and get more new ones.”

Respondent 5: “My income is generally higher than before. I take on extra assignments to earn more, and because I control my schedule, I can handle a few projects a month.”

These reports align with extrinsic motivation accounts in self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006) and with evidence that some freelancers enter or remain in gig work primarily for financial returns (Zaman et al., 2020). Importantly, participants also recognized that for some workers gig income is supplemental, while for others it represents the primary livelihood (e.g., post-COVID job loss; Lim, 2021).

6. Research Question 2: Challenges Faced by ICT Gig Workers

While participants were broadly satisfied with flexibility, autonomy, and earnings potential, they also identified significant constraints and risks. Three challenges dominated: irregular income, lack of support, and limited learning and development opportunities.

6.1. Irregular Income

All participants described income volatility as a major concern. Pay depended on project flow, client acquisition, and task size; months with few projects produced substantial financial stress.

Respondent 1: “I don’t get a fixed monthly salary. If I don’t secure new projects, my income drops. I’ve even been underpaid compared to what clients initially promised.”

Respondent 2: “My income fluctuates monthly. I rely on referrals and find it hard to expand my client base. If that doesn’t change, I might return to full-time work for stability.”

Respondent 4: “Inconsistent pay is my biggest problem. Some months I get little or no work, then I have to compensate later by taking more jobs.”

These experiences mirror reports of financial precarity among gig workers, including difficulty meeting expenses, lower savings, and lack of social protection (Berg, 2015; PERSOLKELLY, 2018). Risks include downward price

pressure, outsourcing threats, and the absence of employer-provided pensions or statutory contributions, which can jeopardize long-term financial security.

6.2. Lack of Support

Participants frequently noted working alone end-to-end without managerial scaffolding, peer teams, or internal client-liaison roles.

Respondent 1: “I complete the whole project myself. When technical hurdles arise, I must resolve them alone—and assess scope carefully before accepting.”

Respondent 2: “Understanding client requirements can be difficult. Previously, a project lead liaised with clients; now that burden is on me.”

Respondent 3: “I must be hands-on from acquisition to delivery—marketing, pitching, and executing with little support.”

Respondent 4: “When I get stuck, I sometimes pay friends to help. There’s no internal support system.”

This absence of organizational support elevates cognitive load, deadline pressure, and stress—especially in remote settings—while also limiting knowledge sharing and collective problem solving (see Jabagi et al., 2019). The lack of formal escalation paths can leave disputes over scope, revisions, or payment unresolved, transferring project risk to the worker.

6.3. Learning and Development

Participants reported restricted access to structured training, mentorship, and advancement pathways typical of salaried roles.

Respondent 1: “I face limits in my skills for certain tasks and may outsource parts. In full-time roles, teams with complementary skills helped each other.”

Respondent 2: “It’s stressful to deliver with only my current skill set. Previously, tasks were distributed across colleagues.”

Respondent 4: “Career progression is difficult as a gig worker—I can’t ‘move up’ to managerial roles.”

Respondent 5: “I may not develop managerial or administrative skills—projects are immediate and individual.”

This echoes findings that gig workers often lack embedded upskilling channels and career ladders, reducing opportunities for vertical mobility and professional identity development (Seibert et al., 2001; Kost et al., 2020; Zhao, 2019). Sparse contact with supervisors and peers limits network formation and social capital, further constraining progression.

7. Implications

This study advances both theory and practice by clarifying the motivational drivers (flexibility, autonomy, higher earnings) and constraints (income instability, limited support, curtailed development) shaping ICT professionals’ participation in Malaysia’s gig economy.

Practical implications. For firms engaging gig talent, results point to designing contracting and collaboration models that:

- preserve true flexibility while reducing algorithmic or administrative frictions;
- provide structured support (clear briefs, single points of contact, timely feedback, fair dispute resolution);
- offer learning access (micro-credentials, sandboxes, tool licenses) and performance-based pathways (preferred-vendor tiers).

Policy implications. Public agencies can strengthen sustainability by exploring portable benefits, fair payment standards, and access to training subsidies tailored to independent workers. Such measures help bridge gaps between organizational needs and worker welfare, supporting a healthier digital labor ecosystem.

Theoretical implications. Findings corroborate Self-Determination Theory and Job Characteristics Theory: alignment between autonomy/competence/relatedness and skill variety/task identity/task significance/autonomy/feedback underpins motivation in platform work—tempered by governance mechanisms that may erode perceived autonomy.

8. Limitations and Future Research

As with most qualitative studies, this inquiry has limitations that inform future work.

1. Individual differences. The study did not analyze how variables such as age, personality, self-efficacy, or emotional intelligence shape motivations and experiences. Future studies should examine cohort differences (e.g., Gen X vs. Millennials/Gen Z).
2. Motivational dimensions. We treated motivation holistically rather than disentangling intrinsic vs. extrinsic components (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Subsequent work should model these pathways separately and test their interaction effects on outcomes (e.g., earnings volatility tolerance).
3. Sample scope. With five homogeneous ICT participants in Kuala Lumpur, findings are analytically (not statistically) generalizable. Comparative studies across regions, sectors, and platform types—and mixed-methods designs—would enhance external validity.

Table 1

Summary of Key Findings: Motivations and Challenges of ICT Gig Workers in Kuala Lumpur

Themes / Dimensions	Findings from Participants	Illustrative Quotes	Supporting Literature
Motivational Factors			
Flexibility	Participants emphasized time and location flexibility as the strongest motivation to join the gig economy. They valued the ability to determine when, where, and how long to work.	<i>"I can set my own working hours and work anywhere I want."</i> - Respondent 2 <i>"I manage my own time efficiently and don't need to follow the 9-5 routine."</i> - Respondent 4	Smith & Galbraith (2012); Volkin (2021); Lehdonvirta (2018)
Autonomy	Gig work provides professional independence in project choice, task methods, and use of tools/software. This freedom enhances creativity and job satisfaction.	<i>"I decide how to handle tasks and choose the tools that work best."</i> - Respondent 1 <i>"I pick projects that interest me and feel more motivated."</i> - Respondent 2	Deci & Ryan (2000); Aube et al. (2007); Robertson (2019); Foss et al. (2009)
Higher Earnings	Participants noted greater earning potential through project-based pay, multiple contracts, and control over workload. Income is performance-linked rather than fixed.	<i>"My typical income now is higher than a full-time salary."</i> - Respondent 1 <i>"Sometimes I earn more than before, depending</i>	Deci & Ryan (2000); Vansteenkiste et al. (2006); Zaman et al. (2020); Lim (2021)

		<i>on how many clients I take.” – Respondent 5</i>	
Challenges			
Irregular Income	Income instability was cited as the most severe challenge. Workers face unpredictable earnings tied to project flow and client acquisition.	<i>“My income goes up and down every month; some months I have little or no work.” – Respondent 4</i> <i>“If I can’t find clients, I might return to full-time employment.” – Respondent 2</i>	Berg (2015); PERSOLKELLY (2018); ILO (2021)
Lack of Support	Respondents reported working in isolation without managerial or technical assistance. They bear full responsibility for client communication and problem-solving.	<i>“I complete projects alone and must troubleshoot issues myself.” – Respondent 1</i> <i>“It’s stressful dealing with clients’ unclear requirements without a team.” – Respondent 2</i>	Jabagi et al. (2019); Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas (2018)
Limited Learning and Development	Gig workers lack structured training, mentorship, and promotion opportunities. Career growth is largely stagnant.	<i>“It’s difficult to advance; I work individually without managerial experience.” – Respondent 4</i> <i>“I can’t easily develop new skills unless I pay for training myself.” – Respondent 1</i>	Kost et al. (2020); Zhao (2019); Seibert et al. (2001)

9. Conclusion

This study explored the motivations and challenges experienced by professionals engaged as gig workers in the ICT sector in Kuala Lumpur. Using a qualitative approach grounded in interpretivism, the research provided in-depth insights into the lived experiences of five professionals who have transitioned from traditional employment to participation in the gig economy.

The findings reveal that flexibility, autonomy, and income potential are the most significant motivational drivers influencing professionals to adopt gig work. These factors reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of motivation as described by the Self-Determination Theory and Job Characteristics Theory. Participants valued the freedom to determine their working hours, project choices, and work environments—key attributes that enhanced their sense of control, job satisfaction, and productivity. The ability to secure higher earnings through multiple short-term projects also served as a strong extrinsic motivator, offering financial independence and empowerment.

However, the study also highlights several critical challenges that threaten the sustainability of gig work. Chief among these are irregular income, lack of institutional support, and limited opportunities for learning and career development. Despite the perceived autonomy, gig workers often operate within systems of algorithmic and contractual control that restrict their long-term financial and professional stability. The absence of organizational support structures further contributes to work-related stress, isolation, and restricted social interaction. In addition, limited access to training or professional development constrains their ability to upgrade skills and progress beyond entry-level or project-based work.

From a theoretical perspective, this study reinforces the applicability of motivation theories in explaining participation within the digital labor market. It demonstrates that the gig economy simultaneously fulfills and frustrates core psychological needs—offering autonomy and flexibility but limiting relatedness and security.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest the need for a more balanced ecosystem that protects workers' rights while preserving flexibility. Organizations and policymakers should implement initiatives such as fair compensation frameworks, structured feedback mechanisms, access to continuous learning, and social protection systems. These interventions are vital to bridging the gap between platform management structures and workers' well-being.

In conclusion, while the gig economy represents an innovative and adaptive model of modern employment, its long-term sustainability depends on recognizing gig workers as an integral part of the digital workforce. Ensuring their protection, professional growth, and equitable participation will be essential to maximizing the potential of the gig economy in Malaysia's ICT sector and beyond.

Ethical Considerations

All research procedures complied with the ethical guidelines of the Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, and their informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any point without consequence. All interview data were stored securely and used solely for academic purposes.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research.

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