

CROWDWORK AND EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT: NEW CHALLENGES FOR HRM

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Abstract:

Crowdsourcing for paid labour (paid crowdsourcing) will fundamentally change the relationships between actors in the labour market. Employee-employer-relations are mediated by an internet service platform provider, immediate contact between both sides become limited. This does have crucial impacts on form and scope of employee commitment regarding both their jobs and the organization, they work for. Traditional HRM is facing the challenge to either overcome the problems of lacking employee commitment or to organize crowdsourcing in a way that fosters new forms of commitment.

Barnes et al. (2013) propose the following definition of paid crowdsourcing: “An internet-enabled exchange through which individuals (the workers, supply-side) can seek paid employment and organisations (the employers, demand-side) can reach a larger pool of workers to outsource tasks by utilizing online intermediaries or vendors (those providing an online platform in which tasks are advertised).” (20) Jeff Howe (2006), commonly referred to as coining the term “crowdsourcing”, defines it as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call” (Howe, 2006, online). In the view of Saxton et al. (2013), crowdsourcing is an advanced form of outsourcing: “We conceptualize crowdsourcing as a type of sourcing model that lies at the intersection of outsourcing and sophisticated internet technologies” (2).

According to Zysman (2015) intermediary platform providers play a significant role in the digital transformation of work. Platforms act as intermediaries and “[...] provide the central nexus between requesters and workers. It is said that platform design offers the opportunity to (...) shape the relationships and practical interaction between workers and requesters in practice” (Kittur et al 2013, 8). We agree with Kittur et al (ibid) that “Crowd work marketplaces are complex socio-technical systems, composed of many people and a changing technical infrastructure, with emergent organizational forms, new incentives being offered, and shifting labor pools” (12).

Based on existing knowledge about Crowdsourcing platforms we developed a model, describing three main elements of the STS – economic and social relations and job design - and their content as far as relevant in the context of crowdsourcing (figure 1). These three main elements are closely interwoven.

Recent research on crowdsourcing arrangements (Boons et al. 2015) strongly indicates that social relations between employers and employees seem to be the most crucial success factor. According to most research on these social relations, only the topic “control” was acknowledged as important yet. However, the limits of immediate control, particularly of higher qualified jobs, are obvious; trust and commitment are more efficient means to assure employee’s work performance. These are based on an appropriate corporate culture and fuelled by social capital. Employees claim for communication not only with the employer but also between them and their distant co-workers. In order to stay healthy and motivated, crowdworkers do need some kind of professional identity and the recognition of their work.

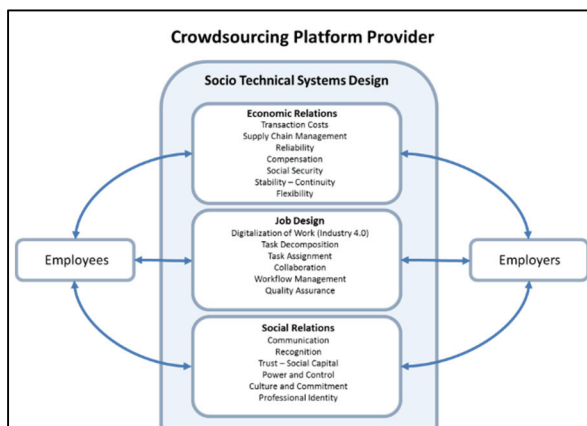


fig. 1

The concept of employee commitment provides further

insights into the social relations in a crowdsourcing environment. Commitment covers a broad range of single aspects essential for the description of work and labour relations. The work-related relationships on a crowdsourcing platform are multiple: to the platform provider and to the employers, whereby the latter is short-term and consistently changing. According to Meyer and Allen (1991) commitment includes three components: the affective, normative and continuance commitment, and relates to different targets – organization, occupation, supervisor, team, or form of employment (cf. Felfe & Franke, 2012).

The relationships at crowdsourcing platforms can be characterized by “virtuality” (computer-mediated work), “short-term nature” (assignments) and “multiplicity” (multiple employers). Several fields of research show the influence of these aspects on commitment. Research on virtual work (telework) shows that virtuality increases the distance between employers and employees, and affects social interaction, communication, and visibility in the organization. It subsequently leads to the dilution of organizational commitment (Fay and Kline, 2012; Mattarelli and Tagliaventi, 2010; Thatcher and Zhu, 2006). Recent literature indicates that even in short-term assignments, employees establish commitment to the agency and the client organization (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008). However, reduced visibility affects the commitment, especially to the agency (Felfe et al., 2005). Felfe et al. (2005) show that commitment to temporary work (as a form of employment) is related to the commitment to the agency and to the client organization. We assume that the new form of virtual work itself may have an influence on employee’s feelings of belonging.

Given the heterogeneity of crowdworkers with regard to task requirements (from clickwork to demanding R&D), professional role (“Turker” / Self-employed entrepreneur), task characteristic (repetitive short-cycled work / creative processes), financial dependencies (“some extra money” / main source of income), time range (some hours per month / 40+ hours per week), gender and age it is more than unlikely that commitment is constituted in similar ways within all these different groups.

We are about to examine the commitment of two groups of crowdworkers in a qualitative study design. The first group is engaged in copywriting (e.g. writing search engine entries, handbooks, travel reports), the second sample derives from software testing (debugging, development). In both groups crowdworkers work between one and five days per week via online platforms. First results show different patterns of commitment depending mainly on the work-live situation and motives for that form of working. High intensity crowdworkers develop commitment to the type of work (freelancing), to the occupation (e.g. as a copywriter or journalist), to the platform company (despite the virtuality) and other targets.

Given the fact that IBM’s Head of Human Resources predicted that very soon only 100,000 of IBM’s 430,000 employees will remain in permanent employment and all additional workers will be sourced as “liquid labour” worldwide through the virtual labour market, the challenges for HRM seem to be evident. The basic questions for HRM that is sourcing external labour via crowdsourcing platforms will be, whether they should aim at

- an optimized transactional relationship, based on specifications sheets, focused merely on the service, crowdworkers provide, neglecting any individual recognition of the people behind the service, or
- the promotion of the crowdworkers’ commitment towards their jobs and their employers/customers, by strengthening individual bonds with these employees and trying to integrate them in cultural systems covering occupation, task, project, virtual community or even the entire organization.

Based on our empirical findings we will advocate for the latter approach but are not yet sure whether our arguments will withstand.

Keywords: Crowdsourcing, HRM, Employee Commitment, Platform Economy

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