RISE AND GRIND

MICROWORK AND HUSTLE CULTURE IN THE UK

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Autonomy

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Microwork is a form of work on digital platforms in which short tasks are assigned to workers, who are paid piece wages for completing them. This can consist of coding data to teach algorithms, short translation tasks, surveys, tagging content and identifying images. It has provided new opportunities for workers to participate in the labour market but has been found to exacerbate labour market inequalities. Workers on these platforms are not classified as employees under labour law and are often paid below minimum wage for their work.

Microwork and other forms of digital piece work are beginning to play an important role within neoliberal "hustle culture": the idea that individuals ought to be productive all of the time and that success is determined by endless work and the attainment of an entrepreneurial ideal. Due to the influence of a pervasive "always on" culture promoted by celebrities and influencers on social media, many workers feel guilty when not working.

Easy access to these digital tools enables workers to transform time outside of work into economically productive activity labouring on digital platforms. Some workers appreciate the autonomy and flexibility of microwork and see it as positively contributing to their ability to earn an income. But rather than relaxing or spending time with friends and family, these workers report spending additional time online to earn extra money.

The distinction between work and non-work continues to be blurred as companies develop new ways to create economic value out of workers' activity. It leaves workers feeling stressed, burnt out and unable to recover from their time at work. Hustling seven days a week puts extra pressure on workers' mental and physical health and feeds into a toxic culture of over-work. This report provides important new insights into the conditions and work culture of microworkers in the United Kingdom.

Reflecting on these new findings, we outline a range of policies which could help improve working conditions for microworkers within the UK. In addition to the set of Universal Workers' Rights we have developed in earlier research, we propose policies specifically for the microwork sector: including 'finders fees' and payment for pre-task tests to ensure that all the time microworkers actually spend working is remunerated, as well as ratings systems for contractors and worker messaging systems so that microworkers are better placed to organise for improved working conditions.

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KEY FINDINGS

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» **95% of UK microworkers earn below minimum wage for this work**

» **Almost 2 in 3 microworkers earn less than £4 an hour**

» **1 in 5 microworkers has no other paid work**

» **More than half receive no pension from any of their work**

» **Microwork has increased because of Covid, with 36% of respondents reporting starting microwork during the pandemic**

» **Almost 30% of microworkers spent at least 30 minutes on unpaid activities for every hour of paid work on the platform**

» **The report recommends that microworkers should be offered 'finders fees' and payment for pre-task tests so that all time 'on the job' is financially remunerated.**

» **Ratings systems should be available for contractors, not only workers, so that bad employers within the system can be easily spotted.**

» **New messaging systems for workers should be legally mandated for each microwork site so that communication over key issues at work can be improved.**

» **Microworkers should be given the right to collective bargaining, to sit alongside a 'Fair Microwork Charter', which would set out best practice for microwork employers.**

MICROWORK IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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While microwork began in the United States, it has become a global phenomenon. Today, the majority of workers access microwork platforms from countries in the Global South such as India, Kenya and Venezuela. Some estimates suggest that the number of people working on these sites globally could be as high as 20 million,[1] and a number of studies have suggested that the majority of these workers are overeducated and underemployed.[2] Microwork is often their primary source of income or represents a significant proportion of their overall income.

The first of these platforms to emerge was Amazon Mechanical Turk, which became a prototype for many of the platforms – such as Clickworker, Appen and Playment – that followed. These platforms host contractors, often large tech companies – who outsource short tasks such as annotating images – to workers often not covered by employment law.

Microwork has tended to emerge in countries and contexts where informal work and unemployment represent the majority of the labour market. In many countries in the Global South, it has also come to prominence under the banner of 'economic development', with institutions such as the World Bank advocating for the use of microwork as a solution to long-term, often intractable labour market problems. 'Impact sourcing' companies such as Sama have been at the forefront of pushing microwork as a development solution. Such companies have set up projects in slums, refugee camps and poor rural areas. As Sama's slogan suggests, the aim of such projects is to 'give work not aid'.[3] These companies have been integral in the process of embedding microwork in domestic labour markets.

1   Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri (2019), *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass.*
2   Phil Jones (2021), *Work Without the Worker;* Gray and Suri (2019), *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass.*
3   Ibid.

These programs claim to provide work to those who would otherwise be unemployed or working in the informal sector. But the work is often unregulated and provides workers with few rights. Pay can be highly volatile and is often far below the minimums such companies would have to pay if they used workers in the countries where their businesses primarily operate.

One reason that conditions remain poor on these platforms is there are significant barriers to organising collectively. Due to poverty and insecurity, many of the workers are not in the position to turn down work. Some platforms use non-disclosure agreements to stop workers from talking about their work, and many maintain strict review systems. If a worker produces "bad" work or acts out they can receive a poor rating which makes it difficult to find further work. Platforms can also shut down worker accounts without offering a justification, meaning that workers can lose access to their sole or main source of income without any recourse to challenge the platforms.

Despite these problems and a growing number of critics voicing anxieties about how the platforms operate, the continued growth of microwork appears inevitable, particularly as governments seem reluctant to regulate the sector. New innovations in microwork emerge continually. In the last few years, there has been a growing number of companies attempting to build microwork platforms on the blockchain. This involved a digital ledger where transactions can be permanently recorded on a distributed network of computer systems. These ventures aim to provide forms of payments to those who remain marginalised from the global banking system which, if successful, promises to expand the microwork market to a variety of new contexts. This new innovation has also seen growing numbers of NGOs start to use microwork as a development strategy. For example, Save the Children's recent initiative in Rwanda 'MicroWorks' uses the blockchain to pay unemployed youth for short tasks with cryptocurrency.[4]

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4   Save the Children (2021), 'Cryptocurrency donations set to fund innovation hub in Rwanda to aid children'. Available at https://www.savethechildren.net/news/cryptocurrency-donations-set-fund-innovation-hub-rwanda-aid-children.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

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Remote work on digital platforms has become normalised due to the Covid pandemic, which has led to a significant increase in the number of workers undertaking microwork in the Global North.[5] While a number of reports have examined the proliferation of microwork platforms from a global perspective, none have specifically focused on the United Kingdom. Previous studies of Amazon Mechanical Turk have shown that the majority of microworkers are based in India and the United States, with workers in the United Kingdom occupying only a small subsection of the overall population.[6]

In 2022, the think tank Autonomy and researchers at the University of Exeter and the London School of Economics (LSE) undertook a survey of 1189 UK-based workers on three major microwork platforms: Clickworker, Prolific and Amazon Mechanical Turk. This was supplemented by 17 in-depth interviews carried out by researchers from the LSE over Zoom. From the survey findings and interviews, this report provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of microwork in the United Kingdom from a sample large enough to generate significant insight into the overall population. It presents an overview of some of the key characteristics of microworkers, the conditions in which they work, and their remuneration and income. On the basis of this analysis, it presents some recommendations for how to improve the working conditions of workers on microwork platforms.

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5   Phil Jones (2021) 'Big tech's push for automation hides the grim reality of 'microwork''. *The Guardian*. 27 October 2021. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/oct/27/big-techs-push-for-automation-hides-the-grim-reality-of-microwork.
6   Djellel Difallah, Elena Filatova, and Panos Ipeirotis (2018) 'Demographics and Dynamics of Mechanical Turk Workers'. In *Proceedings of WSDM 2018: The Eleventh ACM International Conference on Web Search and Data Mining*, Marina Del Rey, CA, USA, 5-9 February 2018 (WSDM 2018).

WHO ARE MICRO WORKERS IN THE UK?

WHO ARE MICROWORKERS IN THE UK?

The overall picture of microworkers in the United Kingdom differs significantly from global norms. While microworkers in other parts of the world work long hours and rely heavily on income received from their work on platforms to provide for their essential needs, UK-based workers tend to work fewer hours and see their work on the platform as supplementing other sources of income, even full-time jobs. Many workers we interviewed explicitly spoke of their work on platforms as a 'side hustle' and only one of a range of revenue streams.

Interview data revealed that workers' experience of their work on digital platforms was mediated by their position in classed, gendered and racialised divisions of labour. Workers were divided across different social classes and educational backgrounds. Those from low-income backgrounds were most likely to see microwork as providing essential income necessary to live a decent life in the UK, while those on higher incomes were less reliant on microwork to pay for basic goods.

For these workers, microwork was a 'side hustle' and a source of extra money for entertainment and leisure. The economic shock of the Covid pandemic led some people in the UK to look for alternative revenue streams and microwork offered one such avenue. At the same time, there was a significant minority of workers (roughly 20%) who worked many hours on the platform and suffered extreme forms of precarity and economic insecurity due to their reliance on such low-paying work.

AGE

Workers of all ages have engaged in microwork. However, those most likely to engage in this work are those in the 25-34 age bracket (32% of total) followed by the 35-44 bracket (27% of total). Those least well represented were the over 65 age bracket, representing only 2.6% of total microworkers.
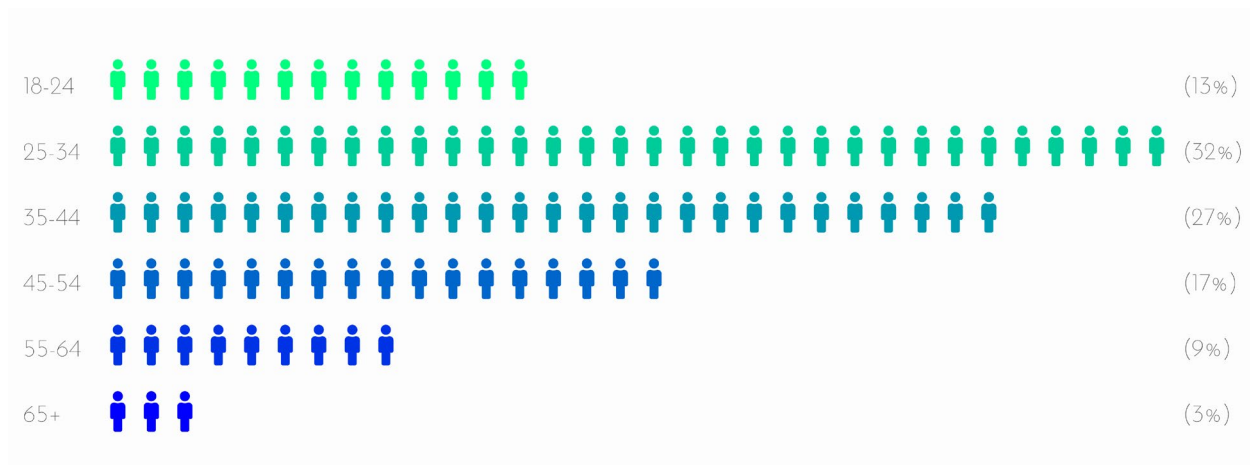
Age		Percentage
18-24		(13%)
25-34		(32%)
35-44		(27%)
45-54		(17%)
55-64		(9%)
65+		(3%)

Figure 1. *Survey participants were asked "What is your age?" (Survey sample size : 1189 participants)*

GENDER

55% of survey respondents were women. Given that another prominent study found that women represented only one out of every three workers on the platform, such a high level of women workers is surprising.[7] The gender balance altered significantly for those engaged in more than 15 hours of microwork per week, however. For this category of worker, only 42% were women, suggesting women were more likely to engage in only small amounts of microwork. They were also twice as likely to have spent more than three years engaging in microwork.
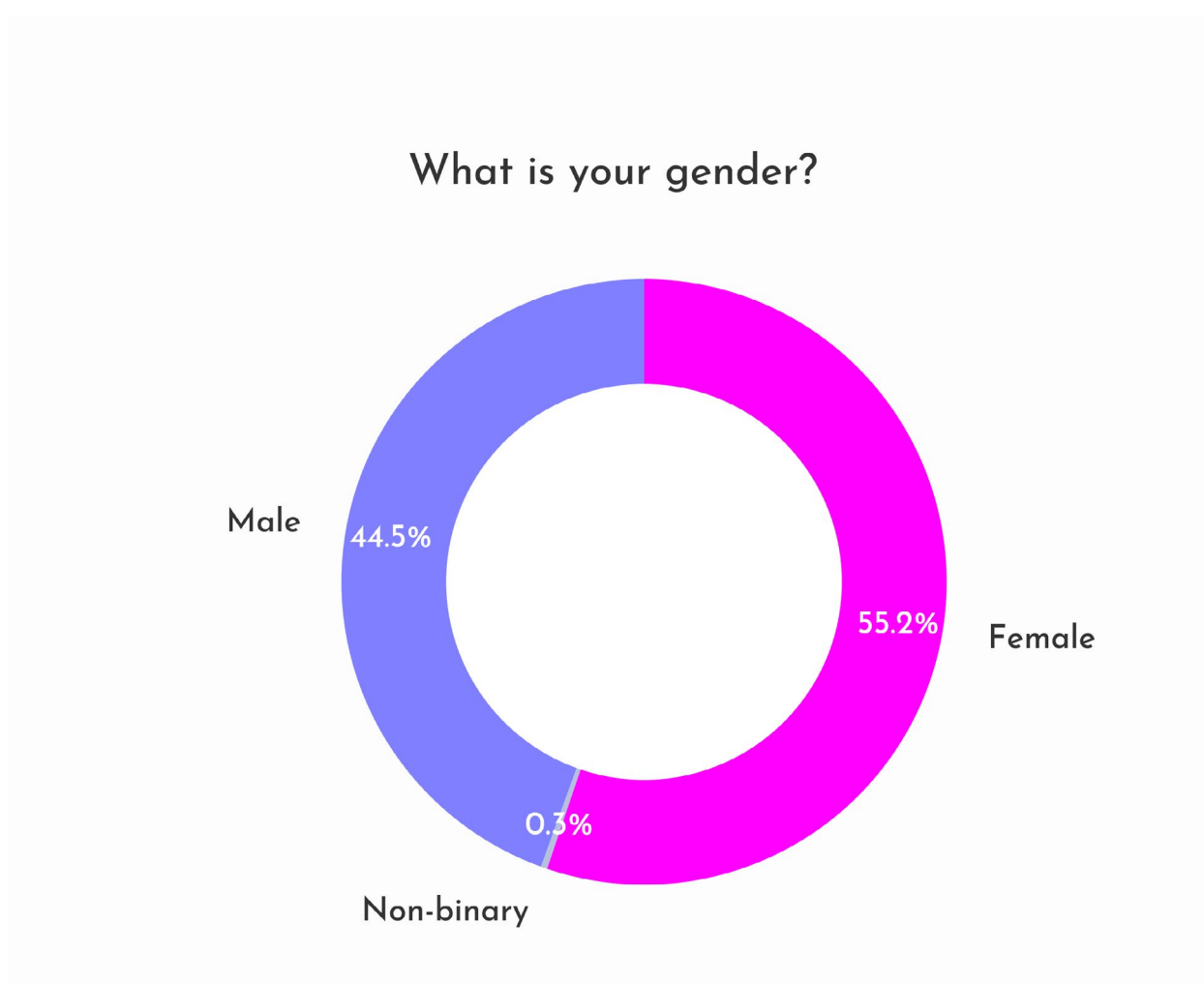

What is your gender?

Male — 44.5%

Female — 55.2%

Non-binary — 0.3%

Figure 2. *Survey participants were asked "What is your gender?" (Survey sample size : 1189 participants)*

7   Janine Berg et al (2018) 'Digital labour platforms and the future of work: Towards decent work in the online world.' International Labour Organization. Geneva. Available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_645337.pdf.

Figure 3. *Survey participants were asked "What is your age?" Responses are broken down by gender. (Survey sample size : 1189 participants)*

For one female worker we interviewed, the decision to undertake microwork alongside caring for her child was driven by the fact that her male partner received a higher income than her, so they decided it would be more beneficial for him to remain in paid work. She could mix microwork with other domestic and care work around the house. This also fits in with a more general idea expressed by participants of microwork as providing supplemental income on top of other paid work. In this sense, microwork seems to follow prevalent social patterns in which men's income-earning activity takes precedence over women's. This enables men to sustain greater social power and privilege by retaining a position of being the breadwinner and main earner of the family.

ETHNICITY

The ethnic background of microworkers is similar in some respects to the overall composition of the UK according to figures from the ONS. Of the survey respondents, 80% were White, 8.9% were Asian, 6.3% were Black, 3.3% were mixed or multiple ethnic groups, and 1.4% responded as an 'other' ethnic group including Arab. The most notable difference from the overall population of the UK was that Black and Black British people were twice as likely to engage in microwork than White respondents.
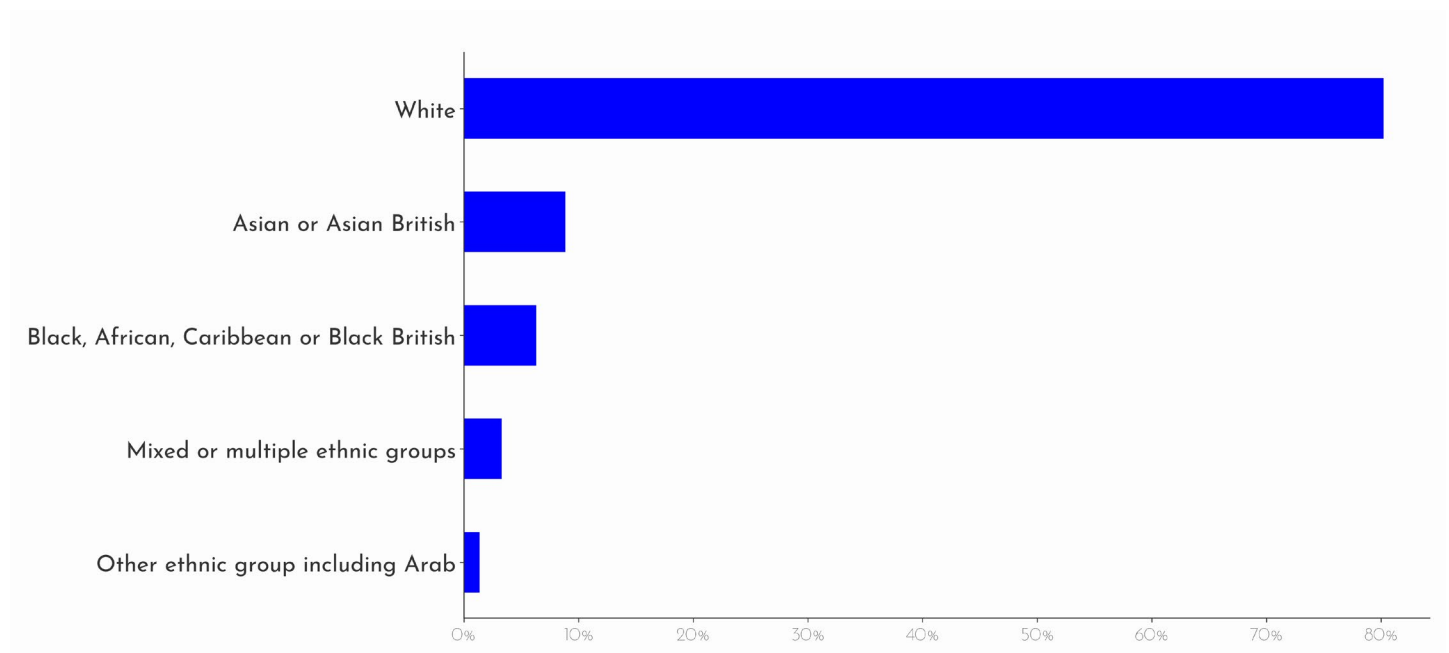

Figure 4. *Participants were asked: "What is your ethnic group?" (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

EDUCATION

Microworkers tended to be well educated with over 60% holding a tertiary level qualification and over 20% with a postgraduate degree. Holding a tertiary level qualification did not lead to workers receiving higher wages on the platforms or engaging in different types of work.
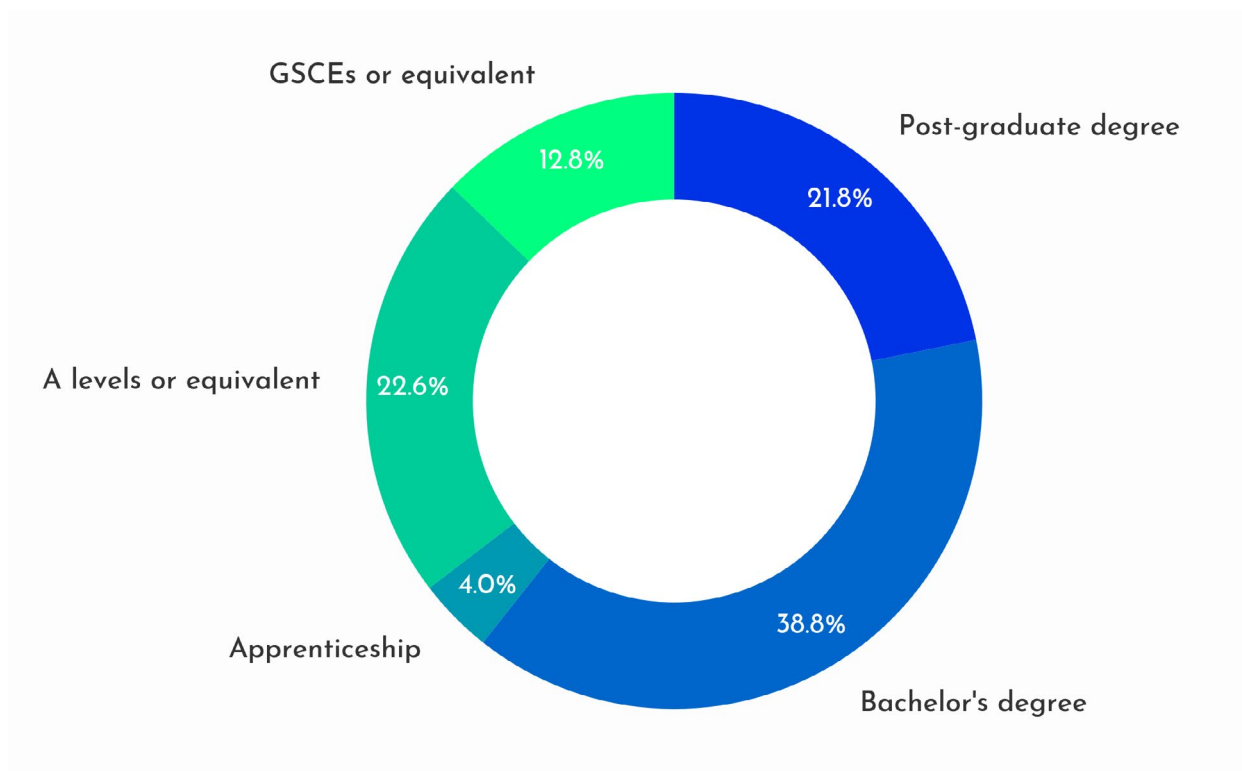

Figure 5. *Participants were asked: ̈What level of education do you have? ̈ (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

EMPLOYMENT

Most microworkers had other sources of income. 50% were engaged in full-time work, 29% in part-time or casual work, and only 20% were not engaged in any other paid work. This suggests that for most workers microwork is only supplemental to their primary source of income, but for a sizable minority, the nature and conditions of the work are important because they have no other sources of paid work, although they may be on welfare benefits.

MOTIVATIONS FOR DOING MICROWORK

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Most people do microwork due to the flexibility it offers in terms of location and working hours. Over half of respondents preferred to work outside an office and one in three wanted to work at a time that was convenient for them. Most UK-based microworkers conceived of microwork as additional to other forms of paid work and a way to earn extra income on top of their main jobs. Many participants in interviews emphasised the influence of a hustle culture that expected them to be always busy and at work.

Companies in the gig economy are all too willing to support this toxic culture and promote their exploitative business models as an ideal way for individuals to have their own side hustles. Influencers take advantage of this culture of constant work by attempting to sell a range of products and strategies for others to chase a dream of success. Some now have an entire career based around promoting a "rise and grind" culture on social media.

Given the low pay and lack of protections for workers on digital platforms, this ultimately benefits the rich and powerful. It makes people feel guilty for having a healthy work-life balance and encourages people to work longer hours in their jobs to increase the profits of their company. It also misrepresents the true reasons why some people end up making it and others don't. Success is often determined by having industry connections and taking advantage of one's privilege and support networks. Those who can't live up to an ideal of success are blamed for being too lazy or not willing to work hard enough for their dreams.
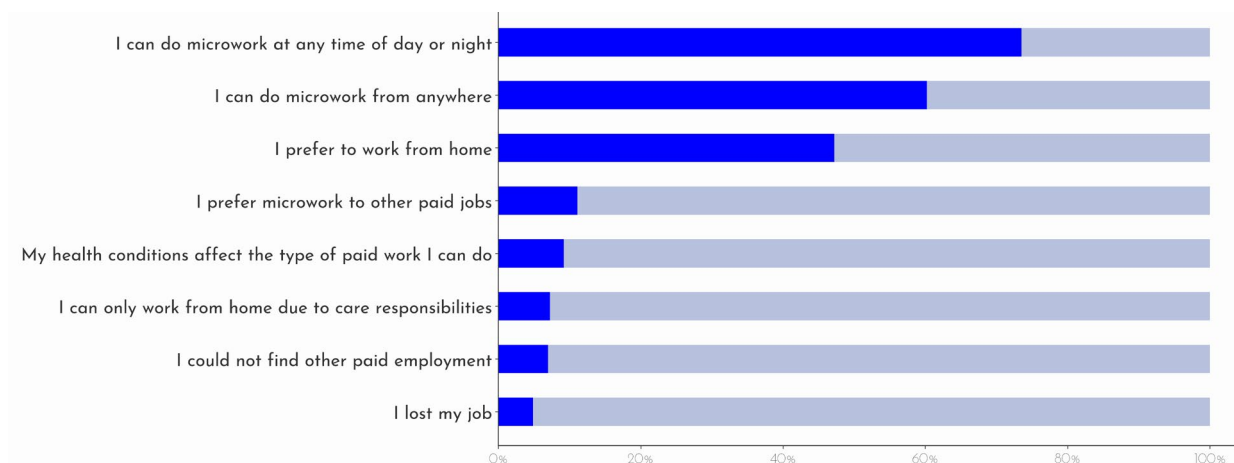
Figure 6. *Participants were asked: "Which of the following best describes your reasons for doing microwork?" (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

Several participants mentioned the Covid pandemic as a significant factor in their reason for starting microwork. Microwork became an important part of some individuals' lifestyles during the pandemic. One participant stated they were "definitely on it more than I was [before]" while another said that the pandemic had "intensified my efforts" on the platforms.

> *"The pandemic meant we couldn't go out. So I had nothing else to do but set work. So it was actually very positive for me… it probably increased my workload, because I spent more time sitting at the computer, [and] spent more time looking for new work." - Participant 3*

Workers' desire for autonomy is about having control of their own time and income. Many preferred to work when they wanted and to use moments of downtime to earn extra money.

> *"I've got nothing better to do, and it's going to give me that extra pound or two. Why not? You know, after all, I pay for my broadband every month, I might as well get my money's worth." - Participant 11*

Some interview participants told us they found microwork relaxing and easy to do, which gave them a sense of stress relief from other paid work. Some saw it as a way to wind down from their jobs and something to do instead of other leisure activities. This attitude was more common for those who could rely on other forms of paid work.

"It's actually quite a good stress reliever. ... I can sort of log on, you know, there's nothing on Netflix, nothing on YouTube ... I'll log on to the system, I'll see what's on there." - Participant 7

Microwork was considered a form of productive activity that could fit around other commitments and allow workers to work more during each day. 13% of microworkers reported having a disability and 14% had a health problem that prevented them from engaging in other forms of employment. The flexibility of microwork helped these people maintain some form of paid work when other forms of employment were not an option.

The fact that you could log on whenever you wanted was perceived as a positive aspect of the work and enabled participants to do more at varied hours throughout the day. One participant filled commuter hours with microwork while another performed household tasks alongside microwork. In each case, microwork was undertaken in hours outside of other paid work in which workers could have been doing other things.

"So it's more to do with... not boredom. But like it's there. It's something for me to do when I've got a free moment, rather than like, I need to earn this much money to pay for this." - Participant 16

"It's easily accessible. I can do it any time as well... like I could do one at like midnight, or sometimes like two in the morning" - Participant 12

Workers rationalised their activity as part of feeling "useful" and important. One liked how their "opinion mattered to other people", in marketing surveys and enjoyed speaking with executives about new products. For another worker, engaging in microwork made them feel more "productive" after work and "not redundant" outside of normal working hours.

Workers were interested in turning "free time" into "productive time" and using their leisure time in a productive and efficient way. The pandemic provided many of these workers with a greater supply of free time that could be monetised rather than spent on cultural activities or spending time with friends and families. Many of the participants spoke about time as a kind of currency that could be commodified and used in a way to earn extra income.

A number of workers also expressed feeling a sense of community and connection with others through their work. They felt like they were part of a microworker community from across the globe that was engaged in a similar type of work. This was even expressed by workers who had not spoken to other microworkers on social media or had any means of communicating with other workers, which is not provided on most microwork platforms.

> *"I think it makes me feel good, it makes me feel like I'm contributing towards something. … I also feel like I'm part of a big team … when you look at the tasks that you're doing, it's not lost on me that I think, oh, you know, someone across the country could be doing this as well"* - Participant 2

Despite receiving very low pay for the work and the problems related to unpaid work on the platform, many participants didn't think they should demand more rights or better conditions. There was a general sense of resignation: no one, some thought, would really expect microwork to be worth anything more.

Also concerning was how microwork played into a culture of productivism that both degraded the value of people's work, but also provided companies with a near-endless supply of cheap labour for online tasks. Few workers reported finding their work oppressive or burdensome, but it nevertheless represents a limited conception of what could be done with time outside of formal paid employment. No workers we spoke to said they would do microwork if it were unpaid, but many did seem to be motivated by perceived non-economic benefits such as the mental stimulation it engendered or the sense of productivity it created. The fact that workers desire more work in their free time, particularly work that is so poorly paid, reveals a troubling aspect of our work-centred culture.

WORKING CONDITIONS

WORKING CONDITIONS

Microworkers generally face extremely poor working conditions on digital platforms with low pay and long periods of unpaid activity common, paired with limited rights and an inability to communicate with employers. It might be surprising, then, that workers do not report lower satisfaction rates with microwork. Our interviews suggest that this is related to the way workers conceptualise microwork as an additional activity that falls outside of their traditional expectations around work. As a productive side hustle, many workers felt that poor pay and working conditions on the platforms were to be expected.

Most workers did not report working very long hours on microwork platforms. One in three only worked an hour or less per week, while more than half worked between one and ten hours per week. Only 10% worked over 10 hours each week. For the majority of workers on the platform, this would not be enough work to constitute a primary source of income.
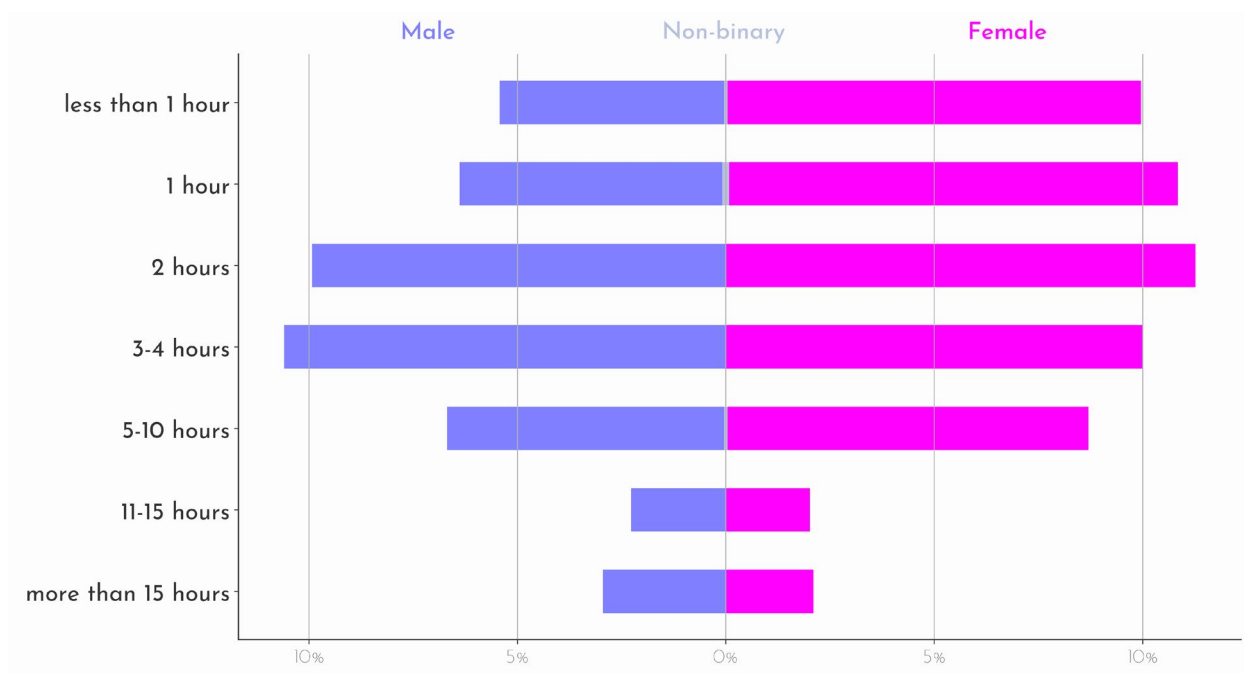
Figure 7. *Participants were asked: "How many hours of microwork do you work on average per week". Responses are broken down by gender (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

Most of the survey respondents work irregular hours, with over 64% keeping no fixed hours for their microwork and less than 10% engaging in microwork during business hours. Microwork is a flexible extra source of income that fits around other activities in their life.

Partly because of these short hours, many participants expressed the view that microwork did not feel like work to them and that they did not see microwork activities as a real job. This explains why for some workers there was less stress involved with this type of activity.

> "It's not work. It's like, picking up the phone and going on Facebook for me? Yeah. Just don't consider it as work. It's just a hobby." - Participant 6

Microwork often fell in an in-between zone of neither work nor leisure. Some described it as a hobby, while others saw it as supplementing their income from other work. Another participant who was semi-retired claimed that they would not categorise microwork as a hobby,

> "Because I'm not sure how much pleasure I gain from it. I certainly wouldn't be doing it if I wasn't getting paid for it, put it that way. But it is weird, like I said before, I don't really think of it as a job either." Participant 5

Workers without an alternative income were less likely to call microwork a hobby, referring to it "as a part-time job." These workers were more likely to consider that the conditions on the platform could be greatly improved.

53% of survey respondents had performed microwork for less than a year, while only 15% had performed microwork for more than three years. There is a relatively quick turnover of workers with the average worker leaving in under two years.
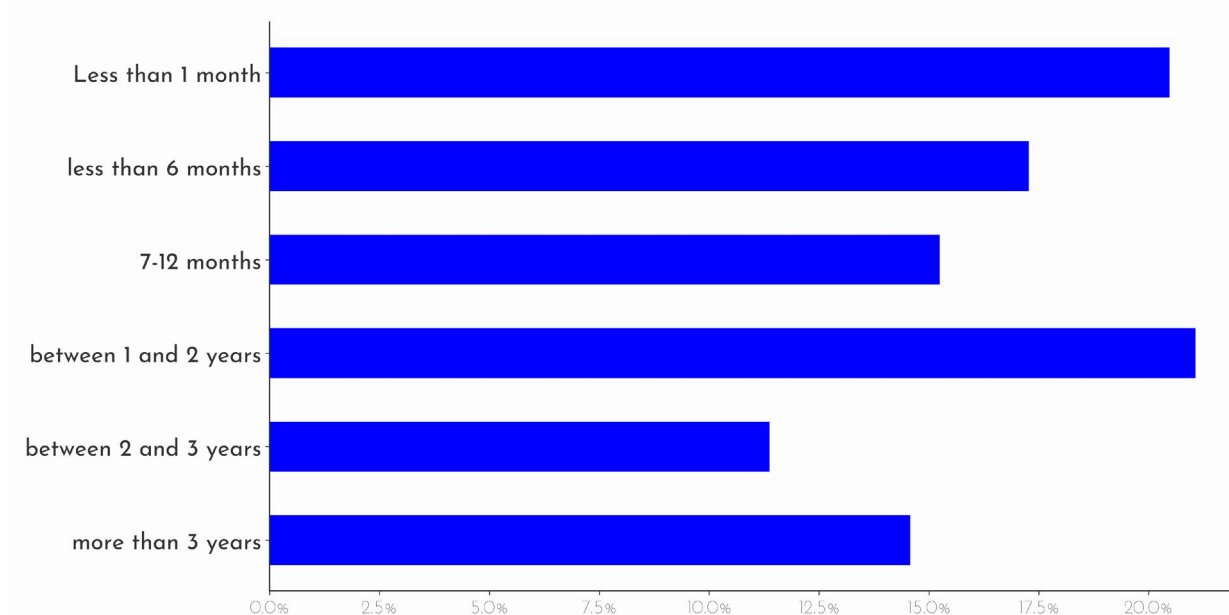

Figure 8. *Participants were asked: "How long have you performed microwork?" (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

This rapid turnover is reflected in how many workers had turned to microwork during the pandemic. 36% started microwork throughout the period, and a further 24% increased their hours during the pandemic.

Workers are also flexible with which platforms they use. Over 40% of survey respondents stated they had used another platform in the past 3 months, suggesting a relatively high degree of cross-platform movement.

There are, however, indications of widespread under-employment, with over half of microworkers indicating they were searching for more paid work.

Despite experiencing relatively low pay and some challenges on the platform, many of the respondents were relatively satisfied with their work as microworkers. 59% reported being either somewhat or very satisfied and only 2% were very dissatisfied.
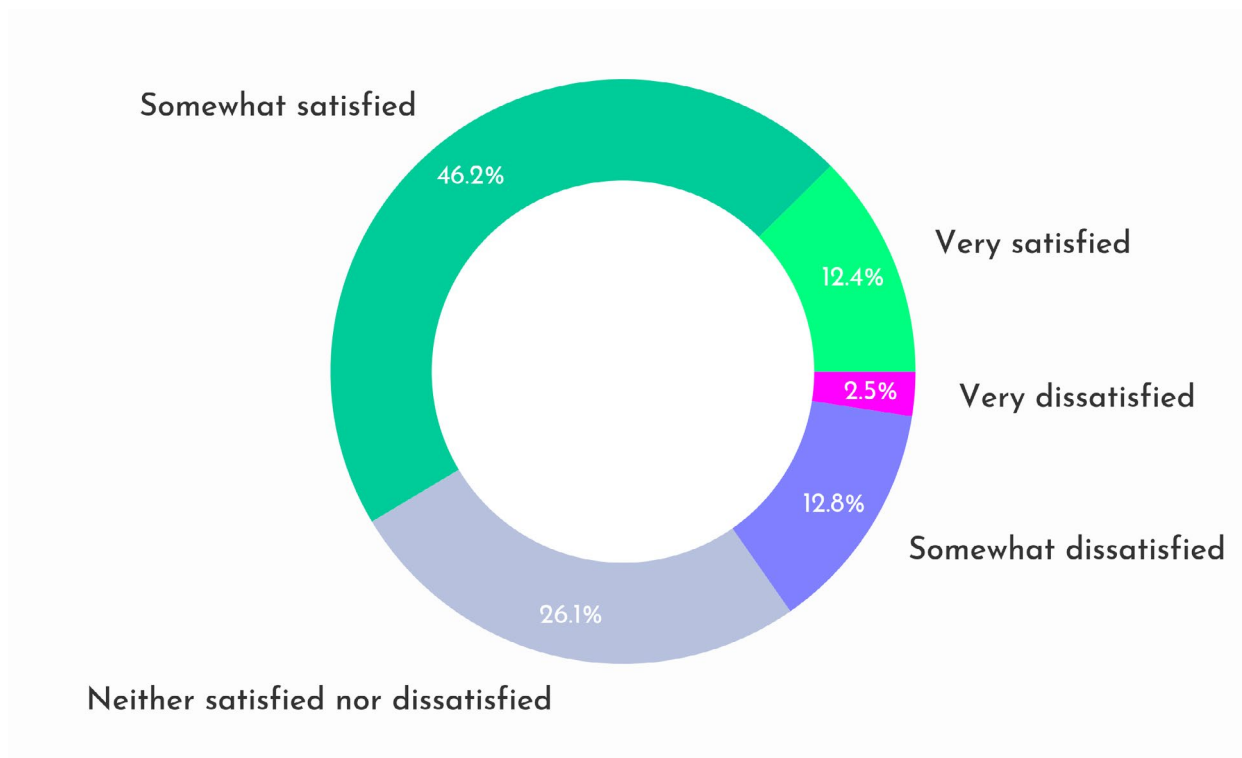

Somewhat satisfied — 46.2%
Very satisfied — 12.4%
Very dissatisfied — 2.5%
Somewhat dissatisfied — 12.8%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied — 26.1%

Figure 9. *Participants were asked: "How satisfied are you with working as a microworker?" (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

One of the largest grievances was the amount of time workers spent on unpaid activities while looking for work on the platforms. This included time spent browsing the platform for tasks, but also the sometimes lengthy periods of preparation and reading workers had to do to begin a paid task. Another issue related to being "screened out" of surveys once a task had been accepted because the respondent didn't fit the company's profile of their desired survey respondent, meaning the partially completed task would go unpaid.

> "My view is and has been for microworking sites that they should recompense you within the rate for the time that you're spending, because, you know, that activity is contributing towards their final product. So I do think that that side of it can be quite destructive because people have a right to be paid for the time they're spending preparing for these tasks." - Participant 7

Workers expressed frustration about this, particularly because the platforms did not make it easy for workers to complain about unfair treatment on the platform.

> "And it's just frustrating, you know, because you want to get in touch with someone to complain, and that's going to take a lot of time." - Participant 6

Throughout the interviews, participants would often rationalise undesirable aspects of microwork such as unpaid time, low pay and harvesting of users' data as a necessary and unavoidable part of the work. One participant considered that certain rules were "not fair" but that "sometimes a reason may not be fair, but it makes more logical [sense] when you think about the bigger picture."

Our interviews suggested that this acceptance of poor working conditions was also part of a broader "productivity" or "hustle" culture that encouraged people to work hard despite adverse circumstances. Even when some workers were relaxing after their paid jobs, they felt like they needed to maximise their time and do some extra work on the side.

> "My justification is I want to save a deposit and move out of here as fast as I can, you know what I mean? So, I'll hustle and hustle, you know, until I get it done" - Participant 2

> "Football, you know, when you're watching that, you can do two things at once." - Participant 4

Another participant stated that social media influenced them to begin doing microwork because influencers they followed made them feel like they weren't doing enough and needed to work several jobs "to keep up". Microwork and other forms of online work are now an integral part of this hustler mentality due to the ease with which they can be performed in time that would otherwise be spent relaxing or engaged in some other leisure activity.

REMUNERATION

REMUNERATION

Most UK-based microworkers work only a limited number of hours on microwork platforms and do not earn very much from this work. Microwork is the main source of income for only 13% of survey respondents. The average experience of microworkers in the UK is engaging in this work in addition to either a full-time or part-time job. Half of the survey respondents earn less than £10 a week from microwork and only 10% earn more than £50 a week.

However, for those workers that do rely on microwork, the money they receive from microwork is precariously low. 95% of UK-based microworkers earn below minimum wage for their microwork and almost two in three earn less than four pounds an hour.
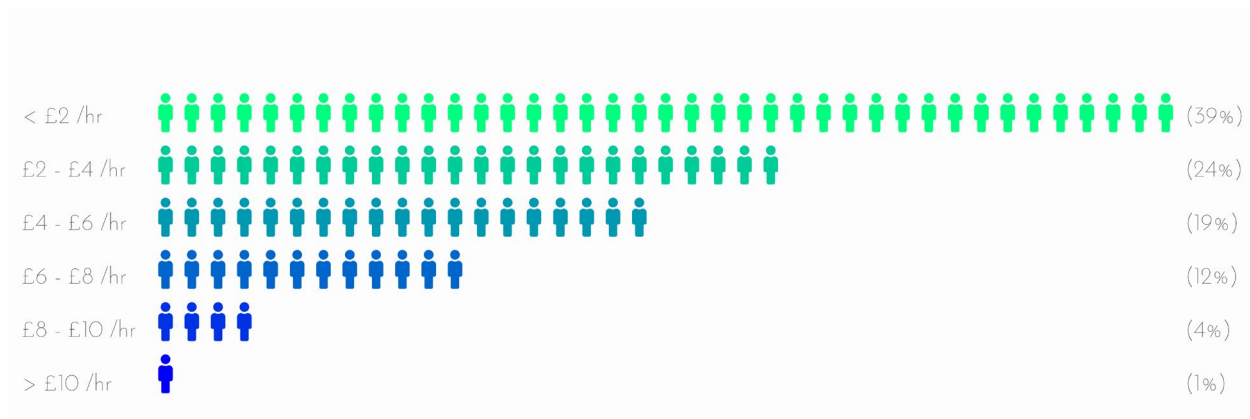
< £2 /hr	(39%)
£2 - £4 /hr	(24%)
£4 - £6 /hr	(19%)
£6 - £8 /hr	(12%)
£8 - £10 /hr	(4%)
> £10 /hr	(1%)

Figure 10. *Participants were asked: "How much do you earn per hour from microwork?" (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*
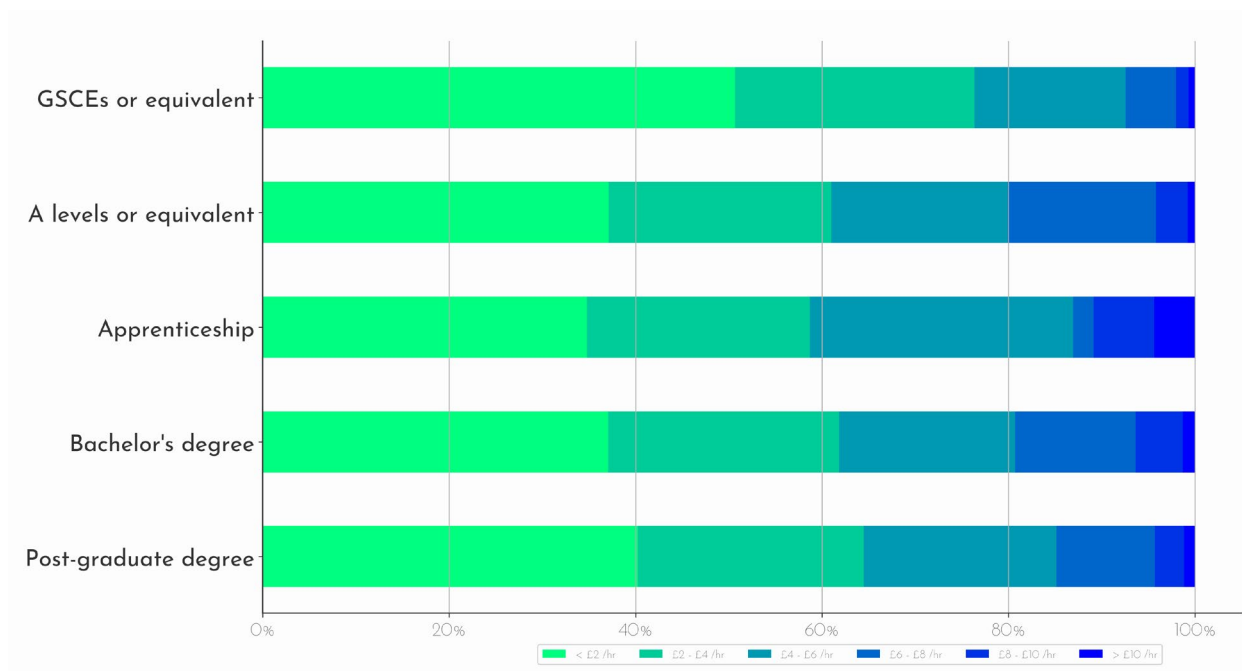
Figure 11. *Participants were asked: "How much do you earn per hour from microwork?" Responses are broken down by level of education (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

The equivalent hourly rate for microwork is even lower because workers must spend time looking for tasks and signing up for new assignments. Almost 30% of microworkers spent at least 30 minutes on unpaid activities for every hour of paid work they received on the platform. 14% of respondents spent over half of their time on the platform on unpaid activities.

Workers were also dissatisfied with how many tasks were available and the quality of these opportunities. 68% thought that there were not enough well-paying tasks on the platform.

Microworkers are, for the most part, low-income earners. 27% have a total income of less than £6000=. Almost half have a total income of under £17,000. Only a small fraction (11%) have an income over £40,000. More than half of microworkers receive no pension, making their work even more precarious.
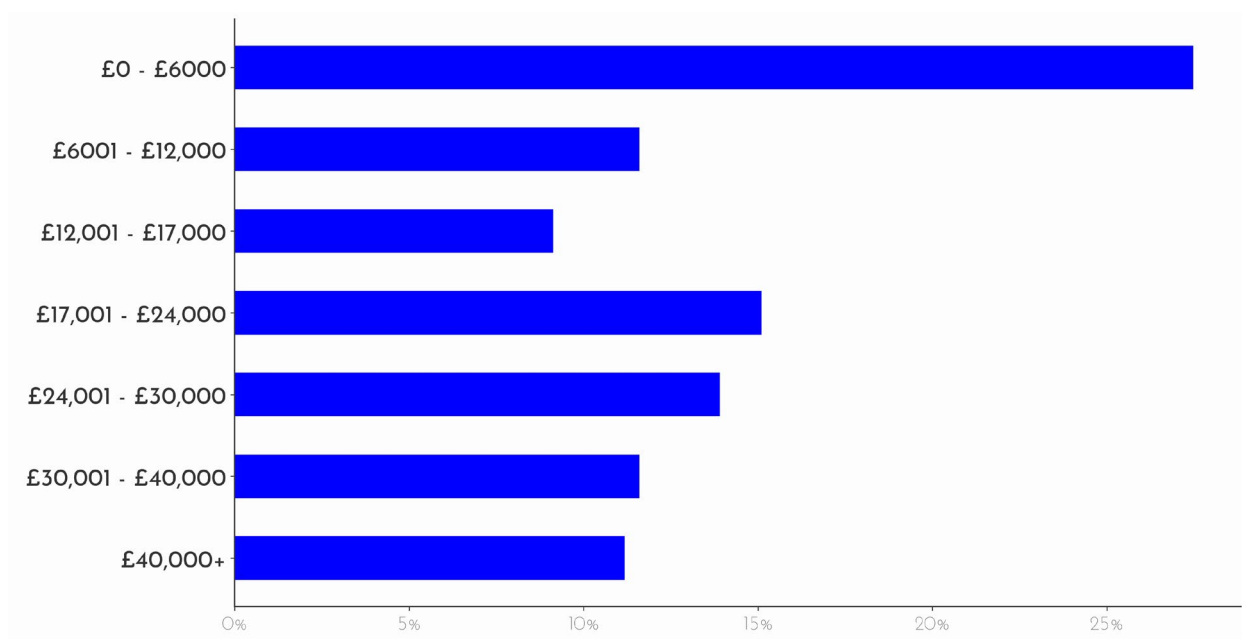
Figure 12. *Participants were asked: "What is your income per year from all your paid work?" (Survey sample size: 1189 participants)*

As a result of the minimal hours spent on the platform, many participants in our interviews didn't see the money they received from microwork as a wage or as part of their main earnings. One participant explained that they do not rely on income from microwork, but rather see it as money that can be spent on smaller purchases. Another referred to their money from microwork as "beer money" and that it was "to basically get a holiday for me and my girlfriend."

> *"If I can use the money in the [microwork] account, then it's kind of almost free… it doesn't come out of like the pot that, you know, it doesn't come out of the budget… like it was treat money or it's, you know, shopping money or something"* - Participant 2

The sense that this wasn't 'real' work was one of the reasons why workers were less likely to complain about low pay. There were nevertheless limits to the amount of low-paying jobs workers would put up with.

> *"Some jobs you do once and you realise 'No, no, no, this is a joke' and it's not worth doing."* - Participant 3

Another participant reflected on the value that companies were extracting from workers who took part in the surveys and other tasks put up on the platforms and felt exploited by the low pay.

'It's like, I mean, to put it bluntly, it did just pretty much like gathering all your information. That's then being like be used for all these big corporations to make way more money than they're paying us for?" - Participant 4

Workers were likely to underestimate the value their work provided companies and how much companies would otherwise have to spend to have consumers participate in marketing research or to train artificial intelligence. Some workers' acceptance of the low pay of microwork is facilitated by a broader culture of over-work which encourages workers to see themselves as responsible for maintaining multiple revenue streams.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING MICROWORK

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Microworkers face similar problems to other "self-employed" workers on digital platforms relating to poorly paid tasks and the lack of rights and benefits. One way to improve the conditions on microwork platforms would be to implement a bill of **universal workers' rights**. This would offer the full range of rights available in the UK to all workers, including the "self-employed" and those that make income below the lower earnings limit. Of particular salience, this would mean that microworkers would receive:

» Statutory sick pay

» Holiday pay

» Minimum wage (applied to piece rates)

» Redundancy protection - this would be applied to unfair account closures.

Extending the whole repertoire of rights available in the UK to independent contractors would mean that piece rates would have to be paid according to the minimum wage. This would require making adaptations to income tax and national insurance contributions so that workers are charged based on their income as opposed to contractual status – Autonomy has recently released [a full report on this policy](.)

There are also a number of important ways in which microwork platforms are distinct from other kinds of work. For this reason, they also require their own unique set of regulations, which could include:

» **'Finders fees'** which would cover the lengthy fallow periods between shorter tasks. This would cover the large amounts of shadow work undertaken by workers to simply find tasks. A worker that undertakes 15 two-minute tasks undertakes significantly more unpaid shadow work than one who does two 15-minute tasks. The 'finders fees' for time spent searching for tasks should, therefore, be graded, so that two-minute tasks receive a greater payment boost than a five-minute task. These payments should be incurred by requesters via monthly taxes on their earnings and paid to workers per task.

» **Payment for pre-task tests** should be made obligatory on all sites. Workers often have to take short competency tests before completing tasks that require certain language or computational skills. These are usually unpaid. To make sure that workers are compensated for all of the work they do toward a task, these tests should be paid at the same rate as the completed task.

» **Rating systems** should be offered to contractors as well as workers. To deal with this inequality, workers on Amazon Mechanical Turk have designed the plug-in Turkopticon, which overlays their screen when using the platform and allows them to rate contractors in real-time. This means that workers can warn each other about bad contractors, who fail to pay workers or rate workers unfairly. This tool should not have to be designed and implemented by workers but should be offered as a standard feature of all microwork platforms.

» **Worker messaging services** should be made a legal obligation of microwork sites. As it stands, workers are forced to use forums and Reddit threads to discuss platform problems, bad requesters, as well as hints and tips around task completion. This creates a lag in response times and makes the real-time communication that workers share in other lines of work close to impossible. Internal messaging services that enable horizontal lines of communication would go some way to improving communication between workers.

» **The right to collective bargaining.** Microworkers are workers, and should be treated as such by the various legislative systems in the countries where they operate. Like other workers, they should be given the right to organise collectively. Collective organising would help to create an institutionalised counterforce to the 'rise and grind' culture identified in this report. Through greater communication and organisation between workers, there is more chance workers would start to see what they are doing more as work and see their demands for fair pay and conditions as entirely legitimate.

» **A** '**Fair Microwork Charter**' should be drawn up by workers, contractors and other stakeholders. This would cover:

· Fair and transparent rules around non-payment

· Fair and transparent rules around ratings

· Fair and transparent rules around account closures

· Rules around covering the costs of work lost to technical problems such as network disruptions

· Finders fees prices

Sites would be assessed on whether they uphold such principles and those that are found to do so consistently would be awarded a certificate of excellence such as the 'Living Wage' accreditation.

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