

Different gigs, different digital skills

Digital skills are a must, especially for higher-skilled own-account workers

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On June 28, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong launched the Forward Singapore exercise. The one-year-long exercise will see the Government engaging Singaporeans on six key pillars. Two pillars – “Empower” (economy and jobs) and “Equip” (education and lifelong learning) – hold particular significance for a group of Singaporeans. These are the gig economy workers or own-account workers, defined by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) as self-employed persons without employees. According to MOM’s reports on the labour force published between 2017 and 2022, the number of own-account workers has been steadily increasing in Singapore since 2018 and they make up approximately one in 10 people in the local labour force.

Against the backdrop of ongoing global crises that have highlighted the vulnerability of workers in precarious gig work, policy and public discussions thus far have been, and rightly so, focused on the lack of physical and financial security faced by delivery workers and private-hire car drivers, who make up a third of own-account workers in Singapore.

However, just as there are lower-skilled and higher-skilled jobs, there is gig work that requires limited or low digital skills, and work that requires more advanced digital skills. Besides the lower-skilled platform workers, and highly skilled workers in the technology sector, about one in four own-account workers in Singapore work in professions such as insurance agents, real estate agents, freelance creatives and private academic tutors, all of whom can benefit from higher digital skills.

This often-forgotten group of white-collar gig workers will need to develop critical digital competencies to perform more effectively in their gig work or transit to less precarious employment.

CHANGING NATURE OF GIG OR OWN-ACCOUNT WORK

Global trends shed light on the emerging industries that might see greater demand for own-account workers. The Online Labour Index developed by Oxford University points to demand for higher-skilled gig work in software development and technology, creative and multimedia, clerical and data entry, writing and translation, sales and marketing support and professional services (for example, financial services).

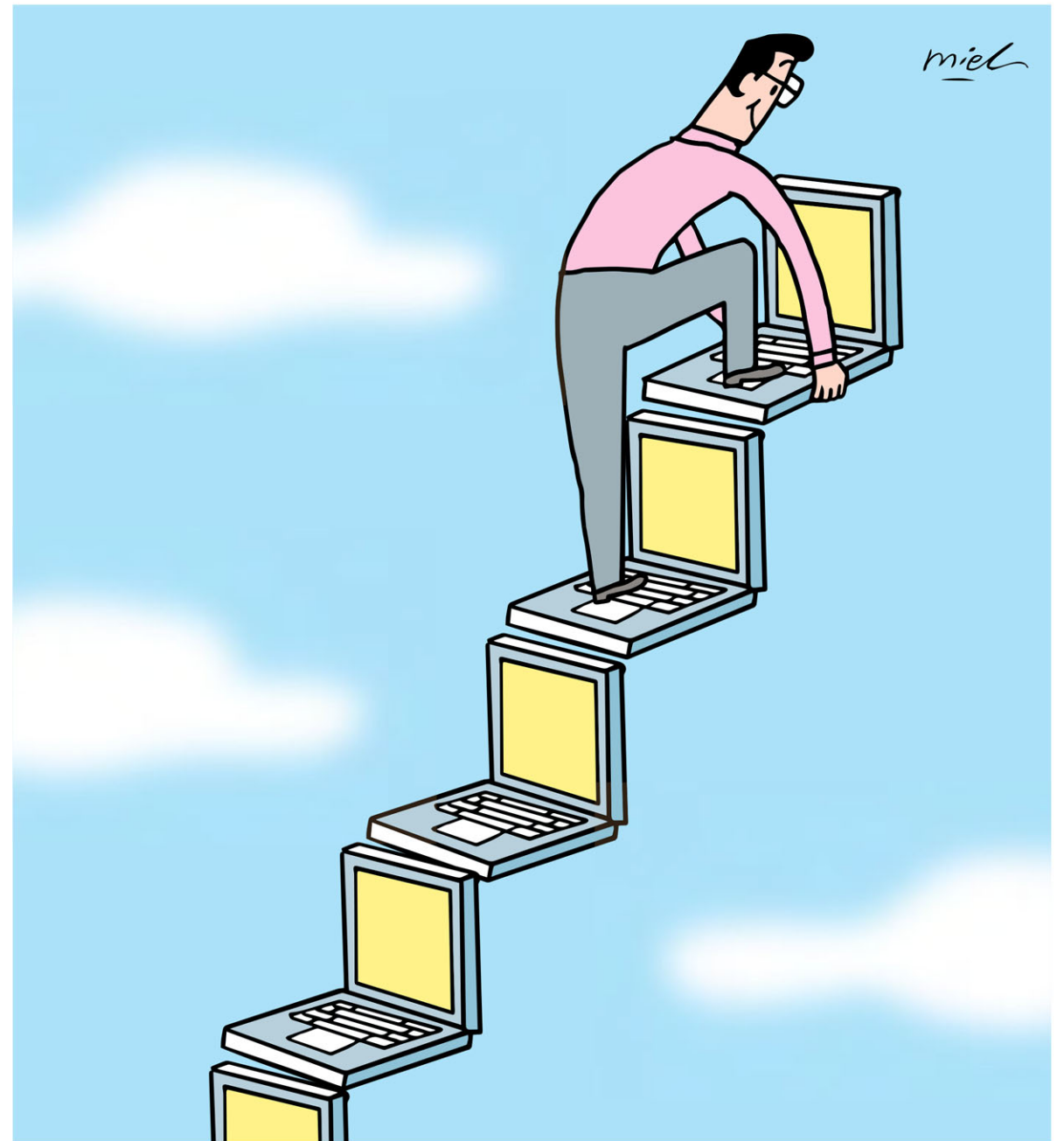
While the biggest share of gig work today (at 35 per cent of gig jobs) is in the software development and technology sector, the demand for clerical and data entry gig jobs (at 19 per cent) has increased more than for other global gig jobs since pre-pandemic days. One key reason for this is that employers can engage workers regardless of where they operate at globally competitive prices.

The growth of non-permanent job roles (for example part-time, contract, flexi-work, temporary, freelance, internship/traineeship) in Singapore mirrors these global trends. As jobs start to require more advanced digital skills, there is a need to enhance own-account workers’ digital and critical literacies to ensure that they remain competitive not just locally, but globally.

URGENT NEED FOR DIGITAL UPSKILLING

Digitalisation has altered the own-account work landscape in two main ways. Even before the pandemic, white-collar workers relied on digital communication tools to work remotely, such as instant messaging applications (for example, WhatsApp), video conferencing tools (for example, Zoom), and cloud collaboration tools (for example, Google Drive). Today, these tools have become a mainstay in most, if not all, occupations, due to the digitalisation of basic work processes.

At the same time, digital platforms that match supply and demand of short-term, project-based work have grown at exponential rates, especially during the pandemic. Some examples include Fiverr and Upwork for freelancers doing remote work in media and ICT, such as graphic and video designers. Hence, not only do own-account workers need to



master technical capabilities (for example, digital design), they also need to enhance their “gig literacies” – critical skills that include the ability to build a professional, online reputation via LinkedIn or other social media networks, maintain work-life balance using digital productivity tools, and manage relationships with employers and peers in both online and offline settings.

DEVELOPING A TIERED DIGITAL SKILLS FRAMEWORK

The above developments call for a combination of digital skills and soft skills. Without the ability to navigate online spaces effectively, own-account workers may be unable to even find work, much less complete it. Moreover, unlike full-time employees, own-account workers have limited access to structured training and development. Own-account workers need to be supported in their digital upskilling journey, to help them to thrive or potentially transit to full-time employment when the opportunity arises.

Based on existing frameworks developed by academics and international organisations, we propose that enhancing employment competencies for

own-account workers should be guided by a three-tiered framework, comprising baseline, intermediate and sector-specific skills. Besides taking into account the different competencies and specific industry needs of own-account workers, the skills framework can also help them identify areas for improvement.

The baseline skills tier comprises both basic digital skills and contextual skills. This level focuses on simple tasks that have been streamlined by digital tools, such as the use of basic digital hardware and software, and communication skills.

Intermediate skills are more advanced versions of the baseline skills. They include skills relating to seeking work on digital platforms (for example, Grab and Upwork) and using more advanced tools to complete their work (for example, digital drawing and digital content creation). The baseline and intermediate tiers contain skills that own-account workers should have regardless of the sector type of gig work they are doing.

Finally, sector-specific skills capture the skills relevant for six sectors prominent in the own-account work landscape – software and development, business and administration,

professional services, science and engineering, creative and multimedia, and transportation and delivery. Existing research shows that programming fundamentals and cloud computing skills are increasingly essential to most sectors except the transportation and delivery sector.

For example, own-account workers who showcase their portfolios or services on a personal website (for example, a graphic designer or real estate agent) would need basic HTML knowledge, which is not easy to pick up for those outside the tech industry.

Working independently is challenging, but by consistently upgrading their digital skills’ arsenal, own-account workers can stay ahead of the curve and maximise independent work opportunities.

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