

Gig economy app seeks to balance UK workers and employers

Level: Intermediate–Upper-intermediate (B1–B2)

Time: 60–90 minutes

Business topics: Recruitment, HR, Legal, Technology, Career planning

Business language focus: language associated with recruitment, technology, law and trade unions

Activities: In this lesson, students will:

- read a business article first published in the *Financial Times* and look at the language necessary to understand and talk about the article;
- look at business-specific words and expressions and apply them to their own personal work experience;
- discuss aspects of the article in greater depth;
- research an issue affecting employment and debate it with another group.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student, internet access for Exercise 6

Group size: All of the tasks can be completed in pairs or groups, so that as much communication as possible takes place in the class. However, this lesson plan can also be used in a one-to-one teaching situation.

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This lesson is based on an authentic article from the *Financial Times*, republished here with its full, original text.

The article talks about how new apps are providing new work opportunities.

1. Warmer

If possible, before handing out the worksheets, display the logos for the four companies on the board. Ask students if they recognise these companies and can say anything about what they do. Then hand out the worksheets and discuss the questions as a whole class.

Key:

- Uber* – An American multinational ridesharing company, similar to a taxi firm, that operates via an app.
- Deliveroo* – A UK based food delivery company that also operates in other countries. People order food from a variety of restaurants through an app.
- Lyft* – A ridesharing company based in the US that also operates in Canada. Through an app, people can share car rides, scooters and bicycles.
- TaskRabbit* – An American online and mobile marketplace that matches freelance labour with local demand.
- Upwork* – A global freelancing platform based in the US where businesses and freelancers connect and collaborate remotely.

Elicit what these companies have in common (*they are all fairly new companies, they are all based online, they all use self-employed workers*) and any other similar companies that the students know of. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being self-employed?

2. Key words and expressions

Explain that today learners are going to read an article about the ‘gig economy’ in the UK. Explain that the ‘gig economy’ is low paid work with irregular hours, similar to being self-employed.

Ask learners to read the article once and see if they can find the words in the text that match the definitions. Monitor and support where necessary.

Students should check their answers in pairs before comparing answers with the class.

Key:

- | | |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. <i>supplement</i> | 5. <i>perpetuate</i> |
| 2. <i>a drive</i> | 6. <i>a permanent post</i> |
| 3. <i>exploitation</i> | 7. <i>underemployed</i> |
| 4. <i>sufficient</i> | 8. <i>Desperate</i> |

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3. Understanding the article

Ask learners to read the article and answer the questions.

Encourage them to discuss their answers in pairs before comparing answers with the class.

Key:

1. *It helps people find temporary work*
2. *The community trade union*
3. *Southend, Lambeth and Croydon*
4. *They like it because it helps them find work*
5. *They like it because it helps them find staff but isn't exploitative, like other apps*

4. Business language

A Learners match the words to the definitions and check their answers in pairs. For weaker classes, you may wish to provide them with dictionaries and make this into a race.

Key:

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1. <i>d</i> | 5. <i>b</i> |
| 2. <i>c</i> | 6. <i>g</i> |
| 3. <i>a</i> | 7. <i>h</i> |
| 4. <i>f</i> | 8. <i>e</i> |

B Learners complete the sentences with words from A.

Key:

1. *rating/platform*
2. *safeguards*
3. *start-up*
4. *flexible labour*
5. *contractual relationship*
6. *keep me on*
7. *trade union*

5. Discussion

Students discuss the six questions in pairs. Monitor and support where necessary, making a note of any interesting answers and common errors. Feedback on these as a whole class.

6. Wider Business Theme – Self-employment and workers' rights

A

Key:

1. *Employee*
2. *Self-employed*
3. *A contractor*
4. *A worker*

B Put the students into pairs: A and B. Ask student A to read Case 1 and student B to read Case 2. Then ask learners to explain their case to their partner.

C Ask learners to compare the cases and discuss the questions.



One-to-one teaching

Ask the student to choose one of the roles from either group A or group B and prepare the presentation for homework.

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1 Warmer

Look at the companies in the box and discuss the questions below with a partner.

Uber

Lyft

Deliveroo

Task Rabbit

Upwork

1. Do you know what all these companies do?
2. Do they operate in your country?
3. Do the companies you know have a positive or negative reputation?

2 Key words and expressions

Read the article. Find the words in the text with the same meaning as these terms.

1. Add to (para 1) _____
2. A big effort (para 3) _____
3. Using people for your own benefit (para3) _____
4. Enough (para 5) _____
5. Make something continue (para 12) _____
6. A job for as long as you want it (para 17) _____
7. Not have enough work (para 18) _____
8. Really need something (para 22) _____

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Union-backed start-up part of a drive to improve rights of flexible workers

BY ROBERT WRIGHT



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- 1 When Pat Sampson's employer forced her to retire from her job as a pharmaceutical technician when she turned 65, she was not ready to stop working – nor was she confident that she would find casual work to supplement her state pension.
- 2 But since April last year, the 74-year-old has found temporary jobs at four different cafés in her hometown of Southend-on-Sea. Each has paid about £10 an hour – “not bad for café work”, she said – and she has been able to work around commitments to a charity she founded.
- 3 She found the jobs through Labour Xchange, an app supported by Community, a trade union, which seeks to link people with employers who need temporary workers. It is part of a drive to improve the rights of flexible workers and avoid the unfair exploitation associated with “gig economy” platforms.
- 4 Workers signing up to the app indicate their skills and when they are available, then wait for employers to contact them. They are guaranteed to be paid at least the living wage – £10.55 an hour in London and £9 an hour elsewhere in the UK.
- 5 Jonathan Key, co-founder of the new service, said he set it up to help retired people like Pat, as well as workers who may be struggling for sufficient hours from their employers or those with caring responsibilities.
- 6 “These are people who are desperate for work because they're the ones where £20 extra a week is the difference between them eating and not eating,” Mr Key said.

Community has invested £40,000 in the development of Labour Xchange. Funding has also come from BGV, an investor specialising in socially responsible technology start-ups.

The app launched in Southend in June 2017 and now also operates in the London boroughs of Lambeth and Croydon. About 6,500 people have signed up.

Ms Sampson said she used the app because she still wanted to work and needed some extra cash. “I've limited myself by the fact I'm running this charity, so it fits in with everything I need,” Ms Sampson said. “It's a perfect scenario for me.”

According to Jeremias Prassl, a law professor at the University of Oxford who has studied the gig economy, many apps provide a flexible source of labour for employers but too narrow a range of work opportunities to offer workers real choice.

“For the [Labour Xchange] deal to work in the interests of both parties, the platform needs to provide genuine, two-sided flexibility,” Prof Prassl said. “Work needs to be available for those seeking it at the times they need it.”

Mr Key admitted that when he was setting up the service, most trade unions refused to be involved because they thought the service would perpetuate short-term, insecure working rather than creating long-term, secure, full-time jobs.

“They told me to get lost because I was evil,” he said.

Business users say the app has clear advantages. Gareth Lewis, a builder, said his company, Lewis & Walls, had used Labour Xchange when he needed an “extra pair of hands” for a few hours to help with tasks such as unloading flat-packs or pouring a large load of concrete near Southend.

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Worksheet

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15 “The sort of thing that we’ve used them for is small jobs, not really skilled work,” Mr Lewis said. “It’s handy for me because once they’re done they’re done and I don’t have to think about them.”

16 Mr Key insisted the app contained multiple safeguards to ensure that workers also benefited. The service is free for employees and is funded by business users, who pay £10 per booking made via the site or £150 if they take on a worker found through the site permanently.

17 The site also prevents employers from hiring the same person more than three times for a job, saying they should instead offer the worker a permanent post. In addition, it offers transparency, allowing workers to download all the information the site holds on them. According to Mr Key, this gives them far more power than other sites, where workers often have to guess how the site’s algorithms affect their rating.

18 Les Bayliss, head of special projects for Community, said many underemployed workers sought casual work and that Labour Xchange ensured that they were properly paid.

19 “We’re working with employers to have a better environment for people that they’re employing, under whatever contractual relationship,” Mr Bayliss said.

Jade Kelsey, 28, said Labour Xchange had helped her to boost her income from shifts at a fast-food restaurant chain in Southend. She had been offered work cleaning two evenings a week at a local estate agent, which had turned into a permanent post.

“They actually kept me on, so it’s really good,” Ms Kelsey said.

Labour Xchange is now looking to expand beyond its three pilot areas and eventually cover the entire UK. Mr Key said negotiations were already close to completion with several large employers that were desperate for staff.

But he cautioned that expansion would have to be undertaken carefully, to ensure the site maintained its two-sided flexibility. New local managers would need to be hired in each area to ensure the app signed up appropriate numbers of suitable businesses and found enough workers.

“One of the things that I always intended with Labour Xchange was that it was a tool to connect people to businesses on a level playing field, so people benefit and businesses benefit,” Mr Key said.

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3 Understanding the article

Read the article again and answer the questions in as much detail as you can.

1. What does Labour Xchange do?

2. Who supports the app?

3. Where does it operate?

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4. What do workers think about the app?

5. What do employers think about the app?

4 Business Language

A Match the words from the article (1–8) with the correct definition (a–h)

1. platform	a. Workers who you can hire and fire easily
2. start-up	b. Protections
3. flexible labour	c. A new company
4. trade unions	d. A website that offers a service
5. safeguards	e. To employ someone after their initial contract
6. rating	f. Organizations that protect workers' rights
7. contractual relationship	g. A score of how good you are at something
8. keep someone on	h. The link between parties in a contract

B Complete the sentences with words 1–8 above. Change the form of the word if necessary.

- We got a five-star _____ on the customer feedback _____.
- Our equipment has _____ to protect users.
- I work for a _____. It's only been in business for six months.
- We're much busier in summer than winter so we hire _____ then.
- The _____ states we must deliver the goods on the 14th.
- My contract finished but the firm decided to _____.
- The _____ demanded workers' salaries were increased.

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5 Discussion

Discuss the questions with a partner.

1. Do you think the App is positive or negative?
2. Would you use it? Why / Why not?
3. Do many people work in the 'gig economy' in your country?
4. Do you think a growing 'gig economy' is positive or negative? Why?
5. Are trade unions weak or strong in your country?
6. How do trade unions affect work in your country?

6 Wider business theme – Self-employment and workers' rights

A Complete the sentences with the words in the box.

contractor employee worker self-employed

1. A _____ has a full time, permanent job, holiday pay and sick pay.
2. A _____ has their own company.
3. A _____ works for lots of different companies for a short time.
4. A _____ doesn't have a full time job but has holiday pay and sick pay.

B Read either Case 1 or Case 2 and explain it to your partner.

Case 1 – Uber Workers

Uber, the taxi app, lost an employment case in the UK in 2018. Uber insisted that its drivers were self-employed. They owned their own cars and had total freedom about when they worked. This is the same as people who run their own business. Because the drivers were self-employed, Uber did not need to pay them holiday or sick pay.

The Uber drivers argued that Uber controlled when they worked and made them keep their car in a specified condition and follow lots of rules, like employees. The drivers took Uber to court claiming that they were 'workers'. This group do not have permanent work in a company but work like employees. They must be paid holiday pay and sick pay.

The court found that the Uber drivers were 'workers' because they did not have control over how and when they worked. Uber was ordered to pay the drivers holiday pay and sick pay.

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Case 2 – Deliveroo

Deliveroo, the food delivery company, won an employment case in 2018. Deliveroo insisted that its delivery riders were self-employed. They worked when they wanted and were able to swap shifts with other riders, something employees could not do. Because the riders were self-employed, Deliveroo did not need to pay them holiday pay or sick pay.

The riders argued that they had to wear a Deliveroo uniform just like employees, and were put under pressure to take shifts at the company. The riders took Deliveroo to court claiming that they were 'workers'. This group do not have permanent work in a company but work like employees. They must be paid holiday pay and sick pay.

Deliveroo won the case. The court found that because the riders were able to swap shifts with others or even select any other person to take their shift, they were not employees or workers. Deliveroo did not have to pay the riders holiday pay or sick pay.

C Now discuss the questions.

1. How similar do you think the cases are?
2. Who do you support in each case?
3. Do you think employees would win in your country?
4. Are there any similar cases in your country?