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A Practice Perspective

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Organizing Work on Creative Crowdwork Platforms: A Practice Perspective

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Introduction

Organization and design of work have always been on the agenda of IS scholars and so far, we have learned quite a lot about how traditional work is organized (Spreitzer et al., 2017). However, the world of work is changing rapidly with the proliferation of advanced information technologies, particularly the increasing popularity of platform-mediated work which is also known as crowdwork and the gig economy. However, although platform-mediated work is the fastest growing segment in the alternative workforce (Katz and Krueger, 2019), there is little beyond anecdotal evidence as to how work is organized on these platforms. This work-in-progress paper tries to address this void by offering an empirical examination of paid, online crowdwork as a new model of work arrangement organized via online platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork and Topcoder. Broadly, there are two types of crowdwork projects: those involving routine and micro tasks, which are usually repetitive with low level of skill necessity, minimal payment and very short time frames (e.g., tagging pictures); and those involving more creative, complex, professional, and long-term tasks such as web development with higher payment for workers (Gol et al, 2018). This paper focuses on the creative crowdwork, as it requires elaborated information processing activities such as data collection, task design, ideation, solution finding, and teamwork (Thuan et al., 2015) and, thus, also requires intricate organization that can handle the inherent socio-technical complexity.

Crowdwork, as a platform-mediated type of work, offers flexibility in three dimensions: (a) flexibility in the employment relationship, (b) flexibility in the scheduling of work, and (c) flexibility in where work is accomplished (Spreitzer et al., 2017). This enhanced flexibility is attractive to job providers because it provides economic benefits and at the same time, is difficult to manage, especially in creative crowdwork with its various complex projects (Thuan et al., 2015). As the number of crowdworkers is growing fast (Spreitzer et al., 2017), research is needed to understand how work organization is achieved through the interweaving and combined practices of platform owner, job providers, and workers. Accordingly, this paper poses the following research question: *how is work organized on creative crowdwork platforms?* The paper builds on the practice perspective (Whittington, 2003; Nicolini, 2012) and uses Topcoder (a famous creative crowdwork platform) as a case study. The preliminary findings demonstrate that professional socialization and career development are the main practices that organize employment relationship flexibility; time, budget, and task management are the main practices that organize scheduling flexibility; and virtual communication as well as cultivating work friendships are the main practices that organize location flexibility. Interestingly, our

findings show that, *together*, these practices can generate psychological safety for everyone involved, despite the usual risks involved in the gig and crowdwork arrangements for both workers and job providers (Gol et al., 2018).

Theoretical Background

The paper follows the practice perspective principle of examining work from the perspective of those who accomplish it in order to “*systematically investigate the concrete activities that constitute the routines of organizing*” (Barley and Kunda, 2001, p. 84). From this perspective, work organization as “*the way work is structured, distributed, processed and supervised*” (Carayon and Smith, 2000, p. 1) is achieved through concrete practices of work scheduling, relationship development, management of teamwork, career advancement, and established ways of doing things (ibid.). Flexibility is a significant factor that distinguishes crowdwork from traditional work (Gol et al., 2018). According to Spreitzer et al. (2017), there are three dimensions of flexibility in alternative work arrangements such as crowdwork; *Flexibility in employment relationship* which refers to short-term work assignments; *Flexibility in scheduling of work* which refers to having control over working hours by workers; *Flexibility in the location of work* which refers to having control over choosing the place of doing a job (incl. away from the job provider or employer). Creative crowdwork involves all three flexibility dimensions. Yet, most of the research regarding the flexibility in scheduling and location has been done exclusively on full-time employees with little attention to whether and how the results may apply to contract workers who operate under more risky employment conditions (Spreitzer et al., 2017). The organization of work under these three dimensions of flexibility is an interesting challenge because it becomes necessary to organize work in a way that reinforces and, at the same time, manages these dimensions of flexibility. Based on the practice perspective, we assume that work organization is not achieved just by the actions of the platform owner(s), but also the everyday activities of the workers themselves and the job providers.

Research Methodology

To study how work is organized in practice on creative crowdwork platforms, a case study approach was chosen with focus on the Topcoder with large job provider companies such as Google, and substantial number of highly skilled freelancers. Data were collected through 42 open-ended and semi-structured Skype interviews with Topcoder staff, workers and job providers, that were conducted from February to September 2018. Each interview lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. Furthermore, data were collected from Topcoder forums, their Slack community channel (used by workers and staff), and the platform website. Iterative coding on the interviews, online data, and observation notes was conducted primarily using open coding and further by classifying and revising the codes according to both data and theory. I coded for the three dimensions of flexibility, as recommended both by the literature and the data exploration. Then, I focused on identifying the practices that helped reinforce and manage the three dimensions of flexibility, such as professional socialization, career development, etc. This process helped me explore and document the

specific practices done by workers, job provider and platform owner and their interweaving.

Summary of Findings¹

The identified practices include professional socialization and career development for successfully organizing flexible employment relationships; time management, budget management, and task management for successfully organizing flexible scheduling; and virtual communication as well as cultivating work friendships for successfully organizing location flexibility.

With flexibility in employment relationship crowdworkers do not work for one specific organization. As a result, there is little traditional organizational socialization (Van Maanen, 1977) and a lack of established career ladders that help workers find a place where they belong and a supportive environment. My data shows in Topcoder this belonging and support is, instead, achieved through the practices of professional socialization and career development. For professional socialization, the platform owner provides and manages the infrastructure (e.g. Slack channels, blog, forums) and creates an attractive environment (through assigned community evangelists) that motivate workers to join the community and help each other. The workers, then, reinforce the professional community atmosphere by actively participating in the Slack channels and forums. For career development, Topcoder is one of the few platforms that provides promotion roles within the platform (copilots and reviewers) and manages these roles (through assigned project managers) to keep the quality of work high. The workers who get a promotion, then, through assessing the participants' submissions, provide them feedback to help them grow their skills and increase their chance to win competitions in the future and get a promotion offer within the platform. This provides a career advancement within the platform while maintaining employment flexibility (copilot and reviewers are paid but remain freelancers).

With flexibility in the scheduling of work the satisfaction of workers rises through an increasing sense of autonomy (Gol et al., 2018). However, it is not clear how such flexibility is shaped and managed to avoid burnout and exhaustion. My data suggests that Topcoder contributes to time management through the practices associated with specific roles on the platform, such as project managers and copilots, who have the responsibility to design work packages and run the challenges in an optimal way in terms of time, budget and task design. The Topcoder team, with the help of copilots and in consultation with job providers, break down the project into separate challenges with different budgets and once the separate challenges have been successfully completed, integrate the challenge solutions back together to produce an overall solution. In sum, the combination of the practices of time, budget, and task management relies on the daily efforts of three parties: workers, platform owner, and job providers. The platform owner supervises and manages the expert workers

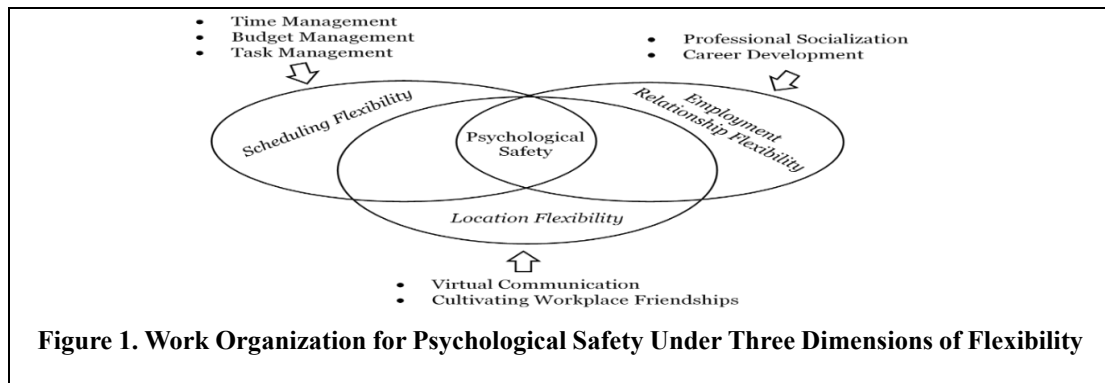
¹ Illustrative data can be provided on request (as it does not easily fit into the extended abstract format).

(e.g., copilots) as well as engages in consultations with job providers. The expert workers, then, design challenges in terms of time, budget, and task division through collaboration with job providers and the platform owner.

With flexibility in the location of work, crowdworkers do not work from a specific place with a determined time zone as well as do not work for one specific organization. Hence, social isolation is a common occurrence (Spreitzer et al., 2017) and there is little traditional organizational communication in crowdwork platforms. Virtual communication and cultivating workplace friendships were found as the main practices that organize location flexibility on Topcoder. The practice of virtual communication relies on the daily efforts of the workers, the platform owner, and the job providers. The platform owner provides and manages the infrastructure, steers the collaborations and discussions with the two other parties, and solves potential issues that arise during the project. The workers consult with job providers to specify their project requirements, both directly and through a platform representative (e.g., project manager). Finally, job providers attend to their own channel to answer the questions of expert workers and Topcoder staff regarding the project, express their opinions about the project processes and engage in a consultation process with both parties. The practice of cultivating workplace friendships relies on the regular efforts of both the workers and the platform owner. The platform owner provides and manages the infrastructure and participates in the creation of a friendly environment through attending to personal chats with workers (e.g., personal chats between project managers and copilots) that motivate workers to join these channels. The workers reinforce the friendly atmosphere that helps overcome the solitary nature of freelance work.

Discussion

This study explored how work is organized in creative crowdwork platforms through the combined practices of workers, platform owner, and job providers to achieve and manage three dimensions of flexibility. This study contributes to a better theoretical and practical understanding of how work is organized in crowdwork platforms by delineating how the combined practices of three key parties in the platform create these positive outcomes and guide practitioners in the design of a successful creative crowdwork platform. One significant emerging outcome of the combined practices is the social construction of *psychological safety* (Figure 1) which refers to the “individuals’ perceptions of the consequences of taking interpersonal risks in their work environment” (Kark and Carmeli, 2009, p. 787). When workers feel psychologically safe, they can expose and employ themselves without concern of negative effect on self-image, position, or career (Kahn, 1990). It is surprising that under conditions of extreme employment and financial uncertainty (most Topcoder workers only have a small chance of winning a competition and getting paid), psychological safety may still be achieved. As shown in Figure 1, it is achieved through the combined practices of the three key stakeholders. For example, professional socialization and cultivating work friendships provide professional and personal learning opportunities for workers, supported by the extensive virtual



communication practices and architecture. The involvement of the platform owner and job providers in many of these interactions bring all three parties closer together and ensures collective responsibility for not just the successful accomplishment of work projects but also the successful maintenance of the Topcoder spirit. Thus, psychological safety not only provides intrinsic motivation to workers to keep offering their services via the platform despite potential lack of financial reward (Gol et al., 2018), but also motivates job providers to take the risk of using the crowdwork platform. In addition, the work organization that generates psychological safety also provides all parties with a feeling of trust in the process of work, despite the known challenges with trust under conditions of flexible employment relationships, as well as scheduling and location flexibility.

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