

Unraveling the Implications of Silent Labor Time (SLT) in the Gig Economy

The gig economy has become integral to the global economy, driven by the labor flexibility it affords companies and the self-scheduling options available to workers. However, it also introduces an additional discretion for workers; they need to search for tasks during downtime, i.e., intervals when the platform does not assign them tasks. This period of uncompensated task-seeking, which we call “Silent Labor Time (SLT),” necessitates balancing effort between searching and executing tasks, impacting execution time. Our research aims to establish how the effort allocated during SLT affects workers’ performance and earnings and identify factors that moderate this relationship. In food delivery, the distance drivers travel to find the next order, called “relocation distance,” represents the effort allocated during SLT. Collaborating with a food delivery platform, we find that, on average, drivers relocate 2.6 km before each order, and a km increase in relocation distance reduces order allocation by 5.4%, order speed by 2.7%, and earnings by 14.8% in the subsequent hour. The primary reason for this decline is drivers allocating significant effort to searching for tasks during SLT, subsequently conserving energy when executing tasks. Relocations that are not towards familiar clusters and reduce supply-demand balance are most detrimental to workers’ performance and earnings. Our findings suggest that relocation adversely affects drivers’ earnings and operational performance in subsequent orders, ultimately impacting the platform’s efficiency. We offer actionable insights by suggesting strategies for the management of effort allocation during SLT by different driver groups.