



Organizing Crowd Workers: From Folly to Urgency

While most people have heard of Uber, Foodora or Deliveroo, few have heard of Amazon Mechanical Turk. Yet this is the site where I made most of my income for the last 11 years. Hidden behind a monitor, many of the largest sites on the internet use the work, which I and thousands of my co-workers provide, to keep their services running. But the workers are separated not only from the customer, but also from each other. We have tried to organize, but a variety of hurdles stop us from finding the success a union might have within an offline environment. As robots and AI replace jobs, many workers may find themselves drawn into crowd work as a last resort, which is why it is important today to figure out how we can fight back against this exploitive labour market, yet how to organize faceless global workers is a question I have yet to answer.

Let me first introduce you to Amazon Mechanical Turk (mTurk), a crowd work platform where anyone can post work, broken into tiny pieces called »microtasks«, and anyone can complete those microtasks. To begin, imagine mTurk as a giant bulletin board where jobs are posted. You may have seen similar job boards locally, and typically someone who needs work done would post their job printed on a page on such a board looking for an individual to complete it. For example, if you wanted to translate this article you would literally post it to the board with your contact information, amount you are willing to offer, and due date, and someone would grab it, translate it, and return it to you, likely a few days or a week later. mTurk is similar, in that a client will post work to the platform with the amount they are willing to pay and how long you have to complete it, but they first break it into microtasks. In this example, the client, known on mTurk as a »requester«, would literally cut out

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every sentence of this article one by one and stack them on top of each other, and then tack the entire pile of work up onto the board. Instead of one person taking the entire article, thousands of people, known as »Turkers«, rush this pile of microtasks, grabbing as many sentences as they can before their competition, the other workers,



grab it. They then all do the work at the same time, so the article which might have taken a week to be translated by one individual offline could now be entirely translated within minutes. Moreover, the cost is much less as each sentence likely only pays a penny or two to the translator. mTurk also makes the process easy for the clients, as they literally upload the work, go about their normal activities, and in no time the job is done without any intervention on their part. It is easier, faster and cheaper than hiring offline, and that is why it has become so popular.

While this sounds great for the requester, it is an exploitive, damaging field of labour for the worker. To begin, Amazon takes a hands-off approach to the platform, meaning they offer no assistance to workers. If you are new, there are no documents to help you figure out how to use the platform or increase your earnings. If you receive a »rejection«, where the requester chooses not to pay you, there is no way to seek arbitration in the matter, which is a huge problem when you find thousands of your HITs rejected for no reason. In fact, when a requester rejects your work, they actually keep what you submitted but pay you nothing in return. This wage theft is built into the platform as Amazon does not require you to be paid before the requester downloads your work, nor are they willing to step in when wage theft is committed, so workers are on egg shells wondering if they will actually be paid for the work they did today. Worse yet, the more rejections you receive, even those which were unfairly given, the less work you can do. Amazon allows requesters to use the percentage of work a worker has had approved as a qualification to do their work, so if your percentage drops below 98%, you will be locked out of many jobs available. And if you end up with a lot of rejections, Amazon might even suspend you from the entire platform, although they are not transparent about how many rejections it takes, or even what criteria must be met before your account is flagged for suspension. This makes this an extremely precarious job, where whether or not you can work tomorrow is based on the whims of the requesters.

Every piece of work you do is a risk as far as payment, but it is also a risk of psychological and physical damage. I have completed content moderation work where I have seen some of the worst images and videos available on the internet, from people being set on fire to a basket of decapitated heads. Over time, I have developed PTSD-like symptoms regarding the abuse of animals I have seen, now stepping into a veterinary hospital sets off flashbacks and a panic attack every time I visit it. The physical damage working on mTurk has caused me is of equal significance, as I have developed a cyst in my wrist, repetitive stress injury, tennis elbow, and a tear in my trapezius muscle in my shoulder due to



the continued strain of clicking a mouse for 17 hours a day, seven days a week. It may be shocking to hear that anyone is working such long hours, but when the average payment for a piece of work on the platform is less than ten cents, you have no choice. Amazon likes to claim that mTurk allows workers flexibility, but that is only true for those who do it to collect »beer money« and not those who depend on it as a serious portion of their income. For workers such as myself who do it full-time, we have to be at the computer when work is posted. That could be at 3am, or during a time I should be somewhere else, such as going to the doctor or picking my child up from school, which means I lose sleep and miss any events which get in the way. If I go to bed or leave my home and miss the batch of work, I may find myself coming home to no work and therefore not making anything for the day. This leads to a great level of stress and anxiety, as you always have to be searching for work in order to ensure your family eats for another week. Together, these physical and mental stressors lead to illness, and make this job extremely damaging with little compensation in return for giving up one's good health.

Sadly, we cannot rely on the government to ensure that we are protected or even able to heal ourselves while working in this job. As we are considered independent contractors or freelancers, labour legislation does not apply. The companies we work for do not have to provide us with benefits, such as health or dental insurance, disability or life insurance, pension payments or even vacation or sick days. We have no protection from unemployment; therefore these platforms can terminate us on a whim with no recourse available. They can even keep our earnings when they suspend us, as there is no easy legal recourse to get it back. The companies, such as Amazon, are also very smart when they create their sign-up agreements, indicating that we cannot sue them in a class action lawsuit, which negates any interest a law firm might have in helping us litigate for damages or underpayment. We also have limited recourse for the wage theft that occurs, meaning that we can be abused repeatedly by requesters by the platform and the only thing we can do is grin and bear it or sign up for another, likely equally exploitive, platform. The good news is that governments in Europe are beginning to take notice and take action, but in North America there is little movement towards protecting crowd workers or any independent contractor. President Trump just rolled back the few protections for independent contractors President Obama had enacted, and while the Ontario Liberal government, where I live, is beginning to take baby steps towards ensuring part-time and full-time workers have the same protections, no



such benefits have been promised to freelancers. I hope that officials here watch what is happening in Europe and begin to emulate it, and that European leaders continue to march towards ensuring equal protections for everyone who works, otherwise I fear that as the majority of workers become freelancers, the majority of work will also become precarious and exploitive.

While the work is underpaid, damaging, and exploitive, organizing workers on mTurk poses major hurdles which have kept us from truly waging a campaign to change our work environment. To begin, the Turkers have no way to communicate with each other on the platform. We do not see and cannot speak to other workers, since the platform was designed to keep us independent from each other. Even as a requester I do not know who works for me, as Turkers are only identified on the platform by a random string of letters and numbers; no name, no location, no photograph, no contact information. Not only does this pose a problem when a task would be better served by a team of workers, but it means that we have no way of contacting each other about work issues. Communities have sprung up on the periphery of mTurk, but the only way for workers to find them is through a reference from a friend or a link on a search engine or social media. These communities likely only house about ten percent of the overall workforce, which means that they neither adequately represent the Turker community nor do they reach all of the people who might be interested in working towards change. Whereas a union has a factory to stand outside of in order to count and name workers, Turker organizers have literally nothing to go on. On top of that, the workforce has massive turnover, with most workers leaving the platform within a few months of joining. There are many reasons for this that I will not go into here, but the bottom line is that even when you reach as many workers as possible, by the time you organize a campaign many workers will already have moved on. This continuous need to find the workers and get in touch with them without any easy way to make contact with the majority of the workforce makes organizing next to impossible.

Yet nothing is impossible, and the Turkers have organized some smaller campaigns which have garnered them some success. A group of academics from Stanford University and the University of California teamed with Turkers to create a platform called WeAreDynamo, which allows Turkers to anonymously post campaign ideas, up vote the ones they like, and then turn those campaigns into reality when they get enough support. Two great campaigns came out of this platform: The first was the Guidelines for Academic Requesters, a continuously updated rule-



book for anyone who uses mTurk to post work, instructing them on how to do it ethically and efficiently. Many academics and requesters have signed the guidelines as a show of support, and Turkers work on bettering the document so that it both helps requesters use the platform effectively while providing the workers with ethical and respectful treatment. The second, the Dear Jeff Bezos letter writing campaign, found Turkers writing emails to jeff@amazon.com explaining who they are, why they complete mTurk work, and providing a few suggestions for the platform. A few dozen people wrote emails, and the community was abuzz with excitement that a group of Turkers could get together and truly attempt an organized campaign. Initially, we assumed we would measure success based on how many emails received personalized responses and action on their calls for change, but we soon found that success would be measured differently. Only one email actually got a response and action, where an Indian worker named Manish wrote that he had never received his cheques in the many years he had worked on mTurk as they were mailed and the Indian postal service was not that reliable. Within six months, his request that Indian workers be permitted to be paid through bank transfers was fulfilled. This was an enormous win for the thousands of workers in India who were struggling to get paid, but it was also the only direct response we received. If this had been our only measure of success, the campaign would have been a failure.

One major lesson we learned from this campaign is, that how you will measure success is not something you can predict before you begin, since the process will open your eyes to much about your community and your situation that you cannot know until the campaign is under way. In this campaign, great success was found in the voice it gave the workers. First, now there was a database of information for others to access about who the Turkers are, and it demonstrated that the reputation mTurk has for being full of uneducated, unskilled, unemployed workers from »third world« countries was totally false. In fact, the workers are highly educated, skilled, intelligent, and most are from the United States, working on the platform in addition to having a full-time job. Second, the campaign created a great media interest in the Turker community, and suddenly instead of writing articles about us, journalists and academics were interested in actually speaking to us and printing what they learned from us directly. We were now included in the discourse about crowd work and the future of labour, and that meant we could speak to our struggles and our needs as far as change within the work environment. This empowered us, reminding us that this work is labour and that we deserve the same rights and protections as traditional employees receive under the



law. That we should be paid fairly, treated with respect and allowed to organize ourselves to better our conditions may be seen to be common sense, but in the world of crowd work where the companies in control do what they can to avoid the terminology of labour and the appearance of the tasks being »work«, these were foreign concepts until this campaign came about.

While WeAreDynamo was a first step towards organizing crowd workers, it also taught us that there will never be one perfect solution. Amazon suspended our mTurk requester account which we used to validate worker sign-ups on the WeAreDynamo system, effectively killing the platform as we could no longer ensure that only workers were signing up to participate. After that, the momentum died down and there have been no additional large-scale campaigns to change the conditions on mTurk since. I believe there are myriad reasons for this, from the fact that Turkers fear losing the only work they may have access to in their lives, to that huge level of attrition where today's Turkers likely have no idea about any of the campaigns we completed because they are new to the community. This is indicative of the fact that we need to do more to reach out to crowd workers. With Uber drivers striking and protesting and Crowdfunder workers suing the company, crowd workers are beginning to push the boundaries to test what they are able to do to change their work experience. That means we need to strongly push organizing and consider new methods of attack, especially using the same technology these companies use to exploit us. For example, social media campaigns, where we name and shame requesters who underpay or otherwise abuse Turkers, have found success in the past. Posting HITs making Turkers aware of their options as far as fighting against bad requesters has helped to spread information to those who might not even know the Turker communities outside mTurk exist. Most importantly, I believe creating our own crowd work cooperative platforms may provide the best way for workers to truly organize to provide themselves the opportunity for fairly paid, decent, respectful online work. Regardless of what the goal is, getting crowd workers on the same page fighting for the same rights has proven to be a struggle thus far, but that should not stop us now.

The next steps that need to be taken towards organizing crowd workers include amassing all resources available in order to strengthen our fight. Governments need to enact legislation forcing companies to be transparent about who is working on their platform so that the government can both supply that information to organizations which might help the workers, and use it themselves to ensure correct income and



business taxes are being paid, likely an easy sell for cash-strapped states looking to increase their bottom line wherever possible. Unions need to find out who within their ranks already work on such sites and ask them what sort of services might be of use, and then share those resources not only with their own members, but other freelancers who need their help. Resources can be legal, group benefits, organizing advice, government lobbying efforts, or even campaigning together towards change. Great examples of leaders in this field are Unionen, UNI Global Union, and ver.di, which are all exploring innovative ways of reaching out to and including freelancers in their organizing activities. Other leaders include non-profit organizations, such as Freelancer Union, the Canadian Freelancer Union and Coworker.org, which are all trying new and different strategies for helping freelancers organize to change problems they face in their workplace. Lastly, I feel the cooperative movement provides a great deal of experience and history to draw from as far as workers organizing themselves, and I hope that cooperative organizations will be willing to step in to help freelancers create their own platforms in order to control their own destiny. Together, those of us who wish to see a future of work where individuals feel comfortable on the job, are treated fairly and ethically and have a platform which ensures their protection from wage theft and stressors, need to come together to move from discussion to drafting a blueprint for organizing in order to fight back against crowd work exploitation. Until we do, crowd work, along with robots and AI, will continue to hack away at the job market as they consume careers where the work is cheaper, easier and faster to get done on a platform such as mTurk. Without resistance, the job market of the future will be bleak, so a promise to our children today that we will push to organize crowd workers is a promise that they will never have to go through what I have in the last 11 years. I have made this promise to my daughter, and I hope you will do the same for your children.