CBS COPENHAGEN BUSINESS SCHOOL
HANDELSHØJSKOLEN

CROWDWORK PLATFORMS AS RESTRICTIVE-EXPANSIVE LEARNING SITES

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Motivation

- Crowdwork has structural constraints that are seen as detrimental to learning and development:
  - No direct organisational support for learning and development
  - Autonomous tasks and lack of interdependencies
  - No opportunities for incidental knowledge sharing
  - Hyper-competetive environment/planetary skill supply

- Recent empirical research suggests platform workers engage in extensive and sophisticated forms of self-directed and self-regulated learning (Margaryan, 2019a; 2019b; Margaryan et al, 2022; Cedefop, 2020)

- To what extent can OLPs be characterised as sites of learning, in particular which of their features are restrictive and which are expansive in relation to learning?

Expansive-Restrictive Learning Environments Framework (Fuller et al, 2004)

Dimension	Expansive	Restrictive
Vision for WPL	Learning as progression for career	Learning for current job/task
	Development of both indvidual and org capabilities	Learning used to tailor individual capabilities to org needs
	Workers recognised as learners	Lack of recognition of workers as learners
	Planned time-off work for learning incl formal	All learning on-the-job
	Managers as facilitators of learning and dev	Managers as controllers of learning and dev
Workplace 'curriculum'	Transparent, documented, available to all	Limited transparency and patchy access to 'curriculum'
	Access to formal qualifications	No access to formal qualifications
Learning opportunities	Chances to learn new skills & progress to new tasks	Lack of learning opps and barriers to progress into new tasks
	Skills of the whole workforce developed and valued	Only key workers' skills developed and valued
Boundary-crossing	Opportunities to develop horizontally, across org boundaries/Polycontextuality fostered	Limited opps for boundary-crossing
	Multi-dimensional/bottom up view of expertise	Uni-dimensional/top down view of expertise
	Cross-boundary communication fostered & valued	Bounded communication, restricted access to knowledge
	Participation in multiple communities of practice	Limited participation in communities
	Gradual transition to full participation	Fast transition to full participation expected
	Teamwork valued	Rigid, specialist roles

Methodology

Method	Data source	Sample size	Dates collected	Countries	Platforms studied
Survey	Workers	N=1001	2019	5 European countries: UK, Italy, Finland, Romania, Spain, Germany	Upwork, Fiverr, PeoplePerHour, Twago
Interview	Workers	N=77	2018-2019	UK, Italy, Finland, Romania, Spain, Germany	Upwork, Fiverr, PeoplePerHour, Twago
Interview	Stakeholders: • Platform owners • Clients • Trade unions • Supranational organisations • Government agencies • Professional associations	N=27	2018-2019	Belgium, Denmark Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the UK, the US	n/a
Review of learning & development provision by platforms	Platform websites and interviews with platform owners	N=4	2018-2019	US, UK, Germany, Israel	Upwork, Fiverr, PeoplePerHour, Twago

No workforce development strategy: learning is seen as workers' individual responsibility

No business case for training:

"As a platform, it's not our goal to develop freelancers to learn new skills. It's our goal to find freelancers with the right skills. The clients are looking for somebody who has already done it before. So for a freelancer actually they have to start in a role, or the core of the role must be something they have experience in. Because there are enough people who can do the job, so they are really competing with others. If they don't have experience in a certain area, and they think it's interesting to learn it, it's pretty difficult for them to get that job. So that's really different from people who are employed and they have a contract with the company and the company says: 'Well, we have got some challenging job for you, you never did it but we think you can learn it.'" (Platform Executive)

"If somebody needs to be trained or hasn't the right competences, we [would be] looking further for a candidate who has the right competences. <Client company> invests a lot in training for the permanent workers. For contingent workers, investing in training is less, because we expect somebody that when he's hired, that he has the right competences and experience" (Client)

No workforce development strategy: learning is seen as workers' individual responsibility

Legal constraints:

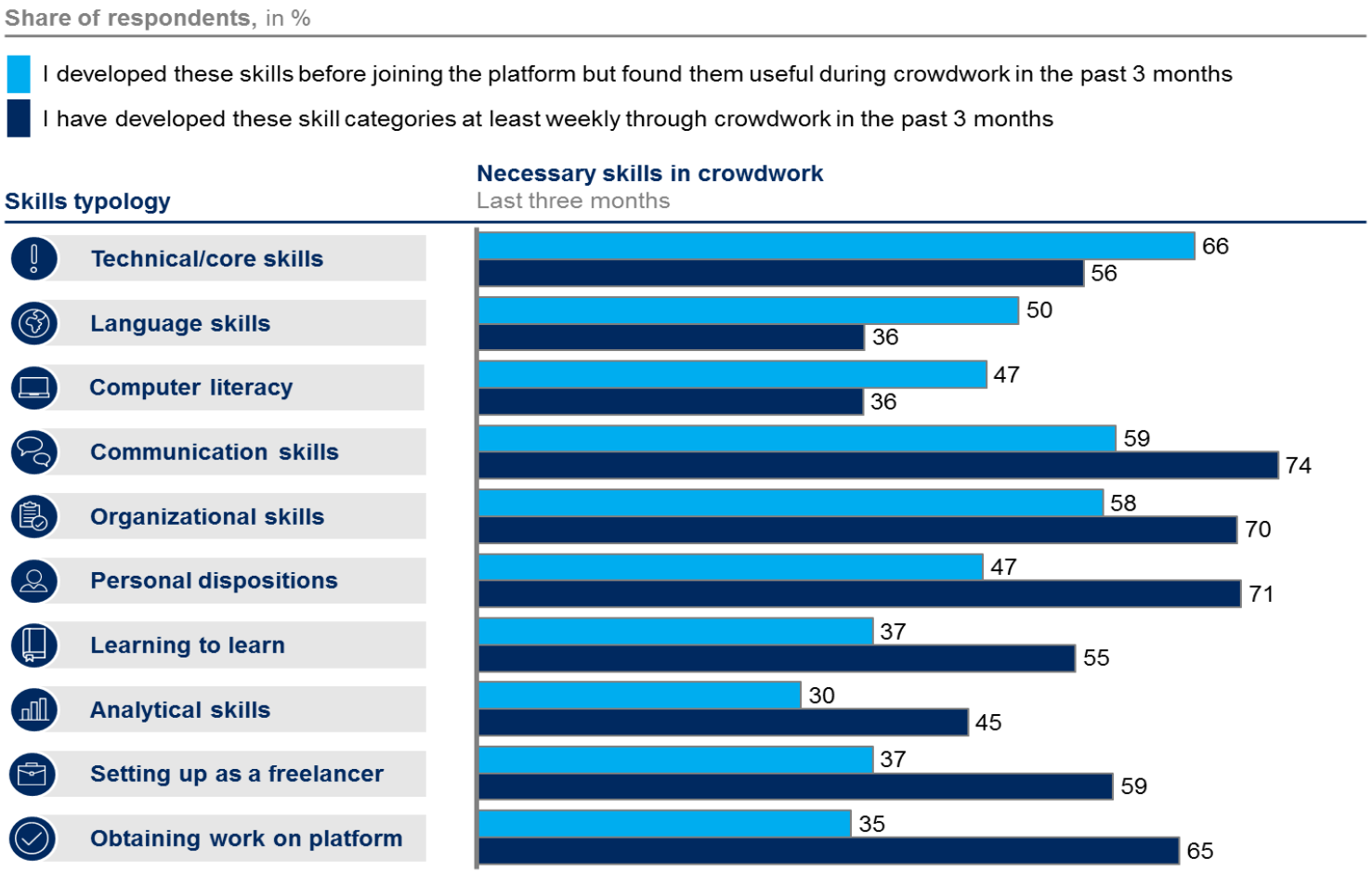
"*Facilitating a training relationship with the freelancer gets us into secondary questions about labour classification and individual contracts between the freelancer and their client.*" (Platform Executive)

"*It's due to our law, the freelancers are seen as independent workers. And the term independent is what it says: they are expected to develop themselves. If you're going to work as a freelancer, you invest in yourself, so that you will be interesting for the market. So you have to develop your own skills and competences. If there is something about employer-employee, then yeah, there can be huge fines for both the freelancer and us*" (Client)

Workers see a limited role for platforms in providing training

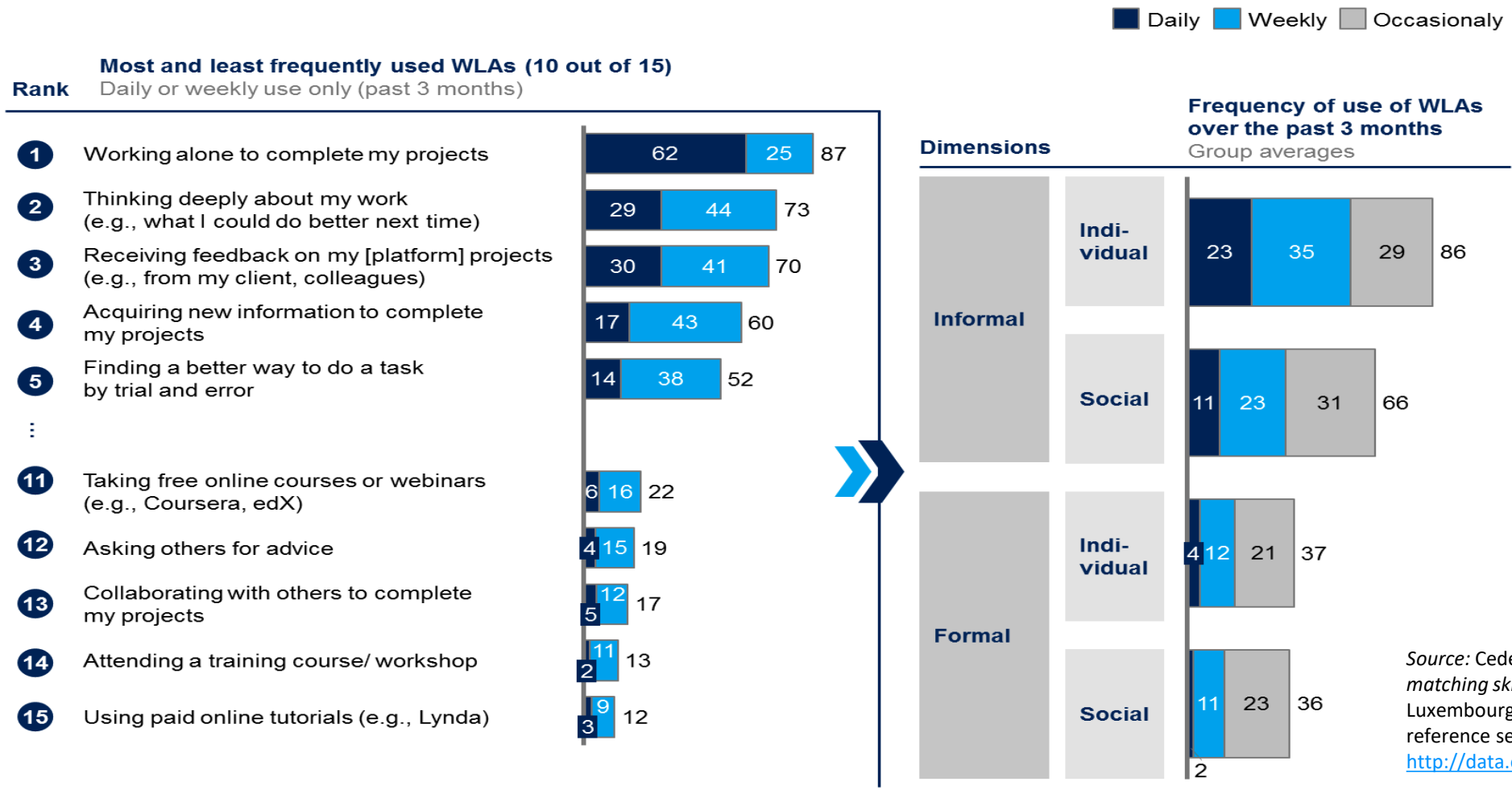
- Platforms are not seen as experts in the skills workers sell
- Workers prefer guidance from those they see as experts, e.g. successful platform workers
- Workers would like support to be limited to platform-specific issues, e.g. how to set up a profile or handle a dispute with a client
- But many are concerned such support would increase competition diluting work available for all

Workers develop 211 skills comprising a 10-component typology including core, transversal and platform-specific skills



Source: Cedefop (2020). *Developing and matching skills in the online platform economy.* Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 116. http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/588297

Workers undertake a range of self-directed learning activities, individually and socially



Source: Cedefop (2020). *Developing and matching skills in the online platform economy.* Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 116. http://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2801/588297

Workers engage in self–initated collaboration and social interaction

- I regularly learn by observing and emulating other people's strategies - 74%
- I regularly learn from online communities – 59%
- I frequently/at least weekly communicate with other platform workers through digital means – 38%
- I frequently/at least weekly communicate with other workers face to face – 17%

Crowdwork is simultaneously restrictive and expansive for learning

Restrictive

- No vision for learning and no workforce development strategy and no direct learning provision
- All learning on-the-job- no paid time off work for formal learning
- Hyper-specialisation and autonomous tasks eliminate interdependencies, cooperation and knowledge sharing from workflow

Expansive

- Emphasis on individual responsibility fosters self-direction and self-regulation in learning
- Crowdwork stimulates situated, work-integrated learning grounded in professional practice
- Crowdwork affords the development of core, transversal and platform-specific skills
- On-the-job learning affords authentic, experiential and mimetic learning, deliberate practice and reflection
- Workers respond to atomisation of OLP work by undertaking self-initiated and collectively organised cooperation and boundary-crossing activities

Implications for policy

1. Shifting the focus from provision of training to supporting and shaping an environment design that is expansive for learning and conducive to the development and application of self-direction, self-regulation and self-organisation in learning

2. Reinserting individual agency into the policy on work and learning on platforms

Related publications

- Margaryan, A., Albert, J., & Charlton-Czaplicki, T. (2022). Workplace learning in crowdwork questionnaire (WLCQ). *International Journal of Training and Development.*
- Margaryan, A. (2019a). Workplace learning in crowdwork. *Journal of Workplace Learning, 31*(4), 250-273.
- Margaryan, A. (2019b). Comparing crowdworkers' and conventional knowledge workers' self-regulated learning strategies in the workplace. *Human Computation, 6*(1), 83-97.
- Cedefop. (2020). Developing and matching skills in the online platform economy. (Reference Series No. 3085). Publications Office.
- Margaryan, A. (under review). The duality of global online labour platforms as restrictive-expansive sites of professional learning and development. [Preprint available on request]