

## **Clickwork: a relapse into conditions long believed to have been overcome**

*A comment by **Norbert Häring**.*

Millions do worldwide the smallest jobs via the Internet for pennies. This still small labour market is also growing strongly in the industrialised countries. This helps companies to save costs. For Clickworkers, it is supposed to be a good opportunity to earn additional money with otherwise unused time. But that's not how it works.

A new job market has emerged in recent years as a result of Internet platforms and apps: Workers and clients come together there for the smallest jobs. Sometimes it's just a matter of working minutes, some jobs can even be done in seconds. The money is then paid in cents.

Since June, these jobs should no longer be allowed. The "law against illegal employment and social benefit abuse" forbids offering workers as day labourers in public places or making use of such offers. The aim is to prevent labour protection and tax laws from being circumvented. But this law does not apply to Clickwork. The public space of the Internet is not included, only the so-called "worker's track" on the street.

Two economists from the International Labour Organization (ILO) have now examined how this labour market looks from the point of view of the contractors. In particular, Uma Rani and Marianne Furrer analysed the possibilities for click workers to increase their earnings through experience and good work. So far, there has been hardly any scientific evidence on this subject.

The question is particularly interesting because platforms such as the Amazon Mechanical Turk, launched in 2005, or the large German platform Clickworker are experiencing rapid growth. It is therefore conceivable that such fragmented working conditions will make up a considerable part of the labour market in the future.

If much could be gained through learning at work, experience and reputation building, there would be reason to expect that working conditions and pay in "crowdwork", as this form of work is also called, would improve over time. Otherwise, the spread of crowdwork would be a very bad prospect for the workforce. Because the pay is so far notoriously bad because of the worldwide competition and the advertised tasks are often annoyingly simple and monotonous.

### **Monotonous work, paid far under the minimum wage**

This has a system and is what makes click work so attractive for clients. From more complex task bundles, which up to now have been done by own employees paid by minimum wage and subject to social security contributions, the simplest, easy-to-describe tasks are detached and advertised

for a small fee.

That can save a lot of money, as the authors report with examples. For example, insurance forms could be digitized for one sixth of the previous costs, or a small, specialized program could be purchased for five dollars by a click worker instead of 2000 dollars by a medium-sized supplier. The platforms enable companies worldwide to find people who urgently need money and work at almost any wage.

The consequence on the other side is that monotonous work best known at the time of Taylorism is increasingly growing. The principle of Taylorism was to divide work that had previously been done by qualified craftsmen into individual steps, which could then be done quickly and efficiently on the assembly line by semi-skilled workers.

It is possible that the monotony of the work and the bad pay is only an initial phenomenon. Perhaps, as in the factories of the time, the tasks of the workers will become more complex again when the system has been established and refined, and when the contractors have shown their reliability and qualification.

However, the authors found little evidence of this in their survey of 2350 clickworkers. They advertised the survey as paid clickwork on five major international platforms, including Clickworkers. They found the results of other studies confirmed that the achievable hourly remuneration is everywhere far below the minimum wage in industrialised countries.

Taking into account unpaid but necessary secondary occupations such as searching and processing assignments, only one third of American clickworkers earned at least the national minimum wage of 7.25 dollars. Of the Germans, only 10 percent even earned the minimum wage of 8.84 euros. The average in industrialized countries was just under four dollars an hour, the median even only three dollars. The median is the hourly wage that lies exactly in the middle of the distribution. Half earn less, the other half more.

### **Most click workers are overqualified.**

Most clickworkers are highly qualified. Half of those who stay longer have a university degree. The requirement profile of the tasks is typically far below the qualification level of the click workers. This improves only slightly with increasing experience, according to the clickworkers.

It is also reflected in the prospects for remuneration. In the first year in which newcomers to the platforms still have to earn a reputation and gain experience, earnings rise markedly, from less than four dollars to just under five dollars on average across all platforms and regions. But after just two years, clickworkers are no longer experiencing higher earnings.

There are practically no opportunities for paid training, and "learning on the job" is also virtually non-existent. On the contrary, click workers experience that their work has a bad reputation both in the

social environment and with traditional employers. They therefore worry whether they still have a chance of getting a normal job after a period as clickers.

For many, clicking is not just an insignificant secondary activity for the time until the bus arrives or the journey on the train. In developing countries it is the main source of income for 41 percent of the survey participants, in industrialized countries it is 27 percent.

### **The client decides whether to pay or not**

The clickwork platforms are also a relapse into long-overcome states when it comes to basic employee rights. The portion of unpaid work is high, was a further result of the questioning. The patron decides completely freely. If he is not satisfied, he does not pay. A reason is not necessary. Often he can even keep the results.

The study supports the ILO's call for the introduction of international minimum standards for digital work. If a law against day labour is needed, then it is difficult to justify why such standards are waived.

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*Thanks to the author for the right to publish.*

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