

Why Flexibility Matters

The Voice of a New Workforce:
How Millions Are Using Flexibility to Build,
Balance, and Navigate Their Lives



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INTRODUCTION

Flexibility has become an increasingly visible part of conversations about work in the United States. As people navigate caregiving responsibilities, health needs, shifting household finances, and periods of transition, the ability to manage one's own hours can shape whether and how they participate in the labor market.

Existing evidence demonstrates that gig workers value flexibility - the ability to choose their own hours is worth approximately \$150 a week to a typical Uber driver (Chen et al., 2017), and forcing a delivery driver into their least-preferred time block is equivalent to a 57.4% pay cut (Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2021).

Building on this evidence, Uber commissioned Ipsos to conduct a qualitative research study with app-based rideshare drivers and couriers to explore how flexibility fits into workers' daily routines.

Qualitative research provides insight into the mechanisms, context, and lived experiences underlying patterns already examined in academic literature. These workers offer a practical window into how flexible, app-based work fits alongside the responsibilities, constraints, and goals that shape people's decisions about when and how to work, and how flexibility shows up in their day-to-day lives.

The study began with a **literature** review of recent economic and academic research on flexible work, evolving worker needs, and emerging approaches to supporting them. Insights from this review informed the **qualitative** design and helped shape the exploration of how flexibility works in practice.

A note on this report. This study complements established quantitative evidence by adding lived-experience context. It illustrates patterns within this sample and does not represent population estimates. The study included early hypotheses about different worker archetypes to ensure a range of perspectives, and these hypotheses were explored and refined through the qualitative work.

Qualitative Research Methodology Overview

24 app-based rideshare drivers and couriers were recruited to participate in this research. The qualitative research design included:



24 completed a one-week online discussion board



8 In-depth virtual one-on-one interviews



12 In-person ethnographic 'ride-alongs'

Note: The qualitative sample was not designed to be statistically representative of all app-based workers. The research describes patterns and experiences in depth. It does not estimate how common any archetype is in the overall population. The findings should therefore be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.



1.

Executive Summary



“When I first started driving I was the single parent of an 11-year-old. Both kids were eventually diagnosed with mental illnesses. Driving rideshare was a blessing. It allowed me to make money on my own time, especially since I had to miss so much of my day job for getting my kids to treatment and such.”

– Rebuilder, Rideshare Driver

FLEXIBILITY MATTERS: FOUR THEMES EMERGED ACROSS STORIES

1

Flexibility is essential to participate

Without the ability to stop working when circumstances require it, some drivers can’t continue earning. Flexibility lets them earn while meeting caregiving, health, or school demands—and preserves dignity and control.

“I can plan my driving around my creative work and personal life instead of the other way around.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

2

Enough, efficient: clear targets and stop-rules

Most workers we spoke with set clear targets (rent, utilities, tuition) and stop when they hit them to protect family time, health, study, or time to build their own ventures.

“My goal is to make what I need without wrecking myself... that’s when I stop.”

–Caregiver, Courier

3

A bridge after disruption

These workers turn to flexible work after a setback like a job loss, a health issue, or a sudden family expense, using it to stay connected to income while they rebuild.

“A regular nine-to-five would be a problem with my health. I’d be constantly calling off. Here, I can work around what’s going on and still make something.”

–Rebuilder, Courier

4

Mixing apps and modes to manage risk and downtime

Many workers “mix and match” platforms and switch between rides and delivery to reduce downtime and fit their energy and comfort.

“If I relied on one app, I would make less money... I’ll go to a different one.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

What Flexibility Is Worth: Four Dimensions of Value

In this report, we use four dimensions to describe the net value created when workers have both schedule flexibility (control over when they work) and access flexibility (the low-friction ability to start and stop earning in real time). The literature and worker stories show this value across four dimensions: 1.) Direct economic compensation, 2.) Enhanced stability and well-being, 3.) A ripple effect of social value, 4.) Benefits that fit flexible work. We use this lens throughout to connect evidence to lived experience and to policy choices that add stability without sacrificing real-time control.

FLEXIBILITY MATTERS: FIVE ARCHETYPES, FIVE DISTINCT NEEDS



Entrepreneur Strivers:

Stack high-yield blocks of time to fund and protect time for their own ventures.



Caregivers:

Earn in short windows of time close to home; need to be reachable for family needs.



Rebuilders:

Use short bursts to cover specific bills and stabilize after disruption.



Student Aspirers:

Adjust hours week-to-week around classes and exams; ramp up during breaks.



Pre-retirees:

Favor calmer hours and routes; pace work around health and caring for others.

A brief evidence snapshot



Several studies estimate that **control over hours has measurable economic value** to many workers who choose flexible work (Chen et al., 2017; Public First, 2024; Mas and Pallais, 2017).



Research also shows a trade-off: **many who prefer independent work report higher satisfaction**, while those who would rather have traditional jobs report more stress (Berger et al., 2018; Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2021).



Studies of platform workers find **varied patterns of engagement and common use of multiple platforms** (Gruber, J., 2022).

App-based workers often navigate across archetypes

These archetypes aren't permanent identities. Over the course of a year or life stage, someone may move from Rebuilder (after job loss) to Student Aspirer (as they re-skill) to Entrepreneur Striver (as they build toward a venture). Flexibility is what allows workers to navigate these transitions without leaving the workforce.

The voice of a new workforce: For these workers, flexibility is the condition that makes earning money possible alongside caregiving, school, health, rebuilding, and later-career pacing.

The design challenge is adding stability in ways that keep real-time control intact. This report centers workers' voices to inform that discussion.



2.

Literature Review of Existing Research

FLEXIBILITY IN A CHANGING WORKFORCE

Across the U.S. labor market, work is being redesigned. Millions now log in from home or split weeks between office and remote, while millions more earn through app-based platforms, using on-demand work to fit income into complex lives. These models look different, but both meet the same demand: greater control over when and where work happens.

It would be a mistake to treat flexibility as a perk to trade for traditional protections. 88% of U.S. platform workers cite the ability to start earning immediately as a key reason they joined (Mandala, 2025).

The economic effects are visible. Flexibility meaningfully broadens participation by enabling people to work around caregiving, health, and other constraints—evidence shows caregivers, women with young children, and workers managing chronic conditions use flexible, on-demand and hybrid arrangements to engage on their own terms. (Public First, 2024; Mas and Pallais, 2017; Chen et al., 2017; Brown, 2024; Mandala, 2025).

These shifts carry major policy implications, especially in the gig economy, where states and cities are setting new standards—from minimum earnings floors to portable benefits. Those choices can strengthen worker welfare or inadvertently erode the value workers derive from flexibility. This report reviews the academic and economic evidence on flexible work, identifies where our understanding still falls short, and explains how the findings can inform better policy.

Analytical Framework

To organize the findings, we introduce an analytical framework to describe the value of flexibility created when workers have both:



Schedule flexibility – when and how to work (control over hours and days).



Access flexibility – the low-friction ability to start and stop earning at will.

Value Dimensions

When these conditions are present, the evidence suggests that **flexibility generates value along four key dimensions:**

1

Direct Economic Compensation: A quantifiable surplus that workers value and would otherwise demand in wages.

2

Enhanced Stability and Well-Being: A tool to absorb financial shocks, though one that comes with its own trade-offs.

3

A Ripple Effect of Social Value: Broader benefits to communities and consumers, including people who don't meet rigid work requirements and would otherwise be excluded from the workforce.

4

Benefits That Fit Flexible Work: A foundation for designing benefits that align with the diverse needs of the 21st-century workforce.

WHAT FLEXIBILITY IS WORTH: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF VALUE

1

Direct Economic Compensation



Flexibility has a measurable value for workers who choose it. For them, it is a key economic benefit.

This value is not unique to gig work. A field experiment published in the *American Economic Review* by Mas and Pallais (2017) found that the average worker requires a 20% wage premium to accept a job with unpredictable schedules set by a manager — evidence that workers across the labor market place a significant price on flexibility.

For those who select into flexible, app-based work, the value is even larger. A foundational NBER study by Chen et al. (2017) used a labor-supply model to estimate a “driver surplus” - the difference between what a driver earns and the minimum they would have been willing to accept to work those hours - worth approximately \$150 per week for the median driver. Scaled across the sector, schedule flexibility is estimated to be worth about \$11 billion annually to workers in the U.S. app-based economy (Public First, 2024).

Research from Harvard Business School (Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2021) goes further, finding that forcing a delivery driver into their least-preferred time block is equivalent to a 57.4% pay cut in welfare terms.

Taken together, this body of evidence demonstrates that for many workers who choose flexible app-based work, the ability to control their schedule is not an ancillary perk. It is part of what they are “paid.”

2

Enhance Stability and Well-Being



Flexibility also serves as a tool for household financial stability, though it comes with recognized trade-offs.

Access flexibility - the ability to instantly convert free time into income - functions as a powerful form of “consumption insurance” (Koustas, 2018). If an unexpected bill arrives or hours are cut in another job, workers can increase their time on the app and generate income, often within the same day or week - smoothing week-to-week income volatility. Research from Fos et al. (2025), published in the *Journal of Financial Economics*, extends this finding to major shocks: laid off workers with access to Uber rely less on household debt, experience fewer credit delinquencies, and are less likely to apply for unemployment insurance benefits. 31% of platform workers said the work helped them cover gaps or changes in income from other sources (Mandala, 2025).

These benefits also come with trade-offs. Berger et al. (2018) found that drivers report higher life satisfaction on average, but also higher anxiety - what they call the “Self-Employment Trade-Off.” The pattern is bimodal: workers who choose independent work report higher satisfaction, while those who would choose traditional employment report the opposite.

Brown (2024) adds that drivers voice legitimate concerns about variable earnings and the risk of account deactivation. The dual reality of flexibility as both a stabilizing tool and a source of stress is central to how workers actually experience this work.

WHAT FLEXIBILITY IS WORTH: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF VALUE (continued)

3

A Ripple Effect of Social Value



The effects of flexible app-based work are not limited to individual workers. The model creates a ripple effect of social and economic value.

These effects extend to consumers and communities. Flexible, on-demand service means riders can access transportation when they need it, saving over one billion hours annually and contributing to public safety; 71% of riders say app-based rides help reduce drunk driving by providing a reliable late-night option (Public First, 2024).

Platform work fosters economic inclusion. Research shows that app-based work can provide a vital pathway to earnings for individuals who may be excluded from the traditional workforce, such as caregivers who can only work a few hours at a time, students juggling classes, and those with chronic health conditions who are unable to meet rigid nine-to-five work requirements (Brown, 2024; Aucejo et al., 2024). In this sense, flexibility is not only an individual asset, it is part of the broader infrastructure that supports labor market participation and stronger communities.

4

Benefits That Fit Flexible Work



The high value of flexibility is driving the emergence of new policy frameworks that combine autonomy with benefits.

Because the economic value of flexibility is so significant, policymakers in several jurisdictions are exploring ways to provide benefits to workers while preserving this value. The data suggest this is a logical approach, as the platform workforce is not a monolith. Research from MIT economist Jonathan Gruber (2022) found that the workforce is highly diverse: 40% of platform workers hold a full-time job and 75% work on multiple platforms. This diversity makes a traditional, employer-centric benefits package, tied to a single job with fixed hours, a poor fit for many.

In response, models are emerging that marry the flexibility workers demand with a modern, portable safety net. Key design features of such a system include **portability** (benefits are tied to the worker, not a single employer, and can be earned across multiple platforms in the same work period), **flexibility** (workers can choose how they allocate their benefits - for example, toward retirement savings, health coverage, or paid time off), and **proportionality** (benefits scale with a worker's earnings across all platforms, reflecting the patchwork nature of many modern careers).

One example is a landmark agreement in Massachusetts, which established a framework under which drivers remain independent while gaining access to a cash stipend for health insurance, a guaranteed minimum earnings floor, and paid sick leave (West, 2025). This illustrates a path toward balancing workers' priorities for flexibility with access to protections.

WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS AND THE GAPS THAT REMAIN

Existing research strongly shows what workers do and how much they value it, but less so *why*.

What the literature reveals is that the demand for flexibility is driven by two primary motivations: a proactive desire for autonomy and a reactive need for adaptability. However, the value of flexibility also comes with a clear trade-off: earnings are less stable than in traditional employment.

The first is a proactive choice for greater economic self-determination. For many, this work represents a conscious move away from the stressors of traditional employment - rigid schedules, long commutes, and limited control, toward a greater sense of control that is linked to higher life satisfaction.

The second is a reactive need for a tool to navigate economic uncertainty and complex life circumstances. Workers use platform adaptability to manage financial shocks, balance caregiving and health needs, pursue education, and bridge employment gaps.

To move beyond the *what* and *how much* to the *why*, Uber and Ipsos conducted in-depth qualitative research with drivers and couriers. The next sections translate the literature into a more human narrative about the value of flexibility.



MEET THE FIVE ARCHETYPES HIGHLIGHTED IN THIS STUDY

We intentionally selected app-based workers to represent diverse life stages and circumstances to ensure our research captured a variety of experiences. Five “archetypes” were identified to frame the data and stories behind why flexibility matters to gig workers. These archetypes are not rigid categories. They are narrative portraits that help us move beyond simple statistics to understand the distinct ways flexible work fits into people’s lives.

Entrepreneur Strivers

These workers leverage flexible work to build their own ventures, whether it’s a business, a creative career, or a curated mix of gigs. Flexibility allows them to protect time for their projects and adjust their work as new opportunities arise.



“My long-term goal is to not have to work so many long hours to make money and basically to have my money work for me... I’m more so built to create my schedule to control things opposed to working a nine to five.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

Caregivers

This group uses flexible work to balance earning an income with their responsibilities for children, partners, or other family members. For them, flexibility is a tool that allows them to be present for both predictable routines and unpredictable needs.



“I value family, and I want them to be my number one priority in life... That really makes me feel that I’m doing the right thing in life by going out of my way and having the ability to be there for my family when someone needs me.”

–Caregiver, Courier

Rebuilders

This group turns to flexible work to find stability after a significant life disruption, such as a job loss, health issue, or divorce. For them, it is a critical tool to prevent further financial decline and manage the practical and emotional fallout of their situation.



“I got into this when my son lost his job, and I can’t work in the traditional sense, because of my chronic illnesses. We really needed the income to supplement, to cover rent and other expenses.”

–Rebuilder, Courier

Student Aspirers

This archetype includes workers who are actively pursuing education or training. Flexible work is key to their success, allowing them to adapt their work schedules around classes, exams, and other academic commitments without sacrificing necessary income.



“It has helped me tremendously, and I’m sure it helps other students tremendously to be able to have time to focus on studies and work not be the number one priority.”

–Student, Rideshare Driver

Pre-Retirees

These are workers in their later career stages who use flexible work to supplement their income as they approach retirement. This work allows them to pace their hours around their health and energy levels while staying engaged and earning.



“I work the hours that let me sleep, take care of myself, and still be there for my wife. That’s not possible in a regular job anymore.”

–Pre-Retiree, Rideshare Driver

3.



Key Insights

HOW DRIVERS USE FLEXIBILITY TO BUILD, BALANCE, AND NAVIGATE THEIR LIVES

What flexibility is in practice: A practical tool, not a bonus

Workers describe flexibility as the way work adapts around caregiving, school, health, rebuilding, and later-career pacing. For them, it's not a nice-to-have - without it, work would compete with the responsibilities that shape their days instead of fitting around them.

"It's nice to feel in control of your work. It makes me feel like a whole person, instead of just a cog in a machine." –Caregiver, Rideshare Driver

"I feel like I have so much control over my life in this profession... it feels like I am the admin of my work life." –Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

Real-time control: The ability to start, stop, and pause when life calls

Across situations, workers make quick decisions to log on, log off, or hold back when family, health, or school needs spike. They value being able to do this without asking permission or risking penalties.

"If my mom's not feeling well, I stop. That's the rule." –Caregiver, Rideshare Driver

A real trade-off: The anxiety of unpredictable income

Workers are candid about the anxiety that comes with variable income - a bad week can mean real pressure on household bills, relationships, and peace of mind. They strive to navigate this pressure through practical strategies, such as setting weekly targets, working across multiple platforms, and scaling hours up when bills come due.

"The income can fluctuate where I may make a decent amount one week, then not the next. I'll stress myself out by trying to work more hours, but it doesn't always work out." –Rebuilder, Courier

"Enough, efficiently": Targets, boundaries, and stop-rules

Many workers have clear targets—rent, utilities, tuition—and stop when they hit them. They balance earnings with the costs of fatigue, stress, and time away, so they can keep going tomorrow.

"If I go too hard, I'm down for two days after."
–Pre-retiree, Courier

"My goal... is to make enough money for my bills... [and] return home safely to my family."
–Rebuilder, Rideshare Driver

"I might do 20 hours one week and 10 the next... I flex it based on how school is going."
–Student Aspirer, Courier



Mixing apps and work types: Enhancing choice and reducing idle time

Many workers “mix and match” platforms to keep choices open and reduce idle time. Workers also switch between rideshare and delivery to balance pay, stress, safety, and social interaction.

“I use Uber Eats when I don’t want to go far... turn on the Roadie app right up the street...”

–Pre-retiree, Courier

“I’m always using multiple apps... I know which ones have better offers in the morning...”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Courier

“I usually will do delivery in the mornings... then switch over to rides.”

–Rebuilder, Courier and Rideshare Driver

Routines and blocks: Flexibility with structure

Workers rarely work “whenever.” They build repeatable windows—blocks that fit around school pickups, appointments, study time, health, or energy. The blocks can shift each week, but the logic stays consistent.

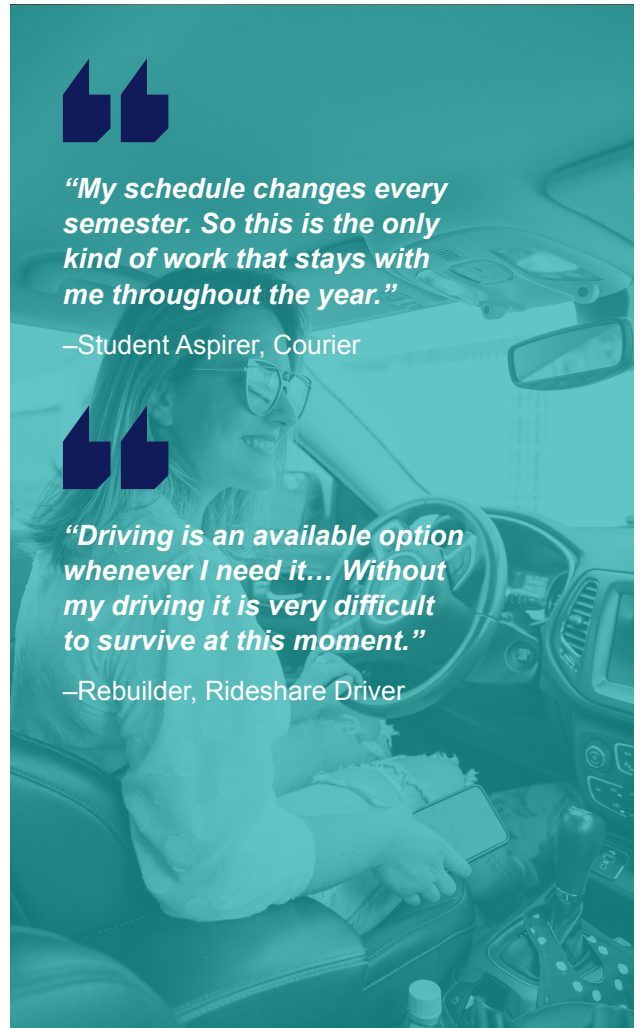
They also describe boundaries around distance, stress, and intensity, to make work fit into a life that already has non-negotiables.

“I plan my week in blocks... The middle of the day is for my projects.” –Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

Income when it’s needed: Short bursts to solve near-term problems

Workers turn up hours to cover a bill, a gap between paychecks, or a sudden cost, then turn them down when the pressure eases. Keeping the option available matters even when they are not actively working.

“If I make \$90 a day, that’s good... I’m not trying to go all day.” –Caregiver, Rideshare Driver





FIXED SHIFTS THAT REMOVE CONTROL

Workers were presented with a potential scenario offering benefits such as health coverage, paid time off, and minimum earnings guarantee in exchange for fixed hours (set hours on set days). Across all archetypes, they pushed back against this trade-off and resisted giving up real-time control, even with guarantees. They want to keep the core mechanics: open the app, start or stop, and face no penalties.

“Not for me... it takes away the control or flexibility when it comes to me not being able to go to certain places during a certain time period or having to accept every single trip. I feel like that takes away from the gig idea, and it feels more like not a nine to five.” –Student Aspirer, Rideshare Driver

“Horrible. Hate it...I don’t want that rigid structured lifestyle. I like the freedom and flexibility that I have now with the current app. It would just interfere with my nieces. It would interfere with my school. It would just, like, be bad all around for me.”
–Caregiver, Courier

“I think that would just kill the entire motive of why I do this. It kills the entire idea of being in total control.” –Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

“If something happened to where I had to work, let’s just say between the hours of 8 a.m.–12 p.m., I am not doing it. I would have to find something else that is unstructured so I can make it work with everything else going on in my life.”
–Rebuilder, Courier

“I press a button and I can just start and stop whenever I want, depending on what I need to do that day or even how I’m feeling. I need to be able to do that.” –Pre-retiree, Rideshare Driver

What ties these insights together: A workable bridge

Drivers use flexibility to stay connected to income while life shifts. They set targets, build routines, solve short-term problems, and mix tools to make it all work—without giving up control over when and how they work.

They are open to protections that add security without changing the basic mechanics of flexibility. They repeatedly returned to approaches that travel with the worker and scale with how people actually engage:

- **Portability:** follows the individual across work arrangements
- **Proportionality:** accrues based on earnings/engagement (without minimum shifts)
- **Flexibility in use:** supports different needs without reducing real-time choice

THE VALUE OF FLEXIBILITY ACROSS ARCHETYPES

Our flexibility framework describes the net value created when workers have both **schedule flexibility** (control over when they work) and **access flexibility** (the ability to start and stop earning with low friction). These findings capture how flexibility shows up for each of the five archetypes.

	1 Direct economic compensation: How flexibility translates into usable earning capacity.	2 Enhanced stability and well-being: How flexibility supports personal sustainability.	3 A ripple effect of social value: Benefits that extend beyond the individual worker.	4 Benefits that fit flexible work: Support aligned to flexible, variable participation.
Entrepreneur Strivers	Compress earnings into planned sessions to fund bills and venture costs while protecting time to build what comes next.	Reduce overload by allowing earning to move around project work, deadlines, and time-sensitive opportunities.	Helps sustain self-directed pathways that can lead to new services, businesses, or independent careers.	Support that remains usable across project cycles, when time and income shift between building phases and earning phases.
Caregivers	Earn around school logistics, appointments, and caregiving coordination while remaining available for care needs.	Protect emotional bandwidth by pausing work when care intensity spikes and returning when it stabilizes.	Supports household functioning by enabling both caregiving presence and ongoing financial contribution.	Support that can be used quickly when caregiving intensity spikes, including short, unexpected gaps in availability.
Rebuilders	Generate income quickly after a setback to cover urgent bills and restart cash flow.	Immediate access shortens the time with no earnings and restores a sense of control over next steps.	Supports economic inclusion during recovery periods when sustained traditional work can be difficult to maintain.	Short-term stabilization support that can be accessed during setbacks (urgent bill, disruption) creates an immediate gap.
Student Aspirers	Earn around classes and exams, scaling hours up or down with course load across weeks and terms.	Protect study capacity during high-demand academic periods, supporting persistence without burnout.	Supports education completion and longer-run mobility pathways that can benefit families and communities.	Support that remains usable when hours dip during exams and heavy coursework, then rise again during lighter periods, breaks.
Pre-Retirees	Supplement income at a self-paced level aligned with preferred routes, times, and comfort	Preserve stamina and peace of mind by pacing work around health, energy, and appointments.	Keeps older adults engaged and supports continuity of local services and community connection.	Light-touch protections that support safe participation as stamina, health needs, and preferred driving conditions vary.

4.



Archetype Deep Dive

ENTREPRENEUR STRIVERS



Lived Context

Entrepreneur Strivers use flexible work to build something of their own, such as a business, creative pursuit, or independent career path. Many balance app-based work with other commitments, including freelance projects, teaching, and in many cases a traditional full-time or part-time job, while they build toward longer-term goals. They often describe their week as a balance between earning time and building their venture, using flexible work to help shape that balance.

Key Motivators for Flexible Work

Protect time for building and respond to opportunities

Entrepreneur Strivers value flexibility because it helps them carve out dedicated time for their own work. They also want the ability to say yes when an opportunity arises, without having to renegotiate a fixed schedule.

“I like the freedom this work gives me, so I can spend time developing my own business. I’m not trying to climb someone else’s ladder.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

Maintain baseline income while investing in what comes next

Flexible work helps cover bills and can help fund venture-related costs such as materials and time needed to develop their work, without giving up the time and energy required to build.

“I want a paycheck. But I also need time to do my thing. This lets me do that without losing income.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Courier



Schedule Flexibility

Entrepreneur Strivers plan their weeks in blocks, separating predictable earning windows from protected building time. They choose work windows that fit around their own projects or traditional job, often keeping evenings and weekends open.

“I’ll do 6-9 in the evening and some weekends. The middle of the day is for my 9-5 job.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver



Access Flexibility

Entrepreneur Strivers rely on the ability to start earning the moment a window opens, and to stop just as quickly when their main work needs to take priority. Many also juggle multiple platforms at once for frictionless access to earning, comparing offers across apps and switching when one slows down, to make the most of the limited hours they have to earn.

“I’ll check the map. Wherever it’s busy, that’s the app I open. Uber one hour, DoorDash or Instacart the next, depending where the money is.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Courier



Earnings Strategy

Entrepreneur Strivers often compress earning into fewer hours to protect building time. Common approaches include targeting peak demand windows, using demand cues such as heatmaps or event schedules, setting daily targets, and declining low-return trips.

“\$180 is my daily goal. If I hit it early, then I can stop and focus on what I want to.”

–Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

CAREGIVERS



Lived Context

Caregivers support children, aging parents, partners with health needs, or other relatives who rely on them. Care needs often shape the day and can change without warning, creating fragmented windows for paid work and a need to stay reachable. For Caregivers, work that can bend around daily care tasks, disruptions, and emotional support needs can reduce how often caregivers face a direct trade-off between earning income and being present for the people who rely on them.

Key Motivators for Flexible Work

Staying on call for care

Caregivers often need to remain reachable during the day because care needs can escalate quickly. Flexible work allows them to keep earning while still staying available to respond when they are needed.

“I have a kid that has anxiety issues. I need to be available at certain times... I can get him from school, I can take him to appointments and just be around.” –Caregiver, Rideshare Driver

Avoiding rigid commitments they cannot always guarantee

Caregiving can make fixed shifts and strict attendance difficult to sustain, especially when responsibilities change unexpectedly. Flexible work offers a way to contribute income without promising availability that may not be realistic week to week.

“I couldn’t work a regular job and take care of them like that... So I started doing deliveries so I could stop when I needed to and go help them.” –Caregiver, Courier



Schedule Flexibility

Caregivers plan work around caregiving, not the other way around. They often think in blocks and set hard stop times tied to responsibilities like pickups and appointments. Many also limit distance, staying close enough to quickly respond if caregiving needs arise.

“I don’t work past 2pm because I don’t want to be late picking my daughter up from school or be stressed out when I get there. She notices. I want her to feel like she’s the priority.”

–Caregiver, Rideshare Driver



Access Flexibility

Caregivers emphasize the ability to log off immediately and return later to attend to responsibilities that often shift quickly, such as a school call, a care need, or a medical issue.

“If the school calls, I’m off the road in a minute. That’s the whole point of this work. I can leave right away.” –Caregiver, Courier



Earnings Strategy

Caregivers keep a target in mind that covers essentials and then try to hit it in the hours they can give. They may also avoid long trips or high-stress options if it risks being too physically or emotionally depleted to handle caregiving responsibilities.

REBUILDERS



Lived Context

Rebuilders use flexible work to regain stability after a disruption such as job loss, a health crisis, divorce, a move, or another major life change. Former routines or income sources no longer fit, and rebuilding often brings unpredictable demands on time, energy, and money. Flexible work offers a way to stay connected to income while rebuilding without needing to commit to a schedule they may not be able to sustain.



“I was so limited because of my migraines. And it’s a cycle of desperation, depression, sickness and lack of basic things. So, finding delivery apps and being able to get above water really allowed me to take better care of myself, to keep food in the house, and be able to take time off when I need it for my health.” –Rebuilder, Courier

Key Motivators for Flexible Work

Preventing further slide when pressure spikes

Rebuilders are often driven by urgency rather than career ambition. When a specific bill is due or an unexpected cost hits, flexible work can function as a short-run tool to stabilize essentials and avoid a deeper setback.

“Lately my reason for driving is a specific bill that needs to get paid, like rent, my car payment, and my internet service.”
–Rebuilder, Rideshare Driver

Keeping a reliable income option during an unstable period

Rebuilders often value an income option that can be used when needed, especially when rebuilding creates uneven capacity or unpredictable demands at home. Flexible work can help them maintain some financial continuity while they work through recovery, transitions, or instability.

“Driving is an available option whenever I need it, I have relied on it to help balance income.” –Rebuilder, Rideshare Driver



Schedule Flexibility

Rebuilders fit work around rebuilding demands and personal limits rather than trying to optimize the best hours. They often work in short, repeating blocks or decide day by day based on factors like fatigue, income needs, and what is happening at home.

“If I wake up stiff or just mentally off... I won’t work that day because I know I’ll be out there making bad decisions, or I’ll be too tired to keep up the rest of the day.” –Rebuilder, Courier



Access Flexibility

Rebuilders rely on the ability to start and stop work quickly as new shocks occur, such as a contract ending, a medical procedure, or a threatened shutoff notice. Being able to ramp up quickly and earn the same day can help them respond to urgent needs.

“My internet from Xfinity was getting turned off. I turned on the Uber Eats app and made that money within that day. When I got home, I processed the order and the internet came the next day. That helped tremendously.” –Rebuilder, Courier



Earnings Strategy

Rebuilders define success as earning enough to cover essentials and avoid crises, while still being able to show up tomorrow. Many set modest targets that reflect their capacity and stop when pushing further would create a recovery cost.

“My goal for each day is to make at least \$50... My other goal is to make enough money for my bills... The other ultimate goal is to return home safely for my family.” –Rebuilder, Rideshare Driver

STUDENT ASPIRERS



Lived Context

Student Aspirers pursue education or training while working substantial hours, treating learning as a priority. They rely on flexible, app-based work to maintain income without disrupting their studies, which helps them stay enrolled, keep earning, and continue progressing toward better opportunities. Many follow nontraditional pathways such as night classes, online programs, certifications, or community college tracks that stretch over multiple years as they balance work and other responsibilities.

Key Motivators for Flexible Work

Staying enrolled without losing income

Student Aspirers often cannot afford to stop working, even when they return to school or add training. Flexible work is valued because it allows them to remain financially active while fitting around class schedules and studies.

“I can’t afford to quit working. I need something that helps me pay and go to my classes at night.”

–Student Aspirer, Rideshare Driver

Adjusting work when coursework intensity changes

Student Aspirers value being able to reduce hours during heavier periods like midterms, finals, or major assignments, then increase hours again when coursework is lighter or bills come due. This flexibility helps them maintain a steady balance between education and earnings instead of having to choose one over the other.

“I picked up another course to help me graduate faster, so I cut back a few hours on Uber Eats. I don’t have to worry about losing my job. I just didn’t turn the app on.”

–Student Aspirer, Courier



Schedule Flexibility

Student Aspirers build their app-based work schedules around class times and study blocks, often driving or couriering on weekends or on lighter weekdays. Their availability can change every term and sometimes week to week, so they rely on flexible windows, not fixed shifts.

“On days I don’t have school, I might drive from 5:30pm to 10:30pm after a full day of work. It just depends on what’s happening with classes or exams.” –Student Aspirer, Rideshare Driver



Access Flexibility

Control over when to log in and out is central, especially when an exam is coming up, a paper is due, or they are too tired to do both work and school well. Some take several days or a full week away from the apps to focus on school, confident they can return once the crunch passes.

“If I need to really buckle down and get schoolwork done, I just don’t turn the app on. The flexibility you get from these apps makes it possible for me to go to school.” –Student Aspirer, Courier



Earnings Strategy

Student Aspirers focus on earning enough to meet essentials like rent, groceries, gas, and especially tuition. They favor efficient periods that fit around their other commitments, adjusting weekly hours based on course load and their own capacity.

“I might do 20 hours one week and 10 the next, depending on what assignments I have due. I just kind of flex it based on how school is going.”

–Student Aspirer, Courier

PRE-RETIREES



Lived Context

Pre-retirees are in the later stages of their working lives, with retirement on the horizon. Many pair part-time work with app-based earnings to cover everyday costs, pay down debt, or fund goals like travel, while staying active and financially steady without overtaxing their bodies or crowding out family and community life.

“I work the hours that let me sleep, take care of myself, and still be there for my wife. That’s not possible in a regular job anymore.”

–Pre-Retiree, Rideshare Driver

Key Motivators for Flexible Work

Practical, steady goals rather than replacing a full-time salary

Pre-retirees often supplement income to cover recurring bills, build a buffer for unexpected costs, and save for meaningful goals like trips or home projects. They want work that supports these aims without exhausting them or pulling them back into rigid schedule

“Driving allowed me to save \$3,000 for a trip to Italy for myself and my wife. We went last year, and we’re already saving again to figure out our next trip.”

–Pre-retiree, Rideshare Driver

Staying engaged and connected to the community

Many value work that keeps them socially engaged and feeling “in the mix” rather than sidelined. The interpersonal side of rideshare and delivery can be part of what makes the work feel meaningful at this life stage.

“I enjoy talking with different people. It’s a way to stay social. It’s a meaningful job. I get a lot out of it.” –Pre-retiree, Rideshare Driver



Schedule Flexibility

Pre-retirees often build work around how they feel and what the week requires, favoring early mornings or mid-day hours when roads are calmer. They tend to avoid late nights, congested downtowns, and high-stress zones, prioritizing comfort and well-being and choosing routines they can sustain over time.

“Dinner is the most profitable time in my area, but I can’t stand the traffic or crowds, so I skip it. I work mornings or weekend afternoons instead.”

–Pre-retiree, Courier



Access Flexibility

Health needs and daily demands can vary at this stage in life. Many manage their own medical issues, support a spouse with health challenges, or help with grandchildren, and real-time control over logging on and off lets them stop early if needed. This control helps them protect the routines and activities that are important to them.

“If my wife has a bad day or I’m feeling tired, I just stop. No one’s penalizing me. That’s a big deal at this stage in life.” –Pre-retiree, Rideshare Driver



Earnings Strategy

Pre-retirees usually aim to earn a steady, reasonable amount of earnings that covers their needs without adding stress. They learn which zones and hours offer a reliable return, often favoring familiar suburban areas, focusing on routines that feel sustainable over months and years.

“I’ll drive longer, but not if it’s downtown where there’s a lot of traffic. I’m sticking to the suburbs and I can still make good money.”

–Pre-retiree, Rideshare Driver

5.



Conclusion

CONCLUSION

Across the five archetypes, app-based workers use flexibility to stay connected to earning while navigating different life contexts - caregiving, rebuilding, studying, building ventures, and later-career pacing. These archetypes aren't permanent identities. Workers often move between them over time: someone who joined platform work as a Rebuilder after job loss may become a Student Aspirer if they enroll in classes, or an Entrepreneur Striver as they build toward their own venture. Flexibility is what makes these transitions possible.

Workers want greater security, but not at the cost of the real-time control that makes this work viable. The considerations below, drawn directly from what workers described, offer design questions policymakers can use to assess whether proposed protections align with the lived realities of flexible work.

A practical way to apply these considerations is to stress-test proposals against the five archetypes by asking whether they would still work if someone's availability changes week to week or day to day.

1

Consider how real-time control is maintained in the design

Workers described the ability to start, stop, and adjust plans quickly as essential to making flexible work viable. This real-time control enables participation when life is unpredictable. Policies that introduce rigid scheduling assumptions may narrow access for workers who have limited flexibility in other parts of their lives.



"The level of control makes a big difference. I can stay focused on what I'm building and still make money. If I had to be somewhere 9-5, I'd have to put all of this on hold."

—Entrepreneur Striver, Rideshare Driver

2

Consider how policies apply to variable engagement and short-burst work

Workers described fluctuating hours, scaling up temporarily when bills spike and scaling down when responsibilities intensify. A full-time, continuous, uniform model does not reflect how many described using flexible work.

3

Consider how protections can align with flexibility without adding rigidity

Workers were not rejecting protections. They were rejecting protections that feel like a trade where benefits require giving up autonomy. When describing protections they were open to, they focused on designs that add security without requiring fixed shifts or changing the basic mechanics of flexibility.



6.

Appendix

CASE STUDY

AN ENTREPRENEUR STRIVER'S STORY: FUELING THE DREAM



Context

Ani is a working artist building a career in music. She writes, performs, and creates content, and supports herself with rideshare and delivery work across several apps, including Uber, Lyft, Uber Eats, DoorDash, and Shipt.

She treats flexible work as a strategic foundation. Her weeks are a balance of discipline and creative flow. She plans her shifts, blocks time for earning, and protects time for writing, rehearsing, and content creation.



Flexibility in Action

Ani went into strategy mode. At the beginning of the week, she stacked delivery shifts across multiple apps and added high-yield rideshare blocks at times she knew would be busiest, such as commuter periods, post-lunch, and dinner. She focused on zones where trips tended to be frequent and efficient, and she skipped lower-paying requests that were unlikely to move her toward her rent goal. At the same time, she preserved her evenings for rehearsals and content prep. On the day of the shoot, she did not work at all. By then she had already met her target.



"I shifted my schedule around and made sure to work at the best times and places to make as much as I could. Then, I turn off and can just focus on my other work."



The Problem

As the end of the month approached, Ani needed to earn enough to cover rent. At the same time, she had a chance to promote her music with a content shoot scheduled that week. She needed to bring in a significant amount of money quickly, but if she spent too many hours driving and delivering, she risked showing up drained and underprepared for the shoot.



Implications

Because flexible work allowed Ani to stack high-value hours, choose which gigs to accept, and step away on the day she needed to perform, she was able to cover her rent without sacrificing the quality of her creative work. In a traditional job, she might have had to cancel the shoot, miss her rent deadline, or show up tired and underprepared. Flexible work gave her a way to stay on track with both her finances and her future.

CASE STUDY

A CAREGIVER'S STORY: THE BALANCING ACT



Context

Melissa lives with her partner and two school-age children. Her youngest son has ongoing mental health challenges, so mornings and evenings at home can be intense. Her partner works full time in a traditional nine to five job, and Melissa is the primary parent who handles school routines, appointments, and most of the day-to-day care.

She drives with Uber and Lyft, and builds her schedule around her family. Most of her work happens in late mornings after school drop-off and sometimes in the evening once dinner and homework are done. She has held other jobs before, but none gave her the flexibility she needed to consistently be there for her son.



“I’ve had jobs before where I was always asking someone if I can leave early or shift things. With Uber, I don’t have to ask. I just plan around what my family needs from me. Like, I can go grocery shopping and come home and cook dinner without being stressed out.”



The Problem

Over the past two weeks, Melissa and her husband noticed that their son was struggling more than usual. There were emotional outbursts, calls from school, and misbehavior at home. These were not medical emergencies, but they required more of her attention, more patience in the mornings, more consistency in the afternoons, and more mental space to be present in the evenings.

At the same time, the family budget was under pressure from rising grocery prices, doctor visits, and other everyday costs. Melissa felt she needed to be home more, but did not feel she could afford to work significantly fewer hours.



Flexibility in Action

To make space for her son without losing income, Melissa restructured her work into two focused blocks. She moved more of her driving into school hours during the day and shifted her evening driving later, going out only after both children were in bed. That way, she could keep her usual earnings while being fully present with her son during the times he needed her most. She also chose routes and times that avoided stressful zones. Keeping her work experiences calmer meant she had more emotional energy left for parenting and her husband.



“Instead of heading out after dinner, waiting a couple more hours until the kids went to bed made all the difference. I needed to be there for my family and especially my son, and this way I could do that.”



Implications

Because she had control over when and where she worked, Melissa was able to adjust her schedule around her son’s needs without losing income. She stayed present for the hard mornings and evenings, stayed calmer at home, and still brought in enough money to help keep the household on track. In her case, flexible work is not just a paycheck. It is the structure that lets her parent well and remain part of the workforce in a way that works for everyone at home.

CASE STUDY

A REBUILDER'S STORY: A BRIDGE THROUGH CRISIS



Context

Ted is a single dad, who is raising elementary school-age kids. His weekdays are built around school drop-offs and pick-ups, parenting, and time at home. Ted also lives with chronic back problems and arthritis in his knee. When his back locks up or his knee flares, he may be out for days.

He has worked conventional jobs before, but he knows that regular nine to five roles do not fit well with his recurring pain and caregiving needs. App-based delivery work, mostly Uber Eats and DoorDash, gives him a kind of work that can bend around his health, parenting duties, and his older vehicle, which would not qualify for rideshare driving.



“With my back, it will be a problem with a regular nine to five that would be a lot of strain on the body. I would be constantly calling off or having to bring in paperwork saying that I was in the hospital or at the doctor. Eventually, they’re going to tell me they don’t need me.”



The Problem

In a month where money was tight, a bill slipped and his household internet service was shut off. In Ted’s home, the internet is not optional. His kids use it for school, and all of their computers and devices are connected. When the provider turned off service and asked for more than he could pay up front, he needed a way to fix it quickly without skipping school pickups or pushing his body past its limits. He did not have savings to cover the gap. He did not have a boss he could ask for extra hours. And he could not pick up a rigid shift that would mean being on his feet all day or missing family responsibilities.



Flexibility in Action

Most weeks, Ted drives after school drop-off in the morning and finishes by early afternoon so he can rest before pickup. Evenings are for homework, family, and staying off his feet. When the internet was shut off, he adjusted his plan. He drove as much as he could within his normal school-day window, then went back out after putting his kids to bed until he made enough money to cover the bill. Because he can get payouts quickly, he was able to pay the provider and have service restored the next day.



“If I know an expense is coming up and money will be tight, I’ll work longer those few days. Just enough to cover what I know is coming.”

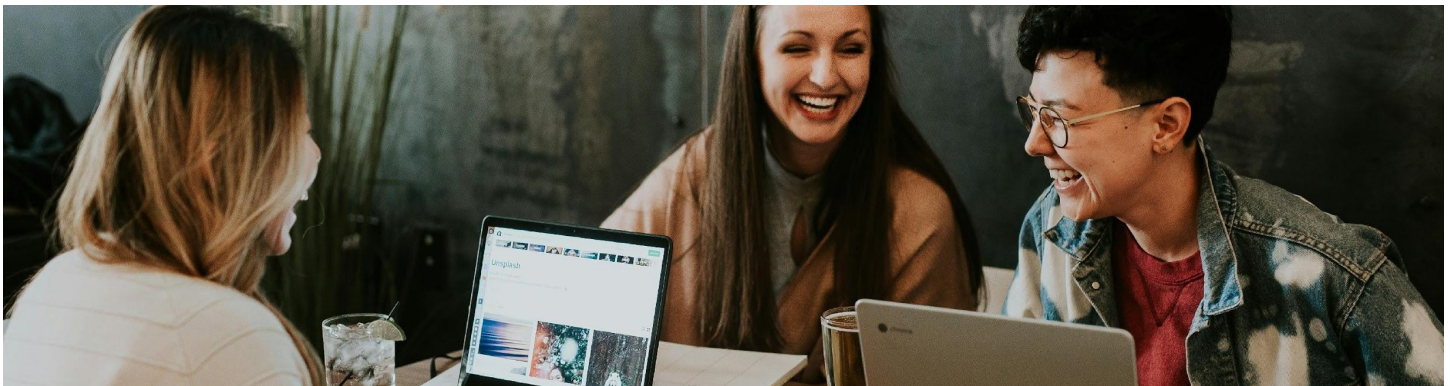


Implications

Because he had control over when and how much he worked, Ted was able to scale up his hours for a few days, cover the unexpected bill, and get back to his normal rhythm without pushing his body past its limits or missing time with his kids. In a traditional job, he would have had to choose between his health and his household responsibilities. Flexible work gives him a way to absorb a short-term crisis while managing chronic pain and caregiving duties that regular nine-to-five roles cannot accommodate.

CASE STUDY

A STUDENT ASPIRER'S STORY: EARNING AND LEARNING



Context

Kirk is in his late twenties and lives with his girlfriend. He works full time in a warehouse and takes evening classes at a local community college to earn an associate degree in business. His long-term goal is to move into accounting, and he is working toward that credential one or two courses at a time. He cannot afford to stop working. Rent, gas, food, and tuition all need to be covered, and his warehouse income alone is not always enough, especially when class fees or other bills are due at the same time. To close the gap, he delivers with Uber Eats between work and school.



“I’m working full time, doing Uber Eats, and going to school. It’s a lot. But I know I have to keep moving forward, even if it’s going to take me a little longer to get my degree.”



The Problem

Mid-semester, an unexpected \$800 tuition payment came due. Kirk needed to pay it to stay enrolled and continue going to class. At the same time, his schedule was already full, with a day job and classes three nights a week. He needed to come up with the money quickly in a way that did not require missing class, falling behind at school, or underperforming at work.



Flexibility in Action

Kirk built a short-term plan. He delivered on two week nights after work when he did not have class, added an extra shift on Saturday, and worked a few hours on Sunday. The plan left less time for studying in the short run, but he knew that over two weeks he could earn what he needed. He focused on high-return zones and times, such as dinner and late-night food delivery near campus, and avoided high-traffic areas and long-haul orders that would eat up time. By choosing efficient trips and stacking short bursts of work, he earned enough in those two weeks to pay the tuition bill.



Implications

Because flexible work was available, Kirk was able to cover his tuition, stay in his classes, and keep his full-time job intact. He did not have to ask for time off, and he did not have to drop a course that would delay graduation. Without this kind of work, his choices would have been much harder, either dropping the class and slowing his progress or risking his standing at his full-time job. Flexible work gave him a way to stay on track in both places.


CASE STUDY

A PRE-RETIREE'S STORY: A NEW RHYTHM



Context

Connie is 57 and lives in a suburban area. She juggles several side gigs in home organization and retail, and drives rideshare for about 15-20 hours per week. She recently took on debt to cover dental expenses and is also trying to save enough to visit her family in Australia. She prefers working mornings, usually from 6am - 11am. She avoids downtown traffic and long-haul trips, choosing areas where demand is steady and she can complete multiple short rides.

 ***"I don't do nights and I don't go downtown. I'm not going to work in places I don't feel safe just to make extra money."***

The Problem

Connie wanted to pay down her medical debt without postponing her plan to travel to Australia. To do that, she needed to earn more than she brings in during a typical week. She estimated she needs to increase her driving to about 25-30 hours a week, but knows that working substantially more than that would be physically taxing. Any solution has to fit within the hours she is willing to work, and around her energy and health.

Flexibility in Action

Connie built a weekly plan that respected her limits. She scheduled three morning rideshare shifts during the week and one longer block on Saturday. That schedule brought her close to 25 hours, with the option to add a little more time on weekdays if she felt up to it. She used the morning window to stack short airport and work-bound rides, staying in familiar zones to avoid stress and unnecessary driving. On Saturdays, she picked up longer trips when traffic was lighter and competition from other drivers was lower. She never worked past her physical limit and skipped driving on days when her body needed rest.

Implications

Because she could decide when and how much to work, Connie was able to increase her hours just enough to pay down debt and build her travel savings, without pushing herself to the point of pain or burnout. She maintained a steady income while structuring work around her energy and health. In a more rigid job, Connie would likely have had to choose between protecting her health and meeting her financial targets. Flexible work lets her do both, in a way that fits this stage of her life.

METHODOLOGY

Sponsor

This qualitative study was commissioned by Uber. Ipsos designed and executed the research and is responsible for the analysis and conclusions.

Research Approach

Ipsos conducted primary qualitative research with 24 people who work through app-based platforms. These platforms included Uber, Lyft, Uber Eats, DoorDash, Instacart, and similar services. **All participants:**

PHASE 1: Online bulletin boards

All 24 participants took part in a moderated online discussion over several days. They answered questions about their background, motivations, and experiences with flexible work. They also discussed how they manage time when they are available on the app but do not have active trips or tasks. This phase surfaced early themes that cut across participants. It provided an initial sense of potential archetypes and helped identify who to invite for follow-up interviews and ethnographies.

PHASE 2: Virtual one-on-one interviews

8 participants were selected for in-depth video interviews. These 60-minute conversations allowed for deeper exploration of key themes. These themes included caregiving responsibilities, job loss and recovery, education, health, entrepreneurship, and how flexibility supported or complicated these experiences. The interviews also allowed the research team to probe how people thought about trade-offs, plans for the future, and policy ideas.

PHASE 3: In-person ethnographies and ride-alongs

12 participants were visited in person. Researchers rode along with them while they worked, observed how they interacted with apps and customers, and conducted contextual interviews in their cars, homes, or neighborhoods. This phase grounded the findings in real-world behavior. It showed when and where people chose to work, how they moved through their cities, how they handled idle time between trips, and what their days actually looked and felt like.

Recruit Sample



Rideshare Driver and/or courier with Uber. Most also used other apps.



Cited flexibility as a key motivation for working on these platforms.



Represented a variety of life stages and responsibilities, such as caregiving, studying, pre-retirement



Note: The qualitative sample was not designed to be statistically representative of all app-based workers. The research describes patterns and experiences in depth. It does not estimate how common any archetype is in the overall population. The findings should therefore be read as analytical and illustrative, not as statistical measurement.

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Why Flexibility Matters

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