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Challenges and Opportunities in Talent Management for Gig workers in Ethiopia: An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Selected Organizations in Addis Ababa

Research Study

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I, Noah Hailemelekot, hereby declare that this thesis is entirely original and has not been submitted, in full or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification at this or any other institution.

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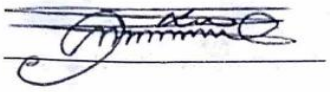
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ABSTRACT

The gig economy has changed the way labor markets work and the challenges in Human Resources Management (HRM) in Sub-Saharan Africa are still not fully understood. With the focus on five critical HRM domains: recruitment and selection, worker engagement, skill development, performance management and retention, this study examined the opportunities and challenges in management of gig workers in Ethiopia. Semi-structured interviews with 22 participants, comprised of 16 gig workers and 6 HR/manager surveyors in three organisations in Addis Ababa were conducted in an exploratory multiple case study approach (Yin, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006) manual thematic coding methodology was used to analyze the data. The flexibility to stability paradox, skill investment gap of institutions, opacity in evaluation and the status of performance systems, structural barriers to talent acquisition and the difficulty in reducing employee turnover due to income instability were found as the main five themes of the study The fact that gig Economy in Ethiopia is an economic response to limited formal employment opportunities rather than a lifestyle choice is the cross-cutting result discovered by this study. This contextual qualifier has important implications for HRM theory and practice. This paper contributes to performance management research by putting out the notion of opacity of assessment and provides organizations and policymakers with evidence-based recommendations. The results are contextually relevant and can provide a platform for further quantitative and long-term research of gig talent management in developing countries.

Keywords: *gig economy, talent management, Ethiopia, HRM, exploratory case study, evaluation opacity, emerging economy*

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ACRONYMS

AI – Artificial Intelligence

ETP – Educational Technology Platform

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

GTM – Global Talent Management

HRC – Human Resource Consultancy

HRM – Human Resource Management

ICT – Information and Communication Technology

USD – United States Dollar

ILO – International Labour Organization

L&D – Learning and Development

MBA – Master of Business Administration

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

SDT – Self-Determination Theory

TM – Talent Management

TSP – Technology and Skills Platform

Key Terms and Definitions

The following key terms are used throughout this study with the definitions provided below:

Gig Economy: A labour market characterised by flexible, short-term, or freelance work arrangements mediated by digital platforms, in which workers provide services to multiple clients on a project or task basis, typically without long-term contractual obligations or traditional employee benefits.

Talent Management (TM): A strategic HRM process focused on attracting, developing, engaging, and retaining individuals with the skills and potential needed to meet organisational objectives (Boocock et al., 2020).

Gig Worker: An individual who performs flexible, short-term, or freelance work through digital or online platforms, or through direct organisational engagement, often without long-term contractual obligations.

Platform Work: Employment facilitated through digital systems or applications that connect clients with independent workers for project- or task-based services.

Algorithmic Management: The use of automated digital systems or AI algorithms to assign tasks, monitor performance, and evaluate workers in platform-based environments (Duggan et al., 2020).

Worker Engagement: The psychological and professional involvement of individuals in their work, encompassing motivation, commitment, and the quality of the worker-organisation relationship.

Human Capital Theory: is an economic theory arguing that workers skills, knowledge, and competences reflect productive assets in which investment provides returns for both people and organisations (Becker, 1964).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT): A motivational theory claiming that human conduct is motivated by three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Evaluation Opacity: conceptualised in this study it is the absence of transparent standards via which client assessments are converted into opportunity distribution choices, reinforced by the excessive weight carried by single negative assessments.

Currency-Stratified Gig Labour Market: A labour market structure, documented in this study, in which access to USD-paying global clients constitutes a qualitative divide within a national gig workforce, producing fundamentally different career trajectories and earnings ceilings for workers in each tier.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The way people work has changed in a dramatic manner over the last 20 years. Work is shifting away from a traditional full-time job into the gig economy, which is a world of flexible, project based jobs where people take on short-term contracts rather than stay at one job for a long time (McDonnell et al., 2018; Bateyo, 2025). Global connectivity, digital technologies, and the opneness of organizations to hire workers on short term projects are one of the reasons for this shift. Gig workers currently work in every department possible ranging from transportation and creative services to coding, tutoring, and consulting (**Wood et al. 2019)**. Organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) and the OECD (2020) say tens of millions of people worldwide now depend on gig work as their primary or additional incomes.

Upwork, Fiverr, and Uber, as well as companies that directly engage independent workers on a contract-based or project basis, have made it possible for workers to work on a flexible and on demand basis and provide flexible pay scale, for the flexibility that makes income diversification and new types of professional engagement possible. That means you have new opportunities to diversify income and work on your own terms. But there's a trade-off: if you don't have a steady job-winning salary, gig workers have a fluctuating income, get less access to benefits and development programs, and no clear structure in HR support (Aslam et al., 2024; Aharouay et al., 2024). The gig economy is a double-edged sword: full of opportunities and risks but also vulnerability (Vallas & Schor 2020); and I think the way to manage talent in this new world, in a very different way from what's a typical HR playbook.

Talent management is the process of hiring, developing, engaging, and retaining people with skills and potential that will help organizations achieve strategic objectives (Boocock et al., 2020). This has always been linked with structured relationships at work. The 'war for talent' concept which dominated HR thought in business organizations since late 1990s (Michaels et al., 2001), assumed that individuals would spend several years in an organization and advance career wise within a single organization. This concept has already been greatly questioned

within the context of employment and in the era of digitalization (Collings and Mellahi, 2009; McDonnell et al., 2018). It is now held that talent management requires following skills wherever they may go; from traditional workplaces to freelancing sites (Meyers & van Woerkom 2014).

Talent management takes an extremely different turn in the case of the gig economy. Instead of focusing on building lasting ties, the organizations will have to find a way to recruit, develop, and retain people who care about their independence more than traditional loyalty. Clearly, it requires an entire rethinking of the whole recruitment, engagement, training, performance evaluation, and retention process, which should be designed for temporary and informal labour relations mediated via application or direct negotiation. In the absence of formal HR practices, issues of fairness, motivation, and stability of the working relationship arise (Duggan et al., 2020), regardless of its being conducted via a platform or company.

The gig economy in Ethiopia is growing fast with high youth unemployment and the wide internet coverage and digital entrepreneurship coming in to fill the void in the absence of regular work (Afriwork, 2024). Freelancing, online tutoring, and digital project work are all lifelines for young people in Addis Ababa, the most crucial part of the country in tech and professional services.

Local firms like ALX Ethiopia, which focuses on freelancers in skills-based work, Africa Jobs Network, which targets gig talent in HR, Marketing and other services, and Fidel Tutorial, which connects tutors with students, display how local companies are converting flexible work into work. But gig workers in Ethiopia still don’t have formal HR systems, benefits, or professional development. And the sector is still plagued by regulatory gaps, poor performance management, income instability, and weak talent development mechanisms (Afriwork, 2024; Addis Fortune, 2023).

Even though the economy is growing, most gig workers in Ethiopia are not provided with structured HR systems, formal benefits, or professional development support. Local studies by (Afriwork, 2024; Addis Fortune, 2023) points out that the sector still faces a number of challenges (e.g., regulatory gaps, uneven performance management, income instability, and weak talent development). At the same time, the gig economy offers unique opportunities: a large,

digitally connected youth workforce; sector-specific HR models that are adapted to Ethiopian conditions; and the potential for the gig talent ecosystem to connect Ethiopian workers with both local and international markets. The aim of the research here is to examine talent management in Ethiopia's gig economy through an exploratory multiple case study of selected organisations in Addis Ababa. Based on semi-structured interviews with gig workers and HR professionals from three organizational contexts, this study provides a holistic, dual-perspective view of talent management in this context and provides evidence-based insights to inform more inclusive, adaptive, and contextually relevant HR practices.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Innovation in digital technologies, development of online labor platforms, organization changes (Kuhn et al., 2021), and flexibility in work practices have transformed the approach that organizations adopt when dealing with talent.

Gig work is becoming increasingly popular in today's labor market, especially through a mixture of short-term and long-term contracts that are offered to independent workers, as more and more people choose to take up gigs as either their primary or secondary source of income (ILO, 2021; OECD, 2020). But, such transformations pose challenges not only for gig workers but also for human resource management systems in general (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019).

Traditional HR systems were designed for full-time workers who have established stable career paths and have strong, long-term ties to their organisations. Gig work, on the other hand, is a workforce that is flexible, short-term and geographically dispersed, often working through informal, direct contracts with organisations or online work and is not necessarily supervised by HR. Celestin and Vanitha (2023) state that this change makes it much harder for organisations to engage and support gig workers outside formal HR structures. Duggan et al. (2020) point out that in the case of flexible and hybrid workforces, most organisations do not have a system for the evaluation of performance and inclusion (Rosenblat & Stark (2016). They indicate that informal or automated management systems, when they replace direct HR oversight, encounter new challenges such as unfair evaluation results and a systematic absence of developmental support for workers. Collectively these studies show that traditional HR models are ill-suited to handle

flexible, independently contracted work (whether from digital structures or organisations directly).

Academic studies on the gig economy have advanced, but are scattered. Most studies focus on workers' lives only or only the sides of organizations, and they don't usually take into account the push and pull of employee and employer decisions. This unexplored area shows thet we don't really see how HR practices affect gig workers' lives/business objectives at the same time. This gap is particularly profound in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the gig economy is growing rapidly but the field is still largely undervalued in both academic research as well as policy development ILO (2021).

In particular, the gig economy is becoming one .of the major areas of employment in Ethiopia, where urban youth unemployment is rising and mobile connections and digital employment are growing rapidly (Afriwork, 2024). Freelancers are expected to have reached more than one million by 2025 (Afriwork, 2024). with the gig economy on the rise in Ethiopia and the structural uncertainty. Ethiopian gig workers are not provided with structured HR support, social protection, formal benefits or learning and development support and are faced with inconsistent income, low growth prospects and poor working relations with organisations that hire them. Companies must go through recruitment and performance assessment, engagement and retention as well as a period of time in HR frameworks that are meant to be permanent employment.

In addition, the gig economy in Ethiopia has a specific structural condition that sets it apart from the gig work communities in the world: gig work in Ethiopia is never so much a flexible labor preference as a structural response to the lack of formal work models, which is influenced by informality, income instability, weak institutional protection and a lack of access to global digital labour markets. This structural reality does matter to how talent management challenges and opportunities can be seen and addressed and yet it is not widely recognized and analyzed in the academic literaturexs. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyze the key challenges and openings in talent management in the gig economy of Ethiopia and identified five HRM areas: recruitment and selection, worker engagement, skills development, performance management and retention.

This study is based on an exploratory multiple case study approach, exploring the perspectives of worker-driven and organisational perspectives so that theoretical and empirical research can be

done and a concrete recommendation for organisations and policy-makers to take into account in Ethiopia's rapidly evolving digital labour market development as the next step in the field of digital labour in the context of job creation.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 General Objective

To explore and analyse the challenges and opportunities in talent management for gig workers in Ethiopia, through an exploratory multiple case study of selected organisations in Addis Ababa, and to generate evidence-based insights and practical recommendations for organisations, platforms, and policymakers seeking to manage and engage gig workers more effectively within a flexible, technology-driven labour environment.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

The following specific objectives guide the study:

- To explore how Ethiopian gig workers and HR professionals in selected organisations perceive and experience key talent management practices.
- To identify the major difficulties and enabling environments for gig workers and organisations in adopting talent management systems in Ethiopia's emerging gig economy.
- To assess the degree of alignment and divergence between gig workers' expectations and organisational talent management strategies across the five HRM domains.
- To suggest evidence-based HR strategies and frameworks that can help organisations address talent management challenges and seize opportunities in Ethiopia's digital labour market.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do Ethiopian gig workers and HR professionals in selected organisations perceive existing talent management practices.

2. What are the key difficulties and enabling environments experienced by gig workers and organisations in managing and participating in Ethiopia's emerging gig labour market?
3. Where do gig workers' expectations and organisational HR strategies align or diverge across the five HRM domains?
4. What evidence-based HR strategies and practices can help organisations address talent management challenges and capitalise on opportunities in managing gig workers in Ethiopia's emerging digital economy?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant in several aspects: academic, practical and social. It dives into a field that is changing rapidly but has not seen a lot of research and is not well-understood in Ethiopia or in Sub-Saharan Africa. That makes this work timely and relevant, both to Knowledge and practice.

The study also pushes gig economy HRM research forward by looking at gig economy HRM research from two angles at once, the experiences of gig workers and insights of HR professionals, which are all grounded in the Ethiopian context. This approach provides us with a new perspective on gig work and expands on what we know so far.

By doing so, it bridges the theoretical gap between the global gig work literature that is mainly based on Western high-income countries and the empirical reality of an emerging market where formal employment is scarce, infrastructure is poor and a new platform ecosystem is emerging. The study's three theoretical contributions (e.g., a context-based, contextualised perspective on gig work motivation in emerging economies and evaluation opacity concept and documentation of a currency-stratified gig labour market) will offer ideas applicable beyond Ethiopia to other African and developing economy contexts.

For the practice of HR professionals and organisations that are engaging gig workers, the study offers practical evidence on how the talent management issues are identified and addressed in the five HRM dimensions of recruitment, engagement, skill development, performance evaluation, and retention, and suggests strategic solutions that can be done in practice in the Ethiopian

organisation. These structured evaluation frameworks, partnership-based engagement models and ecosystem-based skill investment approaches that are outlined in this study can be applied effectively to improve gig talent management outcomes at a basic level.

The evidence produced through this study will be useful to policymakers for timely evidence generation that supports the creation of jobs, labour reforms, and digital workforce policies.And as Ethiopia is trying to reduce youth unemployment and to promote innovation, the findings of this research can be used as a guide for better policy frameworks to develop policy frameworks, safety nets and real career options for gig workers. For gig workers, this study helps to open up about their own experiences and obstacles to how they experience and the issues they face and turn lived realities into concrete solutions to work that is sustainable, inclusive and respectful.

1.6 Scope and Delimitations of the Study

Thematically, this study investigates the challenges and opportunities of talent management for gig workers in Ethiopia in terms of how HRM is implemented across five dimensions (recruitment and selection, worker engagement, skill development, performance management and retention) in flexible, platform-based and organisation-controlled labour markets. This study is from the worker and company perspective, so we can see the job situation and actual work in the field from the worker's side as well as what it's actually like on the ground.

In geographical terms, the study will be directed towards gig work in Addis Ababa. As there is an obvious advantage to do so as most organisations and platforms (and even gig work professionals themselves) will find their place in Addis Ababa, which is the best place to do field studies. When talking about the organizational scope of the study we need to mention three types of organizations: HR consultancy, tech and skill platform and education platform.

This study uses a qualitative, exploratory multiple case study approach, and it's qualitative in nature. It's not about testing any hypothesis or producing results that apply to every situation. It's about building contextually grounded, thematically rich insights into gig workers' daily life and management practices of HR professionals and the types of ideas that can inform theory, practice and policy without a causal or representative position.

Temporally, the study reflects the gig economy in Ethiopia as it existed during the period of data collection (late 2025 to early 2026). Given the dynamic and fast-changing gig economy, the results should be interpreted in this time frame.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

Despite its rigor in terms of methodology, there are some limitations associated with this study.

First, the research is limited to Addis Ababa. While the capital is the hub of Ethiopia's gig economy, results can't be assumed to apply everywhere; smaller cities and rural areas may have different realities, especially with access to tech or formal gig platforms.

Second, the research relies on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, all conducted at a single point in time. Of course, self-reporting comes with its own set of challenges, people remember things differently, sometimes tell what they think people (interviewer) want to hear, and there's always a layer of subjectivity in personal experiences.. Triangulation with organisational documents was employed where possible to mitigate this limitation.

Third, the anonymisation protocol; ethically necessary to honour commitments made to participating organisations and individuals, limits the specificity with which organisational-level findings can be discussed and cross-referenced with publicly available information about the organisations' practices, scale, and market position.

Fourth, the exploratory qualitative design generates depth of understanding at the cost of statistical breadth. The study's findings cannot claim causal explanation or statistical generalizability. Relationships between variables; such as between the absence of L&D and retention outcomes; are inferred from participant accounts rather than demonstrated through longitudinal observation or controlled analysis. The findings are best understood as a contextually grounded foundation for further quantitative and longitudinal investigation.

1.8 Organisation of the Study

The thesis consists of five chapters, with each chapter being based on an idea.

Chapter One: Introduction: the chapter provides the background to the study and the context for the study. This section also describes what the problem statement is, the research goals and the questions. And also tells the scope of the research, why it matters, what's off limits and what's important.

Chapter Two: Literature Review: This chapter discusses the main theories (Talent Management Theory, Human Capital Theory, Self-Determination Theory) and what scholars have said about HRM in the gig economy on a global and African level. It also provides the theoretical sketch for the whole study.

Chapter Three - Research Methodology; the chapter outlines the methodology for the study. It explains the research approach, the design, the participants, the selection of participants, the collection and analysis of data and the ethical steps followed

Chapter Four - Findings and Analysis; This chapter summarizes the findings from the twenty-two semi-structured interviews with gig workers and HR/platform managers. This is presented in five themes with more Ethiopia specific findings.

Chapter Five - Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations. This section discusses how the results fit with research and theories from previous research and theories, answers to the research questions are provided. The findings of the study and recommendations for the organisation and policy makers are given. It also discusses the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter covers the main theories and research that inform this research. It is divided into four parts. We start with the theoretical framework for the work in Section 2.2 and we will use three major concepts: Talent Management Theory (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; McDonnell et al., 2018), Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Then Section 2.3 discusses HRM research in the gig economy and focuses on the five HRM domains that form the frame for the study. Section 2.4 highlights the gaps, both theoretical and practical, that this research attempts to fill. In the end, Section 2.5 introduces the theoretical sketch that underpins the entire process of data collection, analysis and interpretation

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The study is structured in three theoretical frameworks that complement each other, each dealing with a specific issue associated with the talent management challenge.

2.2.1 Talent Management Theory (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; McDonnell et al., 2018)

Talent management has come a long way since firms perceived it as just a ‘war for talent’ back in the late ’90s (Michaels et al., 2001). Now, it’s more strategic, firms pay particular attention to how they find, develop, and maintain those individuals who actually help them stay ahead. Collings and Mellahi (2009) shaped this change. They said strategic talent management is about systematically determining which positions matter most, building up a pool of high-potential individuals, and putting HR tools in place that really help fill those roles. This expanded talent management beyond merely being an HR admin job, it became a key, strategic aspect.

The study by McDonnell et al. (2018) is another important milestone in researching talent management. It discusses the concept in the global context and identifies five essential HR

functions. First, it is recruitment and selection, second, worker engagement, third, learning and development, fourth, performance management, and fifth, retention. Those five functions become the pillars of effective talent management practice. The authors prove that a firm needs consistency across all five aspects since poor state in one of them will have an adverse impact on the other four. However, one should mention that the framework used by the researchers is relevant to traditional or international businesses where there is a typical employment contract. Emerging labor markets, flexibilities, and gig economy do not fall under their scope. Thus, the research adopts the five-domain framework proposed by McDonnell et al. (2018)

2.2.2 Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964)

Human capital theory (Becker 1964) describes that workers' skills, knowledge and competencies are assets (like physical capital) and that they make money for the work team as well as the company. Training, mentoring and professional development in HRM is based on the assumption that investment in human capital increases productivity, reduces turnover and has an advantage in the competitive market. This assumption is the basis of employer-supported learning and development, performance management and the building of a structured career system.

In the gig economy, this logic is complicated by the contractual ambiguity of the worker-organisation relationship. If gig workers are freelancers rather than employees, there is not a strong motive for companies to invest in worker development as there are no predictable returns for investment in human capital (the worker or the business to which it is being made) so the money (and the company) could be spent on the worker without the guarantee of being the target. This is where Becker's distinction between the general and the specific human capital is relevant: general skills (transferable across organisations) are less likely to be funded by employers than firm-specific skills, because the risk of losing the trained worker to a competitor is higher. In gig environments where workers frequently work for multiple clients at once, this disincentive is even greater.

This dynamic explains one of the main challenges identified in this study: for gig workers in the three cases there is a relatively ubiquitous lack of organized learning and development programmes. Human Capital Theory also supports the opportunity dimension, where organisations that do invest in gig worker capability may distinguish themselves as preferred

partners, leading to higher worker loyalty, service quality and retention even in flexible arrangements.

In this study, Human Capital Theory provides the analytical lens for understanding the learning and development gap, and for interpreting why organisations that invest in gig worker skill development; such as the Technology and Skills Platform ,produce qualitatively different outcomes than those that do not.

2.2.3 Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985, is the theory of why people feel motivated when they meet three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy means you are in charge of what you do. Competence is when you feel skilled and accomplished. Relatedness is when you feel you are in a group and you feel you belong. SDT makes a stark distinction between intrinsic motivation - motivation that is made of real interest or pleasure - and extrinsic motivation - the motivation that arises from outside rewards or pressures. In order for motivation to be strong and meaningful, all three need to be met..

Now think of the gig economy. On paper, there is autonomy in the gig economy; gig workers can choose clients, set their own hours and control the atmosphere of the jobs. But competence and relatedness are often poor. Without much formal training or support (or more specifically, no formal mentors), gig workers will struggle to grow their skills. And with most working alone, they don't often have the chance to build relationships or have a sense of community. In the gig economy, there is autonomy, theoretically, at work: workers decide who they are and how and when to work. But competence and relatedness are often lacking: workers lack structured developmental support (limiting competence growth) and work in isolation from professional communities (limiting relatedness). In other words, SDT would predict that gig workers' high autonomy is not sufficient in the long haul to sustain intrinsic motivation without investment in competence and relatedness, which the empirical literature agrees with (Celestin & Vanitha, 2023; Manyika et al., 2016).

A critical contextual qualification emerges from the Ethiopian data in this study: in conditions of economic constraint and income instability, the autonomy that SDT sees as a motivational resource may not be experienced as freedom but as financial insecurity. When basic economic

needs are unmet, the three SDT needs; autonomy, competence, relatedness, may be insufficient to sustain motivation unless extrinsic needs (particularly income stability) are first addressed. This study treats this contextual qualification as one of its theoretical contributions, proposing that SDT's autonomy dimension requires reframing in emerging economy settings where gig work functions as a structural economic response rather than a freely chosen lifestyle.

In this study, SDT underpins the analysis of worker engagement, motivation, and retention, and provides the theoretical lens through which the flexibility–stability paradox, a central finding of this research; is interpreted and theorised.

2.3 Empirical Review

The empirical literature on gig economy HRM is reviewed thematically across the five domains that structure this study, supplemented by contextual evidence from the Ethiopian and African gig economy literature. Studies are critically examined for their contributions, limitations, and the gaps they leave , gaps that this research is designed to address.

2.3.1 Recruitment, Selection, and Entry into Gig Work

Meijerink and Keegan (2019) say managing talent in the gig economy means moving away from old, employer-controlled HR systems. Instead the researchers promote "ecosystem thinking," which means decentralization of HR activities across various stakeholders such as employers, clients, and even workers. Under this model of recruitment, none of these parties has control over the process of hiring workers.

Rather, this process involves reputation systems, assessment of portfolios, and client testimonials. Of course, such flexibility has certain advantages; however, there is a problem, this model has never been tested in an emerging market setting before, and so there is a huge lack of research in this area. Instead the researchers promote "ecosystem thinking," which means decentralization of HR activities across various stakeholders such as employers, clients, and even workers. Under this model of recruitment, none of these parties has control over the process of hiring workers.

Expanding upon that, Kuhn, Meijerink, and Keegan (2021) list three key environments within which gig HRM may take place. The first environment includes gig firms that use third-party

platforms for outsourcing of work. The second type refers to firms that serve as the platforms themselves. Finally, the authors identify hybrid environments where firms may combine these two approaches. In particular, the authors analyze the ways in which HR authority is redistributed within each environment along with key problems such as transparency, accountability, and support of gig workers. Crucially, the authors' conceptual analysis does not consider the actual experiences of entry by gig workers, and that is the gap which this study seeks to fill through its dual perspective approach.

Wood et al. (2019) and Healy et al. (2017) define reputation and rating systems as the structural gatekeepers that systematically marginalize newcomers irrespective of their qualifications, since accumulated positive feedback from clients is a prerequisite for opportunity allocation in the gig economy. Indeed, the 'entry barrier through reputation' phenomenon was found to be true based on empirical observations made during the current study. Particularly, this problem is especially pronounced in Ethiopia where individuals may find it difficult to provide credentials recognized internationally.

Bateyo (2025) identifies a key gap in organizational strategy related to gig talent acquisition. Despite the increased awareness of the importance of gig workforce, many organizations have failed to establish effective recruiting frameworks tailored to the nature of gig workers. Most organizations rely on informal recruitment channels and lack formal selection criteria for gig jobs, as seen in the Ethiopian case of this study

2.3.2 Worker Engagement and Motivation

Worker engagement in the gig economy is characterised by a far different set of circumstances than in permanent employment. Celestin and Vanitha (2023) investigated the motivation of gig workers in the post-‘Great Resignation’ period and found that autonomy and flexibility are the first factors that contribute to better engagement; the lack of financial security and professional recognition lead to diminishing motivation over time.

Their mixed-methods study provides valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of gig work engagement but is limited to the worker perspective, which is in a Western labour context. The organisational perspective and the emerging economy perspective are not addressed.

Manyika et al. (2016) and Lepanjuuri et al. (2018) show that gig workers do not choose what they want to do with their work rather than what they are economically prepared to do, thus challenging the SDT's assumption that gig workers' autonomy is a motivational tool. If gig work is imposed rather than intrinsic, then the worker-organisation relationship should develop around extrinsic security as a must-have rather than an optional part of the motivation. We find evidence for this argument in the Ethiopian context, in which 11 of 16 gig workers who worked preferred the stability of a job to flexibility.

Rousseau's (1989) psychological contract theory is also relevant here: workers' implicit expectations about the relationship and their expectations for fair treatment, developmental support and investment in employment, even without formal contracts, shape engagement outcomes. In gig settings where there are few explicit contracts, the psychological contract may be the primary form of governance that is able to maintain or undermine trust and engagement. The frequent violation of gig workers' implicit expectations by this research group of participants is consistent with the psychological contract breach literature.

2.3.3 Learning, Development and Skill Formation.

The learning and development deficit is one of the most well-documented challenges in the gig economy HRM literature. Matriano, Al-Harthi and Matriano (2023) examined the ways that learning organisations can improve their development models to accommodate gig workers' career development and found that most organisations have no formalised learning systems in place, and gig workers are largely dependent on self-directed learning and peer networks. They argue for lifelong learning frameworks, but truthfully, their data comes from developed countries and so they don't really deal with the real issues African gig workers have to face or the environment in which they live.

Evans-Uzosike and Okatta (2023) get right to the point of a survey of gig workers across several African countries. What they find is that gig workers tend to learn digital skills on their own, informally, and very rarely have proper training. This lack of structured learning leads to inconsistent job quality and a weak job security, and they say that governments, organizations and universities must partner to solve that issue. Their research adds a lot of African background

to this study, but they didn't look at Ethiopia in particular, which is exactly the gap this research is trying to fill.

Afriwork (2024) also supports these findings in the Ethiopian context, stating that lack of structured learning is one of the major barriers to skill development and career advancement of Ethiopian gig workers. The absence of formal L&D provision (as mentioned in the literature, and observed for our three case organisations, except for the Technology and Skills Platform) is in agreement with the Human Capital Theory prediction and the work of the wider African gig workforce literature.

2.3.4 Performance Management and Evaluation Systems.

Performance management in the gig economy is characterized by a shift from managerial assessment to client-led evaluation, resulting in a number of structural challenges around fairness, transparency and the disproportionate weight of individual assessments. Duggan et al. (2020) begin by focusing on how gig work evaluation systems reconfigure labour relations through surveillance, power asymmetry and the removal of traditional HR authority. Their focus is on algorithmically managed platforms, but the basic idea that informal or automated evaluation systems not only disadvantage workers but also remove appeal mechanisms is also true for platform-based and organisation-based gig work, as we have shown here.

Bonesso et al. (2026) explored the issue of evaluative equity in hybrid workforces that combine permanent and gig workers and found that organisations struggle to operationalise fair and uniform performance management mechanisms that are equally relevant to all employment types.

This implementation gap; the need for equitable performance management in heterogeneous workforce settings; is all too relevant to the Ethiopian organisational contexts studied here, where no formal performance management systems for gig workers were found to exist in any of the three case organisations.Rosenblat and Stark (2016) document the phenomenon of 'information asymmetry' in gig performance systems, where workers have limited visibility into the criteria by which their performance is evaluated or their opportunities are allocated; and the resulting erosion of trust and motivation. This concept is closely related to the 'evaluation

opacity' that this study proposes as a conceptual contribution: the absence of transparent evaluation criteria compounded by the disproportionate weight of single negative assessments.

2.3.5 Retention and Long-Term Sustainability of Gig Talent

Retention Gig talent retention is paradoxical: organisations want to retain high-performing independent workers, but gig work is so flexible that it cannot sustain any sustained organisational commitment to the organisation that a traditional retention policy would do. Meyer and Allen (1991) found three components of organisational commitment; affective (emotional attachment), continuance (cost of leaving), and normative (sense of duty) all of which are structurally impaired in gig conditions when workers work simultaneously with multiple clients and cannot leave without having contractually bound hands.

Meijerink and Keegan (2019) argue that for gig companies it is better to keep those that have good relationships at the core if you can build trust, professional community and perceived organisational support.

Bateyo (2025) also reinforces this argument by saying that companies that incorporate gig workers into their strategy and treat them as long-term professional partners instead of just interchangeable tasks have a higher retention rate and worker loyalty. There is an implementation gap, Bateyo states, but while the strategic advantages of partnership-based retention are now very much recognised, few organisations have put in place the practical policies and management systems for them.

2.3.6 Ethiopian and African Gig Economy Context

In the Ethiopian context, retention challenges are compounded by structural factors beyond the worker-organisation relationship. Afriwork (2024) and Addis Fortune (2023) also noted the high attrition rate of gig workers in Ethiopia due to income instability, lack of social security and gig income not providing a sustainable source of income in an urbanized country where costlier living is a reality.

These contextual factors suggest that retention in Ethiopia cannot be achieved as a matter of relational factors alone; structural interventions (i.e., minimum income guarantees, milestone-based payment systems and clear pathways to longer term engagement) can be done to meet the

economic precarity of worker exit decision-making. The Ethiopian gig economy in general and the gig economy in general in the African context is an important context for this study.

ILO (2021) report on digital labour platforms and the future of work in Africa documents the rise of platform-based and gig work across the continent and the dual problem of regulatory failure and worker vulnerability.

The report calls for a comprehensive HR and policy reform but at the same time provides no organisation-level approach. Addis Fortune (2023) provides the most detailed journalistic look at gig economy in Ethiopia, where jobs are offered through platforms like RIDE, GoodayOn, and Haleta Tutors and there are major HR-related challenges faced by workers and organisations as well as income instability and staff retention and social protection. The report's journalistic dimension limits the study's scope of analysis of HR processes and organisational strategy which is what we will be doing empirically. Afriwork (2024) is the latest and the most in-depth industry-level data on gig workforce in Ethiopia and forecasted that freelance workers will reach the number of freelancers in Ethiopia by 2025 and presents the sector's rapid growth to show its structural threats.

Afriwork's data confirm the key HR issues, income instability, limited access to L&D resources and weak engagement structures, that are the ones we study at an organisational level in this work. Evans-Uzosike and Okatta's (2023) analysis also expands the African lens, providing evidence of the skill deficit in gig workforces for gig organisations across the continent and further highlighting the need for context-specific research to tackle gig markets' specific requirements.

2.4 Identified Gaps in the Literature

The foregoing review of theoretical and empirical literature reveals three distinct categories of gap that this study is designed to address:

2.4.1 Theoretical Gap

Existing theoretical frameworks for talent management, including those of Collings and Mellahi (2009), McDonnell et al. (2018), and Becker (1964), were developed in the context of formal, permanent employment. Their application to gig work contexts has been proposed but not

empirically tested in developing economy settings. Specifically, the applicability of SDT's autonomy dimension as a motivational resource requires contextual qualification in settings where gig work is economically compelled rather than freely chosen, a qualification this study provides through empirical evidence from the Ethiopian context.

2.4.2 Practical Gap

While the literature consistently identifies the need for adapted HR practices in gig work contexts, practical implementation models that organizations can use in practice, especially those that work with gig workers, are largely absent, for non-platform organizations that work with gig workers directly. Studies like Bateyo (2025) and Meijerink and Keegan (2019) provide theoretical sketchs, but little operational guidance. This study fills this void by providing context-specific recommendations based on the lived experiences of gig workers and HR professionals in three Ethiopian organizations.

2.4.3 Contextual Gap

The overwhelming majority of empirical gig economy HRM research is conducted in high-income, Western, or digital platform contexts. Sub-Saharan Africa, and Ethiopia specifically, remains critically underrepresented. The structural conditions of Ethiopia's gig labour market, including constrained formal employment, currency asymmetry, infrastructure limitations, and the social undervaluation of gig work; are sufficiently distinct from developed economy contexts to require dedicated investigation rather than simple extrapolation from existing findings. This study fills this contextual gap by generating one of the first organisation-level empirical investigations of gig talent management in Addis Ababa, contributing to a body of evidence that remains limited in the Ethiopian and broader Sub-Saharan African context.

2.5 Theoretical Sketch

The theoretical framework of this research integrates the three theoretical frameworks discussed above, Talent Management Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Self-Determination Theory; in an analytical framework of two-sided, five-domain analysis. The framework is designed with the intention of providing data collection and interpretation and to offer a systematic perspective on gig talent management in Ethiopia through the eyes of workers and organizations.

It focuses on the five HRM domains, recruitment and selection, worker engagement, learning and development, performance management and retention, as the central analytical domains, through which gig workers' experiences and organisational HR practices are considered in parallel. Within each domain, the framework draws on the three theoretical traditions to frame the analytical questions: Talent Management Theory provides the structural domain categories and the strategic alignment perspective; Human Capital Theory demonstrates the investment logic (or absence) underlying L&D and recruitment decisions; and SDT is the motivational lens through which engagement, retention and the flexible-stability paradox can be understood.

It has been designed with a dual-stakeholder approach that includes the worker and organisational perspective at the same time. This design is in line with the key thesis of the study that talent management in the gig economy can't be understood by considering one side of the picture only: worker experiences of HR practices and organisational strategies for managing gig talent are interrelated and the alignment or divergence between them is the main focus of analysis.

The framework does not imply causal relationships between variables. As with the exploratory, qualitative nature of the study, it serves as an interpretive framework instead of a testable model as it provides a conceptual basis for the analysis of patterns, tensions, and emerging themes across data. The gig economy context of Ethiopia is also part of the framework and serves as a shaping factor that moderates the expression of all five HRM domains, as argued by the study to develop qualitatively different patterns of gig talent management challenge and opportunity in Ethiopia.



Figure 1: Theoretical Sketch for Talent Management in Ethiopia's Gig Economy
Source: Developed by the researcher, adapted from McDonnell et al. (2018), Becker (1964), and Deci & Ryan (1985)

2.6 Summary of Key Empirical Sources

Table 2.1 below summarises the key empirical sources reviewed in this chapter, their methodological approach, the HRM domain they address, and the gap they leave that this study addresses.

Table 1: Summary of Key Emperical Sources and Research Gaps

Author(s) & Year	Context / Method	HRM Domain(s)	Key Finding	Gap Left for This Study
Meijerink & Keegan (2019)	Conceptual review / Global	Recruitment, Engagement	HR responsibilities distributed across ecosystem actors (platforms, clients, workers)	Not tested in emerging markets; no worker-level evidence
Kuhn et al. (2021)	Theoretical Sketch / Global	All five domains	Three org contexts redistribute HR authority under platform conditions	Org-level only; no worker perspective; no African context
Duggan et	Literature review	Performance	Informal/automated	Platform-focused;

al. (2020)	/ Platform-based	Management	evaluation disadvantages workers through opacity and power asymmetry	does not cover organisation-based gig contexts
Celestin & Vanitha (2023)	Mixed-methods surveys & interviews / Western	Engagement, Motivation	Autonomy enhances engagement initially but income insecurity erodes motivation over time	Worker perspective only; Western context; no org-level analysis
Manyika et al. (2016)	Large-scale global labour survey	Engagement, Retention	Substantial share of gig workers engage out of economic necessity, not preference	Does not address African or Ethiopian context
Lepanjuuri et al. (2018)	National survey / UK	Engagement, Retention	Majority of UK gig workers prefer stability; flexibility is often involuntary	UK context; not transferable to Ethiopian structural conditions
Matriano et al. (2023)	Case studies & interviews / Advanced economies	L&D	Most platforms lack formalised L&D; gig workers rely on self-directed learning	Advanced economy focus; African access barriers not addressed
Evans-Uzosike & Okatta (2023)	Multi-country survey / Africa	L&D	African gig workers self-fund skill development; tripartite investment needed	Multi-country; Ethiopia not specifically addressed
(Bonesso et al., 2026)	HR interviews / HRM Journal, Italy	Performance Management	Organisations struggle to standardise appraisal across permanent and gig workers	No practical implementation models; different national context
Wood et al. (2019)	Survey / Platform workers, UK	Recruitment, Performance	Reputation systems function as gatekeeping mechanisms disadvantaging new entrants	Platform-based; no emerging economy application
Rosenblat & Stark (2016)	Ethnographic / Platform workers, USA	Performance Management	Information asymmetry between platform and workers erodes trust and fairness perceptions	Platform context only; no org-based or Ethiopian evidence
Rousseau (1989)	Theoretical / Organisational	Engagement, Retention	Implicit psychological contracts shape worker	Theoretical; not tested in gig or

	psychology		expectations and trust even without formal agreements	African settings
Meyer & Allen (1991)	Theoretical & empirical / Organisational psychology	Retention	Three-component commitment model: affective, continuance, normative	Developed for permanent employment; not tested in gig contexts
Bateyo (2025)	Qualitative / HR leaders, Global	Retention, Engagement	Organisations treating gig workers as strategic partners achieve higher retention	Implementation gap; no Ethiopian or African evidence base
ILO (2021)	Policy report / Africa	All domains	Digital labour platforms transform African labour markets; regulatory gaps persist	Broad policy focus; no org-level implementation strategies
Addis Fortune (2023)	Journalistic review / Ethiopia	All domains	Ethiopia gig economy growing rapidly; income instability and retention are key HR obstacles	Journalistic scope; insufficient empirical HR-process depth
Afriwork (2024)	Industry report / Ethiopia	All domains	Ethiopian freelancer numbers projected to exceed 1 million by 2025; L&D and income gaps persist	No HR process detail; no organisational strategy evidence

Table 1 illustrates a consistent pattern across the reviewed literature: while substantial theoretical and empirical work exists on gig economy HRM, it is overwhelmingly concentrated in Western, platform-centric, and single-stakeholder contexts. Few studies adopt a dual-perspective design, fewer still address organisation-based (non-platform) gig arrangements, and none examine the Ethiopian context directly. This study addresses these compounding gaps by generating dual-perspective, organisation-level evidence from three Ethiopian case organisations across all five HRM domains.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the methodological decisions that shaped how this study was designed, conducted, and analyzed. It goes over the research approach and design, who was studied and how the sample was chosen, how the data was collected, what methods were used for analysis, and the ethical steps that guided the work.

3.2 Research Approach and Design

The study uses qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methodology is appropriate for research that seeks to understand lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings rather than test hypotheses or measure variables across large samples (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

In this qualitative framework, we used an exploratory multiple case study design, based on the framework established by Yin (2018). Case study design is based on current phenomena in our real-world context, using multiple data sources for triangulation, and is flexible to both descriptive and interpretive analysis. The multiple case design was specifically chosen because it enables the researcher to explore and compare talent management practices and experiences across different organisational settings; identifying both unique, context-specific patterns and cross-case commonalities (Yin, 2018).

The three cases chosen for this study were: an HR Consulting Firm (HRC), a Technology and Skills Platform (TSP), and an Educational Technology Platform (ETP).These organisations represent three qualitatively distinct models of gig worker engagement within the Ethiopian context; direct organisational employment of gig talent, structured platform-based preparation and deployment, and intermediary facilitation between tutors and students. Different sectors were chosen on purpose. Looking at talent management across a mix of organizational models gives us deeper insights than just sticking to one case. Additionally, we can use what we learn in more places.

The design is exploratory as gig talent management in Ethiopia and most of Sub-Saharan Africa is still new. The purpose of the study is not to test relationships or validate previous theories but to provide grounded, contextually relevant insights that could inform future research and HR strategy. This is in line with the exploratory approach of multiple case studies (Yin, 2018) and with the qualitative, inductive approach of organisational and HRM research (Bryman, 2016).

3.3 Population and Sampling

3.3.1 Target Population

The study population consisted of two key stakeholder groups within Ethiopia's growin gig economy:

Gig Workers: Individuals engaged in flexible, project-based, or independently contracted work within Addis Ababa, including freelancers, online tutors, graphic designers, software developers, content writers, virtual assistants, and other service providers. This group provided the worker-centred perspective on talent management practices.

HR Professionals and Organisational Managers: Individuals that handle HR duties, manage talent, and coordinate workers within companies that rely on gig workers. This group includes HR managers, platform coordinators, and recruiters from the three organisations chosen for the study. Their perspective dialed in on how managers and organisations handled the gig workforce.

3.3.2 Sampling Frame and Case Selection

The sampling frame comprised individuals and organisations directly involved in Ethiopia's gig economy, operating primarily in Addis Ababa. Addis Ababa was selected as the geographic focus because it represents Ethiopia's primary hub for digital innovation, professional services, and platform-based gig work; providing the highest concentration of both gig workers and gig-engaging organisations in the country.

For the case selection, three organisations were selected through purposive sampling, based on four criterias: (1) they were actively using gig workers in Addis Ababa during data collection; (2) their sectors varied so we could compare across different industries; (3) they were established enough to generate solid HR and management insights; and (4) they were open and willing to take part. The three selected organisations; identified in this study by anonymised sector codes;

represent an HR Consulting Firm (HRC), a Technology and Skills Platform (TSP), and an Educational Technology Platform (ETP).

The eligibility criteria for individual participants were as follows:

Gig Workers: Currently engaged in gig or independently contracted work in Addis Ababa; minimum three months' experience in gig work; aged 18 years or older; able to provide informed consent.

HR/Manager Participants: Currently employed in a role involving recruitment, performance evaluation, learning and development, or worker engagement within one of the three case organisations; minimum six months' experience managing or supporting gig workers; able to provide informed consent.

3.3.3 Sampling Technique

Two non-probability sampling techniques were used to capture a wide range of relevant perspectives for qualitative design.

For the gig workers, the study was based on purposive and network-based sampling. The researcher reached out to initial participants by way of professional and personal contacts, LinkedIn, online freelancing communities and direct connections with organizations that hire gig workers.

If participants were able to refer additional gig workers with relevant experience, these referrals were taken into account, in line with Etikan, Musa and Alkassim (2016) recommendations for extending diversity in convenience samples. Referrals were accepted if they added occupational, sectoral or demographic diversity to the sample.

Purposive Sampling for (HR/Manager participants): HR and management participants were selected based on their involvement in HR functions relevant to the study; specifically, recruitment, performance evaluation, learning and development, or worker engagement. The three case organisations were contacted through organisational gatekeepers and direct professional outreach. Because all HR/manager participants were involved directly in decisions that were made during the process, they were able to provide the experience to generate meaningful organisational-level data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.3.4 Sample Size and Composition

The study achieved a final sample of twenty-two participants: sixteen gig workers (GW1–GW16) and six HR/manager respondents (HRC-1, HRC-2, TSP-1, TSP-2, ETP-1, ETP-2).

Table 2: Sample Composition

Participant Group	Number	Sampling Method	Organisation/Sector
Gig Workers	16 (GW1–GW16)	Purposive and Network-Based Sampling	Multiple sectors
HR / Managers	6 (HRC-1/2, TSP-1/2, ETP-1/2)	Purposive	HRC, TSP, ETP
Total	22	—	3 case organizations

The final gig worker sample of 16 is larger than the original estimate (10-15) as there are more relevant participants and the researcher continued to recruit until the occupational and sectoral diversity was well represented. Participants were graphic designers, software developers, mathematics tutors, content writers, virtual assistants, proofreaders, customer service providers and IT support experts and covered platform-based, organisation-mediated, and independent client-sourcing gig work.

The HR/manager sample of 6, with two respondents from each of the three case organisations, was within the lower range of the original target of six to ten.

This outcome reflected practical constraints in HR participant availability and organisational access during the data collection period. Importantly, thematic consistency was observed across all six HR respondents; similar patterns of informal recruitment, absent engagement strategies, and limited L&D provision appeared independently across all three organisations; indicating that the analytical depth of the HR data was not compromised by the sample size. A larger or more diverse HR sample might have generated additional perspectives, particularly from sectors not represented in the three case organisations, and this is acknowledged as a limitation in Chapter Five.

The combined sample of 22 participants is parallel with the norms of qualitative multiple case study research (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018) and is sufficient to generate analytically rich, thematically diverse data for exploratory purposes. The study does not claim statistical representativeness; rather, it claims analytical depth and contextual grounding appropriate to an exploratory qualitative design.

3.4 Data Collection

3.4.1 Data Types and Sources

Two types of data were collected:

Primary Data: Semi structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants to get their stories about working in the gig economy in Ethiopia. These interviews helped understand how recruitment, engagement, skill development, performance management and retention work in this field.

3.4.2 Semi-Structured Interview Design

Semi-structured interviews have been chosen as the primary data collection tool because they offer the thematic consistency of a pre-designed guide but the flexibility of exploring contextually specific, participant-driven information (Kallio et al., 2016). This is particularly appropriate for research in a new setting; the gig economy in Ethiopia where standardised instruments may not capture culturally relevant experiences and where unexpected findings are relevant to research.

Two interview guides were developed for gig workers and HR or manager participants. Both guides were based on the five HRM domains in our theoretical sketch: recruitment and selection, worker engagement, skill development, performance management, and retention. As a result, the researcher can be sure that it has been systematically covered by both groups.

Interviews were done face to face, via phone, or online (Zoom or Google Meet), depending on how well things worked for the participants and what kind of logistics would be used. Each interview lasted 30-60 minutes, enough time to have a lot of layers and a lot of complex narrative, not too long to bore participants (Bryman, 2016). Language choice was made based on comfortability for the person, whether it was English or Amharic. Questions were asked by the

researcher, recorded responses, and follow-up and probing were used to get to the bottom of things or clarify the context.

Even though a pre-designed guide was presented and in some cases the questions were shared with the participant ahead of time, the interviews kept the semi-structured pattern. Questions were asked in person, listened to, and adapted based on what each person said. This approach aligns with the existing best practice for semi-structured interviews in qualitative research (Bryman, 2016) and is consistent with the research design.

3.4.3 Data Collection Procedure

Collection of data involved the following procedures:

Stage 1 - Instrument Development: Two semi-structured guides in all the five HRM aspects were developed by the researcher prior to collecting data to ensure that they match the objectives and purposes of the research.

Stage 2 - Ethical Clearance and Access to Organizations: Before conducting any interview, an official request was made to all the three case study firms about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and duration of the interview session. This step was taken to ensure that these were purely academic exercises.

Stage 3 - Participant Recruitment and Consent Forms: Participants were recruited by use of direct approach where personal connections were utilized. Every participant received a detailed data sheet containing the entire purpose of the study and rights of withdrawal among other things. The researcher was guaranteed to get written or verbal informed consent prior to starting.

Step 4 - Data collection: Interviews were conducted between early January and late March 2026 with permission. Most were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of the transcript. And field notes were also taken during and immediately after interviews, to add context; tone, emphasis and non-verbal signals, that would be integral in future analysis.

Step 5 - Data management: All the recordings are stored in password-protected folders that only the researcher could access. The researcher transcribed interviews immediately after each interview. When transcribing was completed all data was anonymized, such that no identifying information was used and participant codes were used as described in Section 3.3.4.

Step 6 - Preliminary Review: All transcripts were reviewed early in order to find any emerging patterns. This helped to guide the researcher towards later interviews and to explore themes that come up in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to systematically examine interview transcripts, guided by the procedural framework of Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for qualitative, exploratory research because it allows patterns and meanings to emerge from participant accounts without requiring predefined variables or hypotheses. The approach is also well-suited to a dual-perspective design in which findings from two participant groups; gig workers and HR/managers; must be compared and integrated.

All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and organised alongside field notes and relevant documents. Transcripts were anonymised at the point of transcription. Thematic coding was conducted manually, using Microsoft Excel as an organisational tool. Each transcript was read in full and meaningful units of data, phrases, sentences, and short passages, were identified and recorded in a structured coding spreadsheet. Each row captured the participant code, the relevant excerpt, and, the assigned descriptive code. This approach enabled systematic organisation of coded segments across all twenty-two transcripts and facilitated cross-participant comparison within and across the two participant groups.. Manual coding with spreadsheet organisation is a well-established and methodologically legitimate approach in qualitative research, particularly in exploratory studies where the researcher's close engagement with the raw data is an analytical strength rather than a limitation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis followed a predominantly inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than being imposed from the literature. However, findings were subsequently organised and interpreted in relation to the five HRM domains identified in the theoretical sketch; recruitment and selection, worker engagement, skill development, performance management, and retention; to provide conceptual structure for analysis and ensure alignment with the study's research questions. This combination of inductive coding and deductive organising is consistent with the hybrid thematic analysis approach described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006).

The analysis process was conducted in the following manner as follows and was adapted from Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Braun and Clarke (2006):

Familiarisation: All transcripts, field notes were reviewed in full for a holistic understanding of the data before coding.

Open Coding: Data; phrases, sentences and short sections were identified and coded in terms of the language and content of participant responses. Coding was done independently of each participant group (gig workers and HR/managers) to ensure the integrity of each perspective. **Category coding:** Related codes were grouped into initial categories, and relationships between categories were established. Categories were created independently for each group and compared across groups to identify convergences and divergences.

Theme development: Categories from both groups were combined to form overarching themes that integrated the dual perspectives. Five primary themes emerged from this process, each corresponding broadly to one of the five HRM domains while incorporating cross-cutting findings from both gig worker and HR/manager data.

Review and refinement: Themes were analyzed against the full dataset to ensure internal consistency, adequate evidential grounding, and meaningful differentiation between themes. Themes were modified where necessary to better reflect the data.

Cross-case analysis: After the within-case analysis of each of the three organisations, a cross-case comparison was performed to identify patterns, divergences, and context-specific findings across HRC, TSP, and ETP. This step is consistent with the multiple case study design (Yin, 2018) and enabled the identification of both organisation-specific and cross-organisational dynamics.

Findings are presented in Chapter Four using direct participant quotations; attributed to anonymised participant codes; alongside interpretive narrative, summary tables, and cross-case comparisons. Quotations were selected to be representative of the broader pattern they illustrate, and are not presented as the sole evidence for any analytical claim.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Rigor

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is measured on four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. We used the following strategies to achieve each of these criteria:

Credibility: Data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing interview data of dual perspective stakeholders, both Gig Workers and HR Personnel/ Managers. Member checking; sharing summarised interpretations with a subset of participants; was conducted to verify the accuracy of the researcher's account. Prolonged engagement with the data through iterative reading and re-coding strengthened the depth of interpretive insight.

Transferability: Rich, contextualised descriptions of the research setting, participant profiles, and analytical process are provided throughout this chapter and Chapter Four, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. The study makes no claims of statistical generalizability; analytical transferability, the applicability of findings and conceptual insights to similar emerging economy gig contexts, is the intended form of generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability: The research process was documented in detail in the interview guides, coding decisions, and the analysis itself. Reflexive journaling was carried out in the data collection and analysis of the research to record key methodological decisions and the rationale behind them to establish the audit trail needed for dependability.

Confirmability: All interpretations are based on participant-attributed quotations and documented analytical decisions. Peer debriefing with the research supervisor provided an external perspective on the adequacy and consistency of the analytical process. The researcher's positionality as a practitioner in the HR field is considered to be a potential source of interpretive influence, and reflexive awareness of this position was maintained throughout.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for qualitative research with human participants. The following ethical commitments were observed throughout the study:

Informed Consent: At each interview all participants were provided with a written information sheet regarding the study purpose, the nature of the study, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty and the intended use of the data. Written or verbal consent was obtained before the interview. Participation was voluntary.

Anonymity and Confidentiality: The organisations and the participants of this study are referred to in an anonymised code and anonymity and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study. Organisations are identified by sector type (HRC, TSP, ETP). GW1-GW16 gig worker participants are coded and HR/manager respondents are coded HRC-1, HRC-2, TSP-1, TSP-2, ETP-1, and ETP-2. No information regarding individuals for these organisations is shared in this thesis. This anonymisation was communicated to all the interviewees prior to the interviews, and was specifically agreed to in the consent.

Data Security: Interviews and transcripts are encrypted and stored in password-protected digital folders only available to the researcher. The recordings were deleted after transcription and verification of the transcript accuracy.

Right to Withdraw: Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. No participant withdrew from the study before data collection took place.

Researcher Integrity: All data were reported accurately and without selective omission. No participant data was falsified, altered or presented in a way that conflicted with the actual interview content. When participant accounts were summarised instead of quoted directly, the summary was made so as to convey the participant's view accurately.

3.8 Methodological Limitations

Several methodological limitations are acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of recall bias, social desirability effects, and subjective interpretation by participants. While triangulation with cross perspective data reduced this risk, it couldn’t be eliminated entirely. Next, the convenience sampling approach for gig workers means that the sample may overrepresent workers who are networked, digitally active, and relatively engaged, potentially underrepresenting more marginalised or isolated gig workers who are harder to reach. Third, the HR/manager sample of six, while thematically consistent, limits the diversity of organisational perspectives represented; findings from the HR perspective should be interpreted

as indicative rather than exhaustive. Fourth, the study is cross-sectional, capturing participant experiences at a single point in time; longitudinal dynamics; such as how engagement, or retention evolve over the course of a gig relationship, are therefore inferred from retrospective accounts rather than observed directly.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from semi structured interviews with gig workers and Gig Managers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Twenty-two participants took part; sixteen gig workers from diverse backgrounds and six Managers from three organizations. . In accordance with the ethical commitments made during the consent process, all participating organizations and individual respondents are referred to using anonymized codes throughout this study. The organizations are called an HR Consulting Firm (HRC), a Technology and Skills Platform(TSP) and an Educational Technology Platform (ETP). Gig workers are named GW1 to GW16 and HR/Managers are named HRC-1, HRC-2, TSP-1, TSP-2, ETP-1 and ETP-2.

The analysis followed a two-stage coding process. Open coding was first applied independently to each participant group, generating ten discrete categories, five from the gig worker data and five from the HR/manager data. Then categories were merged into overarching themes by using category coding, guided by the conceptual framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Then five themes were produced that integrated the perspectives of both sides (Gig workers & HR /Platform Managers) and also they addressed the study's research questions related to challenges and opportunities in talent management of gig workers in Ethiopia.

The themes are:

1. Structural Barriers to Entry and Talent Acquisition

2 Engagement, Motivation, and the Flexibility–Stability Paradox

3. Skill Development and Organisational Investment Gaps

4. Performance Evaluation and Contested Fairness

5. Retention, Sustainability, and the Need for Systemic Reform.

A sixth section presents cross-cutting findings specific to the Ethiopian context. Direct quotations are presented verbatim to preserve authenticity and strengthen the credibility of interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.2 Participant Profiles

4.2.1 Gig Worker Participants

The sixteen gig worker participants represented a cross-section of Ethiopia's emerging gig economy, spanning platform-based and referral-based work arrangements across seven occupational sectors. Table 3 summarizes their profiles.

Table 3: Gig Worker Participant Profiles

ID	Sector / Work Type	Platform(s)	Experience	Primary Income?
GW1	Graphic / Logo Design	Referrals	~5 years	No
GW2	Functional Consulting / System Admin / Data Entry	Local platforms / referrals	5+ years	Yes
GW3	Freelance Talent Acquisition / Recruitment	LinkedIn / Telegram / referrals	Several years	Yes
GW4	Tutoring	Fidel Tutorial	Not stated	Not stated
GW5	Freelance	Referrals	~2 years	Yes
GW6	Branding & Creative Direction	Personal connections only/ AJN	15+ years	No
GW7	Creative Design	Personal connections / AJN	5 years	Yes
GW8	Graphics Design	Afriwork / AJN	4 years	No
GW9	Proofreading	Local platform	4+ years	Yes
GW10	Software Development (Web / Flutter / Django)	International & AJN	~3 years	Yes
GW11	Virtual Assistant / Admin Support	Local VA platform	2.5 years	Yes
GW12	Mathematics Tutoring	Fidel Tutorial	~3 years	Yes
GW13	English & Amharic Tutoring	Fidel Tutorial	1.8 years	No
GW14	Content Writing / Social Media Management	International platform / direct clients	4 years	Yes
GW15	Graphics Design	Ethiojobs / referrals	2.5 years	Yes

GW16	Various (saturation participant)	Various	Various	Various

4.2.2 HR/Manager Participants

Six HR and platform management respondents from three organisations participated in the study. In line with the anonymisation protocol, organisations are identified by sector code only. Their diversity in organisational type and management approach enabled meaningful cross-case comparison, consistent with the multiple case study design (Yin, 2018). Table 4 summarises their profiles.

Table 4: HR/Manager Participant Profiles

Code	Role	Organisation Type	Sector
HRC-1	Marketing Manager	HR Consulting Firm (HRC)	HR / Talent Consulting
HRC-2	Managing Director	HR Consulting Firm (HRC)	HR / Talent Consulting
TSP-1	Talent & Recruitment Lead	Technology & Skills Platform (TSP)	Tech / Skills Development
TSP-2	Freelancer Ecosystem Coordinator	Technology & Skills Platform (TSP)	Tech / Skills Development
ETP-1	HR & Academic Operations Officer	Educational Technology Platform (ETP)	EdTech / Tutoring
ETP-2	Talent & Operations Coordinator	Educational Technology Platform (ETP)	EdTech / Tutoring

4.3 From Categories to Themes: The Coding Process

Open coding of gig worker transcripts yielded five categories:

- Challenges in Entering the Gig Economy
- Reputation and Trust Dynamics
- Income Instability and Financial Stress
- Skills Development and Recognition Gap
- Retention and Long-Term Sustainabilility

Open coding of HR/manager responses yielded five parallel categories:

- Informal and Network-Based Recruitment Practices
- Challenges in Talent Selection and Verification
- Weak Formal Worker Engagement Structures
- Limited Access, to Structured Learning and Development
- Need for Systemic Improvements and Ecosystem Support

Categories were first generated independently from each participant group through open coding, then merged into overarching themes through category coding, guided by the theoretical sketch (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Table 5 maps the original categories to their corresponding themes and indicates the degree of cross-perspective alignment observed in the data.

Table 5: Category to Theme Mapping with Alignment

Theme	Gig Worker Categories	HR/Manager Categories	Alignment
1. Structural Barriers to Entry & Talent Acquisition	Challenges in entering the gig economy; Reputation and trust dynamics	Informal & network-based recruitment; Challenges in talent selection & verification	Partial; same trust gap, opposite perspectives
2. Engagement, Motivation & the Flexibility–Stability Paradox	Income instability & financial stress; Flexibility vs stability trade-off; Client-related challenges	Weak formal engagement structures; Multi-homing & commitment dilution; Transactional vs partnership model	Divergence; structural vs. behavioural framing
3. Skill Development & Organisational Investment Gaps	Skills development and recognition gap; Fairness and perceived exploitation; Lack of support and protection	Limited access to structured L&D; Transactional vs partnership model tension	Strong alignment; both confirm L&D exclusion
4. Performance Evaluation & Contested Fairness	Ratings systems and their impact; Fairness and perceived exploitation	Output-based & client-driven evaluation; Weak formal engagement structures	Partial; shared concern; workers add algorithmic opacity
5. Retention, Sustainability & Systemic Reform	Retention and long-term sustainability; Lack of support; Income instability	Retention influenced by incentives & availability; Financial & currency challenges; Need for systemic improvements	Strong alignment; fair pay and reform as shared priorities

4.4 Theme 1: Structural Barriers to Entry and Talent Acquisition

This theme is the collection of findings on how gig workers enter the gig economy and how organizations recruit and select gig talent. Trust was the defining issue from both perspectives, but its manifestation was different depending on which side of the relationship was speaking about.

4.4.1 The Cold-Start Problem: Easy Registration, Difficult First Client

A very interesting and universal finding among gig workers (13 of 16) was the difficulty of acquiring the first customer or assignment. This pattern, which has been described in the literature as the 'cold-start problem' (Huang et al., 2020) disproportionately disadvantages new entrants who lack an established review history, regardless of their actual skill level.

GW10, a software developer who joined gigwork following completion of the ALX programme, described his experience:

> *"Setting up my profile was straightforward, but getting the first clients was very difficult. I had to do a few small jobs at low rates to build my profile and get initial reviews. The biggest challenge was competing with developers from other countries who have more reviews and lower prices."* **— GW10***(2026).*

The pattern was consistent across sectors. GW9 (Proofreader) noted:'The main challenge was showing a portfolio that I don’t have.' GW11 (Virtual Assistant) stated that 'getting my first tasks was slow because I had no portfolios and reviews.' GW12 (Mathematics Tutor), with a university-level subject qualification, said that 'getting students was difficult at first.' The entry barrier, the data show, is less about capability than about the absence of verifiable track record.4.4.2 Trust as the Foundational Challenge

Whether workers operated on formal platforms or through personal networks, trust appeared as the central challenge of entry. For platform-based workers, trust was mediated through algorithmic rating scores. For referral-based workers; GW1, GW3, GW6, and GW7 , it was relational, requiring demonstrated results within established professional circles.

GW3 (Freelance Recruiter) articulated the Ethiopian-specific dimensions of the trust problem:

> *"Building trust was difficult because many companies wanted experienced recruiters with proven results. Companies hesitate to work with freelancers. Another challenge was competition and, in Ethiopia, issues with payment systems and clear freelance contracts."* **— GW3***(2026).*

From the organisational side, HRC-2 acknowledged that 'verifying skills and commitment levels' was a primary recruitment challenge. TSP-1 identified soft skills, 'specifically punctuality and responsiveness', as the hardest competencies to assess prior to engagement, and the most consequential once a project begins. This shared recognition of a trust verification gap, experienced from opposite sides, represents a meaningful point of cross-perspective convergence within this theme.

4.4.2 Informal Recruitment and the Transparency Gap

All six HR respondents identified referrals and social media as their primary sourcing channels for gig talent. None reported using formal applicant tracking systems or standardised evaluation frameworks specifically designed for gig workers as a primary sourcing system. The dominant approach across all three organisations was informal and relational and, more importantly, the informality at work went beyond sourcing methods to the explicit expectations that were communicated to workers at the point of engagement.

HRC-1 was the most candid about the transparency gap:

> *"Hiring is done via recommendation through close friends or professional connections. We also post jobs on the portal and look for an alignment of experiences with the job requirement in the JD. What is expected is not usually communicated."* **HRC-1***(2026).*

The link between informal recruitment and the transparency gap is straightforward: when hiring is done on personal networks rather than in a structured way, job descriptions, performance expectations and contractual responsibilities are rarely laid out in writing and workers are not necessarily clear on what they are expected to do; organisations are free to assess performance with the status quo. This creates an asymmetry that is common to all HRM domains; workers cannot be self-managed with criteria they have not been given to handle and organisations cannot assess performance with standards they have not been communicated to them.

TSP-1 offered a contrasting approach, employing an evidence-based selection process using portfolios and a three-tiered evaluation framework assessing technical competence, reliability, and cost-to-value alignment and communicating these criteria explicitly to candidates. ETP-2 similarly introduced 'demo-first' selection requiring mock teaching sessions, addressing the 'Expert vs. Educator gap' identified through experience: candidates with strong subject knowledge who nevertheless struggled to communicate effectively with students. These contrasts illustrate the variation in recruitment maturity across the three organisations, and indicate that more structured approaches are both feasible and consequential within the Ethiopian context.

While Theme 1 identifies trust as the foundational challenge of entry, Theme 2 demonstrates how the conditions created at entry; unclear expectations, informal agreements, and financial uncertainty, continue to shape worker engagement long after recruitment.

4.4.3 Discussion

The findings from Theme 1 indicate that trust constitutes the foundational challenge of gig work entry in Addis Ababa, operating simultaneously as a barrier for workers seeking their first engagements and as a verification problem for organisations seeking. reliable talent. This dual manifestation of the trust gap is consistent with Petriglieri et al.'s (2019) observation that gig work relationships are characterised by a fundamental absence of the institutional anchors; contracts, credentials, organisational affiliation. That normally establish professional credibility.

The 'cold-start problem' experienced by 13 of 16 gig worker participants reflects a broader structural condition in which reputation systems serve as the primary credentialing mechanism. Within this sample, this pattern appears analytically significant in the Ethiopian context, where internationally recognised credentials are limited and, where the reputational advantage of workers in established gig markets creates a competitive disadvantage for new Ethiopian entrants. Wood et al. (2019) and Healy et al. (2017) identify such systems as gatekeeping mechanisms that disadvantage newcomers regardless of competence; a dynamic the data in this study are consistent with, within a non-Western, emerging economy setting.

From a talent management perspective, the informal and network-driven recruitment practices observed across all three organisations reflect what McDonnell and Collings (2011) describe as a pre-systematic stage of talent management, where talent identification relies on

personal judgment and social capital rather than structured processes. The transparency gap documented in Section 4.4.3; where HRC-1 acknowledged that 'what is expected is not usually communicated', represents a specific manifestation of this informality. If workers enter engagements without clear performance expectations, the psychological contract is incomplete by design (Rousseau, 1989), which will lead to misaligned evaluation, disengagement, and premature exit.

The contrast between the informal HRC approach and the evidence-based recruitment models of TSP and ETP, including the ‘demo-first’ process that uncovered the Expert vs. Educator gap, shows that more structured approaches are possible and consequential within the Ethiopian context.

4.5 Theme 2: Engagement, Motivation, and the Flexibility–Stability Paradox

The second theme integrates findings on how gig workers are motivated to enter and remain in gig work, and how organisations attempt, with varying degrees of success, to maintain their engagement. At its core, this theme is one of fundamental paradox: the one thing that most attracts gig workers to gig work (flexibility) is not enough to sustain their long-term commitment while the characteristic they most desire (income stability) is the one that is not even available to them in current gig work conditions.

4.5.1 Flexibility as a Motivator - With diminishing returns.

Flexibility was the most important motivator among gig worker respondents with 14 out of 16 respondents explicitly saying so. It was the difference: flexibility was the main reason people chose gig work, but it was also a threshold factor: it was immediately demotivating, but it wasn’t keeping them engaged. Deci and Ryan (1985) Self-Determination Theory is a good lens to look at this: flexibility is essential to the autonomy dimension of intrinsic motivation but does not address the competence (skill recognition) or relatedness (belonging, support) dimensions that are key to sustained engagement.

GW2 (Functional Consultant) said: ‘The gig economy provides flexibility and continuous learning opportunities. It allows me to apply my skills in different environments.” ‘Freedom and flexibility’ was one of the key points for GW7 (Creative Designer). But the most fascinating thing was that flexibility was seen as a motivating factor as well as income instability as a

disengagement trigger. GW5, who has gig work as his main source of income, is the most vocal about the tension:

"I can work when I need money or have free time. Moreover, there is always unpredictable income; some weeks are good and some weeks very bad. The uncertainty of whether I can make rent next week is stressful. I would give up flexibility for a predictable monthly salary, even if it meant fixed hours." GW-5(2026).

I can earn money all the time. GW1 (Graphic Designer) also described the motivational hierarchy in the most concise way:

"Passion keeps me in it, but fair payment is what makes it sustainable." GW-1(2026).

These ideas are consistent with extrinsic motivation theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985): intrinsic motivators (passion, autonomy, creative expression) are present and genuine; they die out as extrinsic bases (financial security, fair compensation) are absent.

4.5.2 Income Instability is the dominant disengagement factor.

In 15 of 16 individuals, income instability was identified as a disengagement issue, making it the single most prominent finding in the sample. For platform-based workers, it was due to the unpredictable job flow in relation to algorithmic visibility cycles. For referral-based professionals, it was due to the unpredictability of customer acquisition through personal networks.

GW3 (Freelance Recruiter) identified a sector-specific aspect: "Some months are very busy while others are slow." Another major issue is that companies want immediate results and do not have clear job descriptions or enough communication. Recruiters can work hard, but firms withdraw from the process and often delay their decisions too long. GW11 described the motivating impact of inconsistent platform demand: "Some weeks I have a lot of work that I do, and some weeks I have very little to do. This impacts my motivation."

The instability was evident from the employer point of view for all three organisations. HRC-2 noted that "motivation can still decrease if projects are irregular or payments are delayed," but

none of the three organisations had established structural measures, income floors, project continuity guarantees, or advance payment methods to buffer workers against this volatility. This disconnect between organisational awareness of the problem and institutional response to it is a defining feature of the Ethiopian freelance talent management environment.

4.5.3 The Framing Divergence: Structure vs. Behaviour

The finding in this area is that workers and employers differ in how they explain disengagement. Gig workers attributed disengagement to structural conditions, income instability, lack of compensation, and lack of financial safety nets. Employers perceived disengagement as a behavioural issue; gig workers have a habit of maintaining simultaneous client relationships and ignoring one engagement when a better offer came.

TSP-1 described the employer experience:

"Since most of the top gig workers are balancing multiple clients, we are constantly competing for their mental bandwidth. If another client offers a higher rate or a more urgent task, we often see a sudden dip in their responsiveness." **TSP-1***(2026).*

HRC-1 put the organisational response in a more detailed way: 'Disengagement usually takes place when the expectations of the company do not match the worker's skills and abilities. Responded to dismissal and finding alternative gig workers.' This is the transactional model that characterised the majority of organisations studied, immediate replacement as opposed to structural change. When organisations claim disengagement as a result of worker behaviour, rather than structural conditions, they continue to employ behavioural solutions to solve problems that seem to require structural solutions - which is likely to be an issue with engagement strategies.

4.5.4 Gig Work as Economic Necessity Rather Than Lifestyle Choice

The major and most significant finding of this study, and one that has the largest consequences for talent management practice, is the high desire for income stability over flexibility among gig workers. Eleven of sixteen workers expressly stated a preference for more predictable pay, even in the face of less flexibility. Only three showed a preference for flexibility above stability, two preferring to balance it. That fact the majority of participants chose income stability over flexibility is important. A gig economy model is usually known for autonomy and freedom of

workers and the willingness of eleven out of sixteen participants to exchange it. implies that flexibility was not the real cause for gig workers to be employed. Instead more like a pragmatic solution to unemployment and a means of earning primary income.

Table 6: Stability vs Flexibility Preference from Gig Worker perspective

Preference	Count	% of Participants	Illustrative Quote
Stable income preferred (less flexibility)	11	69%	"I would trade flexibility for a predictable monthly salary, even if it meant fixed hours." GW5*(2026).*
Flexibility preferred (less stable income)	3	19%	"I value the power of deciding what my schedule looks like." GW7*(2026).*
Balance of both	2	12%	"It's hard for me to choose. I prefer both in different situations." GW6*(2026).*

This conclusion contradicts with the widespread belief of most of the international gig economy literature that gig employment is a voluntary lifestyle choice driven by preference for autonomy and freedom (Manyika et al., 2016; Lepanjuuri et al., 2018). The data from this study suggest that, within this sample, gig work appears to function for many Ethiopian participants as a structural economic necessity rather than a deliberate occupational preference. The flexibility it provides is not so much chosen as tolerated , a by-product of precarious employment rather than its purpose.

GW5 provides the most explicit example of this structural reality:

"Many gig workers in Ethiopia work without any safety net - no sick pay, no insurance. If my internet breaks or I get sick for a week, I lose everything. Platforms should offer low-cost accident insurance or emergency funds." **GW5***(2026).*

4.5.5 Organisational Engagement Strategies: Informal and Insufficient

Three of six Employer-side respondents reported having no formal engagement plan for gig workers. HRC-1 stated that gig workers 'typically reject to participate' in normal engagement activities due to the conflicting demands of multi-client work schedules.

"There are no employee engagement strategies specifically for gig workers. We plan to reach out to gig workers but can't include them in normal employee engagement activities since the flexibility of gig workers makes them unavailable to commit to certain events and engagement activities since they will be committed to work on other jobs. They usually decline to participate." **HRC-1***(2026).*

This demonstrates a structural paradox: the flexibility of gig labor makes it very difficult to deploy standard engagement strategies yet businesses have not come up with solutions to cope with gig partnerships.

The TSP strategy was the most active in terms of involvement and production rather than hours and its proactive communication, community-led mentorship and peer accountability were best. TSP-2 also mentioned about the incentive of learning to make actual revenue as well as “peer success in getting gigs is also a big motivator for others” and these practices are part of a means to overcome the isolation of independent gig work and are the best engagement model in this study.

4.5.6 Discussions

Theme 2 produced the most theoretically significant finding of the study: 69% of gig workers preferred income stability rather than flexibility. This finding directly challenges the dominant paradigms for gig economy as a group of people who are freelancing and flexible (Manyika et al., 2016; Lepanjuuri et al., 2018). But the data suggest that flexibility is not a desirable benefit but rather a structural element of economic necessity that can be tolerated as stable alternatives are not available.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is useful here for an analysis. SDT states that intrinsic motivation (i.e. autonomy) is the key to lasting engagement. The results suggest that although autonomy (the freedom dimension) is present in gig work, it loses its value over time as the basic extrinsic condition of financial security is not met. GW1's phrasing 'Passion keeps me

in it, but fair payment is what makes it sustainable' is the ultimate example of this motivational hierarchy: intrinsic motivation is real but not sufficient without an extrinsic foundation. This is in line with Deci and Ryan's argument that extrinsic conditions have to be reached to establish intrinsic motivation..

The structural divergence in disengagement framing workers attributing exit to income instability; employers attributing it to multi-client behaviour has direct practical consequences. Organisations that frame disengagement as a behavioural problem continue applying relational solutions improved communication, flexible scheduling to a structural problem that requires structural responses: advance payment mechanisms, project continuity commitments, and income reliability guarantees.

Vallas and Schor (2020) argue the gig economy transfers income risk to workers while preserving the appearance of autonomy. The Ethiopian data extend this: in a context of constrained formal employment, the autonomy preserved was not meaningful to begin with making the risk transfer particularly acute. The exploratory nature of this study limits broader generalizability.

The motivational consequences of income instability are compounded by a parallel failure in skill development, where workers bear the full cost of human capital investment while organisations capture the majority of the returns.

4.6 Theme 3: Skill Development and Organisational Investment Gaps

The third theme is one of the most conceptually important outcomes of this study: the near-universal lack of organisational investment in the skill development of gig workers and the subsequent impact on pay, engagement and long-term career sustainability. This is a study subject based on Becker's (1964) Human Capital Theory that distinguishes between generic human capital (skills that may be transferred to any employer) and firm-specific human capital (skills produced for a particular company). The results imply that in the Ethiopian gig economy, all human capital development effort falls on the worker, irrespective of the skills necessary at the company.

4.6.1 The Organisational Posture: Buy, Not Build

Fourteen out of sixteen gig worker participants said that skill development was fully self-directed, with no official training or development support offered by the platforms or organisations that engaged them. Four of six HR responses stressed the utter lack of gig-specific L&D programmes.

HRC-2 articulated the dominant organisational position:

"There is a clear boundary between permanent staff and gig talent: L&D is an exclusive benefit for full-time employees. We do not build talent; we buy it. While this saves on training costs, it places the burden of skill-upgrading on the gig worker." **HRC-2***(2026).*

HRC-1 confirmed the same process: 'There are no training and learning courses specifically designed for gig workers. They are required to have enough abilities to perform in that work capacity. Learning is meant to be self-driven.' ETP-1 acknowledged informal peer mentorship was provided through senior tutors, but noted that 'scalability is hard because most workers are part-time and timetables fluctuate greatly.' This finding confirms those of Healy et al. (2017) and the International Labour Organization (2021) which refer to gig workers as being excluded from the organisational human capital investment which determines employment trajectories and career mobility in traditional work. Gig workers were aware of this dynamic and GW9 (Proofreader): 'Platforms should stop abusing freelancers and start supporting them.' GW4 (Tutor, EdTech sector): 'Tutors take up a lot of effort, but the platform owners take a significant proportion of the money that is not always fair.'

4.6.2 The Skills–Reward Misalignment

Only 12 of the sixteen gig worker participants said that their talents were not compensated proportionally to the effort and proficiency they put out. Within a variety of organisational contexts, this mismatch was largely created by commission systems and opportunity allocation mechanisms that workers felt to be taking a disproportionate share of the value they added.

GW4 (Tutor) noted:

"Tutors do a lot of work, but the platform owners take a large share of the money, which does not always feel fair." **GW-4***(2026).*

GW12 (Mathematics Tutor) said: 'The remuneration should be more comparable to the effort we put in.' GW8 (Graphic Designer) said the same: 'I feel I can do better. I haven't fully exploited my skills', proving that organisational engagement restricts and not rewards competence. GW14 (Content Writer) added a subtlety: 'Good skills are rewarded if you have great reviews'; that is, in organisation-mediated jobs, past reputation was more important than ability at the time of admission.

Ultimately, the general takeaway from these stories is that skill investment by gig workers does not necessarily translate into a financial return in the businesses it works for and that the motivation and the long-term commitment for that one engagement are lost over time.

4.6.3 An Emerging Exception: Ecosystem-Level Skill Investment

Although the two organisations of this study largely pursued a 'buy, not build' approach to gig talent, one organisation, the Technology and Skills Platform, demonstrated that structured skill investment for gig-economy participants is feasible in the Ethiopian context. Most importantly, such investment was in order to prepare them for the gig economy ecosystem and not to develop skills specific to the organisation's own work. This distinction is important to the analytical side of this study: without firm-specific L&D, organisations can help to develop gig worker human capital and in the process are able to benefit from each other through gig worker skills.

"Beyond technical trainings, participants gain exposure to portfolio creation, pricing methods, proposal writing, digital tools, productivity systems, and client management techniques. The help is particularly practical because the objective is not only education, but genuine market preparedness." TSP-2*(2026).*

TSP-1 proposed 'Inclusive Micro-L&D' - project-specific upskilling that creates mutual benefit for both organisations (higher output quality) and workers (professional growth and stronger commitment to the engagement). Whether framed as pre-market preparation or ecosystem support, this model indicates that the L&D gap documented in this theme is not an inevitable feature of gig work arrangements, but a design choice; and one that can be reconsidered. The contrast between this approach and the complete absence of development

support in the other organisations studied underscores the variation in talent management philosophy that currently exists across the Ethiopian gig ecosystem.

Where Theme 3 reveals that organisations do not invest in developing gig worker capability, Theme 4 shows that the systems used to evaluate that capability are themselves contested — creating a compounding disadvantage for workers who must self-develop skills that are then assessed through mechanisms many perceive as unfair.

4.6.4 Discussions

Theme 3 produced one of the study's most structurally consequential findings: the near-universal adoption of a 'buy, not build' approach to gig talent across the organisations studied, in which skill development is treated as the exclusive responsibility of the worker. Healy et al. (2017) and the International Labour Organization (2021) identify gig workers as a category systematically excluded from the organisational human capital investment that shapes earnings trajectories and career mobility in traditional employment. The present study finds evidence consistent with this exclusion within the Ethiopian context, and the data suggest it may extend to include not only formal training but also mentorship, career guidance, and professional development infrastructure.

From a Human Capital Theory perspective (Becker, 1964), the plug-and-play model is short-term rational: acquiring pre-formed human capital avoids development costs. The long-term consequences are less favourable: workers find earnings constrained and career mobility limited; organisations become dependent on a volatile external talent market they have done nothing to develop.

The skills–reward misalignment documented in Section 4.6.2 where 12 of 16 workers reported disproportionate commission capture relative to the value they generated represents a pattern that, within this sample, is consistent with the market failure dynamic that Human Capital Theory would predict may lead to underinvestment in skill development over time. If workers cannot expect adequate returns on their skill investment within the organisations that engage them, rational actors will either seek higher-value engagements elsewhere or reduce their investment in skill development both outcomes reducing the overall quality of gig talent available to the market.

The TSP's ecosystem-level approach to skill investment demonstrates feasibility and produces returns at the ecosystem level rather than only for the individual organisation consistent with what Lepak and Snell (1999) describe as collaborative human capital investment.

The failure to invest in worker capability interacts directly with the performance evaluation challenge: workers who self-develop skills are then subjected to evaluation systems many perceive as opaque, unfair, and disproportionately consequential.

4.7 Theme 4: Performance Evaluation and Contested Fairness

The fourth theme examines how gig worker performance is evaluated, and the significant tensions, around fairness, subjectivity, algorithmic control, and structural power asymmetries , that these evaluation systems generate. The analysis reveals a fundamental tension between the efficiency rationale of automated rating systems and the lived experience of workers subject to them.

4.7.1 Client Evaluation Systems: Dominant and Widely Contested

Performance evaluation across the contexts studied was dominated by client-driven rating and feedback mechanisms, whether administered through digital platforms, communicated informally through organisational supervisors, or conveyed through end-client responses such as parent feedback in tutoring contexts. Thirteen of sixteen gig workers identified client feedback as the primary mechanism through which future work opportunities were allocated, and the fairness of these systems was contested by a substantial majority. The central critique, raised by 12 of 16 participants, was that evaluation systems regularly penalised workers for outcomes beyond their control.

The central critique, raised by 12 of 16 participants, was that rating systems regularly penalised workers for outcomes beyond their control. GW5 :

> *"It is not very fair because customers sometimes rate low for issues beyond my control."* **— GW5***(2026).*

GW8 (Graphic Designer): 'It is not always fair because design works have different perspectives , someone may not like it even if others would.' GW9 (Proof-reader): 'One bad review affects my future opportunities.' GW10 (Software Developer): 'One bad client who

doesn't know what they want can damage your profile.' The recovery burden, where a single negative rating requires a lot of effort to neutralize or return to base-line, was shared as a shared structural grievance across sectors.

4.7.2 Algorithmic Control and Its Behavioural Consequences

Apart from the fairness of individual assessments, the data revealed a much deeper structural problem: the opacity of the criteria that were used to transform client feedback into opportunity allocation and the disproportionate weight of a single negative assessment, whether that be through a platform rating system, an informal supervisor decision or a dissatisfied client report. In platform-based and organisation-based contexts, a single bad assessment seemed to carry far more weight than multiple good ones and recovery took a lot of time and effort. GW4 described a direct and concrete consequence:

"When my rating dropped below once, I got fewer student suggestions, especially for longer, higher-paying clients. It took months of extra politeness and accepting every client to bring it back up." GW 4(2026).

GW10 (Software Developer) pointed out a second problem: workers cannot demonstrate capability without past positive assessments but cannot accumulate those assessments without previous opportunities, a vicious cycle that disproportionately disadvantages new entrants. In the tutoring context, ETP-1 showed that a single complaint from a parent can affect a tutor's future assignments, even if that complaint was motivated by student motivation or learning gaps rather than tutor performance. In both cases the lack of clear evaluation criteria, easy access to appeal mechanisms, and context-based weighting means gig workers are on the hook for the full reputational cost of assessment decisions they're not prepared to challenge.

4.7.3 Employer Evaluation: Informal or Structured.

Based on HR respondents, the approach to performance management ranged from informal to milestone-based. HRC-1 confirmed the absence of any formal PMS: 'There's no PMS, only informal feedback on performance.' 'Gig workers respond negatively to negative feedback and change their behaviour,' she said. Without structured development processes, evaluation is punitive rather than positive.

TSP-1 described a more rigorous approach, which compared technical quality with project brief, on-time delivery rate and qualitative stakeholder feedback from internal project leads. The ETP conducted multi-source evaluation including client (parent) feedback, learner progress, punctuality, and professional conduct.. Both ETP-1 and ETP-2 explicitly acknowledged subjectivity as a systemic limitation: 'Student feedback can sometimes be subjective or influenced by factors outside the tutor's control' (ETP-1). This acknowledgment from the employer side represents one of the strongest convergence points in the dataset, both workers and managers recognise evaluation subjectivity as a problem, yet neither has developed robust mechanisms to address it systematically.

Theme 4 establishes that current performance evaluation systems are widely perceived as inequitable and insufficiently formalised. These conditions directly inform Theme 5, which examines why workers choose to remain in - or exit - gig arrangements, and what both groups believe is necessary for long-term sustainability.

4.7.4 Discussions

Theme 4 findings indicate that performance evaluation across the contexts studied was characterised by three interconnected problems: the dominance of client-driven feedback as the primary evaluative mechanism; the perceived unfairness of those mechanisms in attributing outcomes to workers that were beyond their control; and the opacity of criteria through which assessments were translated into opportunity allocation decisions. These findings are consistent with the broader literature on performance management in contingent work (Duggan et al., 2020).

The 'evaluation opacity' construct developed in Section 4.7.2 extends the existing literature in a theoretically useful direction. Where previous scholarship has focused on algorithmic management in platform-based gig work (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), the present study demonstrates that opacity in evaluation criteria and disproportionate weighting of single negative assessments characterise performance management across both platform-based and organisation-based gig contexts suggesting that evaluation opacity is a feature of gig work governance more broadly, not merely of digital platform algorithms.

From a talent management perspective, the absence of formal PMS in three of six organisations is a major shortcoming. Good talent management is the need for not only talent acquisition but also ongoing development through structured feedback (McDonnell & Collings, 2011). If evaluation is more informal, reactive and punitive, it excludes rather than develops talent.

4.8 Theme 5: Retention, Sustainability, and the Need for Systemic Reform

The fifth theme looks at gig workers' conditions in gig work, the triggers that prompt them to leave, and reforms that are essential for long term sustainability. That's the study's best cross-viewed theme. It draws on all three theoretical frameworks simultaneously: Becker's Human Capital Theory (investment returns and career trajectory), Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (motivational sustainability) and McDonnell and Collings' Talent Management framework (organisational retention strategies).

4.8.1 The Universal Retention Driver: Fair and Timely Payment

Fair and timely payment was identified as the primary retention driver by 15 of 16 gig workers and corroborated by all six HR/manager respondents, the single point of strongest cross-perspective alignment in this study. The income-retention relationship operated differently by worker type, however. For those who relied on gig work as their main source of income (GW2, GW3, GW5, GW9, GW10, GW11, GW12, GW14, GW15), financial reliability was a survival baseline, not just a preference.

GW4 (Tutor): "Payment is the main factor that influences my decision to continue."

GW6 (Branding, 15+ years): "Advance payment should always be a way to go. This would make gig work more sustainable."

TSP-1 also linked payment reliability directly to competitive retention advantage: "If they know they will get paid on time and they get clear briefs, they will almost always select us over a new, unknown client even though the pay is similar." TSP-1*(2026).*

4.8.2 Three main exit triggers.

There were three exit triggers across all data. The first was high platform commission rates, as flagged by 9 of 16 gig workers. ‘The platform commission was too high, so I had to leave,’ GW9 said directly. In this context, there’s a structural tension in which platform revenue models are directly at odds with the wage of the workers.

The second was burnout from income uncertainty, multi-client demand, and a lack of organisational support structures such as sick pay, health insurance, or professional wellbeing resources. TSP-1 wrote: “Without the cushion of employee benefits or team-building activities, workers can feel exhausted after a few cycles. Without a long-term incentive, they often consider a project’s end as the natural time to exit.”

The third was currency disparity specific to Ethiopia. TSP-1: “Many skilled gig workers prefer projects that pay in USD or follow global pay scales. When they compare those opportunities to local offers in ETB, their asking price spikes significantly. This creates a price volatility that is hard to manage.” This leads to a two-tier gig labour market in Ethiopia: workers who can access USD-paying global clients, typically those with internationally competitive portfolios, strong English communication, and access to global platforms, and those working in ETB-denominated local markets with lower earning ceilings and fewer negotiating mechanisms. This structural divide within the gig workforce is among the most special findings of this study.

4.8.3 Absence of Career Pathways

Six of six HR respondents said that formal career progression was not available to gig workers in their organisations. HRC-1 was clear: ‘No growth in terms of position. To get growth in position the workers must be in a full-time position.’ GW10 (Software Developer) also explained the worker impact: “Right now I see this as a stepping stone, I hope to get a full-time remote job eventually.” Gig work is not developed via L&D nor rewarded through career progression; it seems to function as a transitional stage in life rather than a sustainable occupational category.

4.8.4 Convergent Reform Priorities

In both groups of participants, a common reform agenda emerged. Table 7 summarises the shared priorities of workers and employers..

Table 7: Convergent Reform Priorities - Worker and Employer Perspective

Gig Workers Propose	HR / Managers Propose
Lower commission rates and fairer revenue sharing	Dynamic compensation frameworks with inflation-linked or performance-linked contracts
Baseline for income amount or earnings guarantee mechanisms	Transition from transactional to partnership-based engagement models
Advance payment as a structural norm	Structured micro-L&D and project-specific upskilling for gig workers
Access to basic social protection (insurance, sick pay)	Better workload planning and professional wellbeing support structures
Improved digital infrastructure (internet, power reliability)	Improved digital infrastructure, payment systems, and professional trust
Greater professional recognition of gig work in Ethiopia	Formal contractual frameworks and clearly communicated work agreements

4.8.5 Discussions

Theme 5 was the study's best cross-perspective alignment in terms of fair and timely payment as the universal retention driver, as 15 of 16 workers and all six HR respondents supported. This finding is consistent with the extrinsic motivation dimension of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and with retention literature that identifies compensation equity as a threshold condition for organisational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991).

Another insightful finding is the reference point in which 'fair' pay is measured in the Ethiopian context. Rather than looking at the comparisons with local ETB markets alone, workers' expectations are conditioned by the visibility of USD-denominated global rates through peer networks, social media, and platform exposure. That does not mean that global rates are the baseline; they are an upward force on expectations that local ETB markets cannot sustain. That means workers in local markets are still underpaid, even when the global rates are above the local one. TSP-1 called this 'price volatility', where the best skilled workers are gradually priced out of local market reach as they learn of global rates. Six exit triggers emerged from two groups. Financial triggers: high commission rates (9 of 16 workers said so), burnout from income uncertainty, and the currency gap that lured talent to global USD-paying clients. Developmental triggers: no career pathways; lack of L&D support; a lack of engagement structures that leave

workers feeling transactional; what TSP-1 called the 'Invisible Worker Syndrome'. Combined with those things, they create an exit pressure that no one organisation can get rid of at one time. If we can't find career pathways, then we're going to find ourselves with a retention failure that's not going to be fixed with engagement. Where gig work offers no pathway to formal advancement, workers with long-term career ambitions will always think of it as transitional, as GW10 puts it. Businesses that want to retain high-performing gig workers need to build what TSP-1 refers to as a 'partnership model': a relationship that is much more than transactional project-by-project engagement, but professional recognition, development and the potential for longer-term commitment.

4.9 Cross-Cutting Findings: The Ethiopian Context

Several results from this study surpass the five themes and show conditions specific to the Ethiopian economic, political, and social setting. These results form a significant addition to the still-limited literature on gig work in sub-Saharan Africa, and they represent the contextual layer within which all five HRM domains operate.

4.9.1 Gig Work as Survival Strategy, not Extra money

The most analytically significant Ethiopian-specific finding in this study reframes a central assumption of the gig economy literature: rather than reflecting a deliberate entrepreneurial preference, gig work participation among the majority of participants appears to represent a rational economic response to constrained formal employment opportunities. High graduate unemployment, limited formal sector absorption capacity and growing numbers of digitally capable young people without stable employment have all led to gig work being created as a necessity not a choice.

The 11-of-16 preference for income stability over flexibility that can be seen in Theme 2 is fully realized in this structural context. GW10 presented gig work as 'a stepping stone' to stable work in the future. GW5 pointed out the structural precariousness of what, from the outside, might look like a flexible career choice:

"*Many gig workers in Ethiopia work without any safety net, no sick pay, no insurance. If my laptop breaks or I get sick for a week, I lose everything." GW5 (2026).*

GW14 (Content Writer) said: ‘The first six months were incredibly challenging until I got my first five reviews.’ That was a time of uncompensated financial exposure that in the Ethiopian context was an enormous personal risk as well as a tolerable career investment. We can see the consequences of talent management design: solutions based on the idea that Ethiopian gig workers view flexibility as an end in itself are likely to miss the incentive structure of the workforce they are planning to manage.

If gig work is a structural economic response to the job market as opposed to an entrepreneurial lifestyle preference then we can see engagement models, compensation structures and support mechanisms that will meet the real needs of gig workers: income stability, professional recognition and career stability.

4.9.2 Currency hierarchy and the two-tier gig market

The ETB/USD currency differential does not just affect individual wages; it appears to set up a divided gig labour market in which access to USD-paying global clients implies a qualitative economic divide in the gig workforce itself. There is a fundamentally different gig economy for workers at the international level who are paid USD-denominated rates as well as for workers at home in ETB-denominated markets.

TSP-1 described the talent management consequences:

"*Many professional gig workers choose jobs that pay in USD or follow worldwide pay standards. When they compare such prospects to local offerings in ETB, their asking price increases dramatically to compensate for the gap in value and inflation and it causes a price fluctuation that is hard to regulate."* TSP-1*(2026).*

GW15 (Graphic Designer, local platforms) found that ‘most clients expect high-quality work at very low pricing,’ a constraint that workers on global platforms are better positioned to escape. GW9 highlighted the wider dynamic:

'Gig labor is undervalued in Ethiopia.' This currency-driven stratification within the gig economy is rarely studied in previous studies, which mainly focus on developed economy scenarios where a single currency system prevails.

4.9.3 Infrastructure instability as a recurring income shock.

Internet and power failure in Ethiopia is not just background; gig workers whose income depends on constant platform access become recurrent income shocks with direct financial implications. GW5 stated: 'Internet disruptions, prevalent here, absolutely end our income.' GW10 suggested a systemic investment: "We need better internet infrastructure and more local jobs to ensure we don't depend on international clients." Also from the employer point of view, TSP-1 shows how infrastructure constraints are part of the job selection criteria: workers who have 'backup power solutions, alternative internet sources and a figure-it-out attitude' are chosen. The normalisation of infrastructure workarounds as a valued professional talent demonstrates the breadth to which structural instability has been incorporated into gig work in Ethiopia and shows the limits of human adaptation as a substitute for systemic investment.

4.9.4 Informality as the Default Institutional Logic

In all five HRM areas, informality emerged as the main institutional rationale for gig work arrangements in Ethiopia. Recruitment was based on personal networks and not formal systems. Contracts (if there were any) were rarely explicitly communicated to workers. Performance assessment was mostly ad hoc. Payment arrangements were arranged case-by-case with delayed or missed payments being a frequent issue.

Dispute resolution methods were lacking in most situations: GW3 recognized the contractual part directly: 'In Ethiopia, challenges with payment methods and unambiguous freelancing contracts pose a key impediment to professional gig labor.' HRC-1 affirmed the organizational side: 'What is required is not frequently stated.' ETP-2 noted that the employment relationship is 'more performance- and outcome-based rather than permanent long-term employment', a description that views informality as a structural element rather than an exception.

This pervasive informality reflects broader institutional factors: a nascent regime for gig work in Ethiopia, a lack of legal protection for freelance employment relationships and no clear platform governance structures to protect workers. These conditions compound the individual HRM issues observed in Themes 1-5 and indicate that long-term improvement in gig talent management will be a systemic and policy-driven process, not an organisational one.

4.9.5 The Legitimacy Deficit: Social Undervaluation of Gig Work

Several participants noted that gig work lacks social and professional legitimacy in Ethiopia in ways that compound the economic and structural challenges already described. GW9 (Proofreader): 'Gig work is underrated in Ethiopia, and many people tend to overlook it.' GW3 (Freelance Recruiter): 'Freelance work is still not always fully appreciated or structured professionally. Sometimes the effort and time invested are much bigger than the financial reward.'

This legitimacy deficit exists in several layers: gig workers face difficulty negotiating fair rates with clients who do not appreciate independent professional work; younger workers face social pressure to seek formal employment rather than gig careers; and gig work is not recognized as a profession, certification, or regulatory recognition in Ethiopia. To solve this legitimacy deficit, through professional recognition, clear contractual norms, and public awareness, in this sample, seems as important as the structural and financial reforms that are outlined in Theme 5.

4.10 Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature and Theoretical Framework

The findings of this study both confirm established patterns in the global gig economy literature and qualify them for the structural realities of the Ethiopian context. Five points of comparison are particularly salient.

In recruitment and selection, the cold-start barrier experienced by 13 of 16 gig worker participants is consistent with Wood et al. (2019), who identify reputation systems as structural gatekeeping mechanisms that disadvantage new entrants regardless of competence. The near-total reliance on informal, network-based hiring observed across all three case organisations similarly aligns with Bateyo (2025), who finds that many firms continue to lack formal selection criteria for gig talent.

In engagement and motivation, the findings are consistent with Celestin and Vanitha (2023), who observe that autonomy drives initial engagement but that income insecurity progressively erodes it. The findings depart, however, from the "free agent" framing advanced by Manyika et al. (2016), in which gig work is presented primarily as a voluntary lifestyle choice. Within this

sample, the data instead indicate that gig work functions as a structural economic necessity for the majority of participants in Addis Ababa.

In skill development, the "buy, not build" pattern documented in this study is consistent with Matriano et al. (2023), who report a global absence of formal learning systems for freelance and gig talent. At the regional level, the findings also align with Evans-Uzosike and Okatta (2023), who find that African gig workers are largely required to self-fund and self-direct their own digital up-skilling.

In performance management, the evaluation opacity documented in this study, where workers are penalised by client assessments they cannot control, is consistent with Duggan et al. (2020). This study extends their work by showing that the same power asymmetries persist in non-platform, organisation-based gig settings where no algorithmic system is involved.

In retention and loyalty, the recommendation to move toward a partnership-based engagement model draws on Bateyo (2025), who argues that treating gig workers as strategic partners rather than interchangeable task-completers is essential to sustaining long-term loyalty and professional commitment.

Beyond their relationship to prior empirical studies, the findings also speak directly to the three theoretical frameworks underpinning this thesis.

Talent Management Theory (McDonnell & Collings, 2011) anticipates an integrated, strategic approach spanning acquisition, development, and retention. The findings indicate that gig talent management within the organisations studied falls short of this standard: recruitment, skill development, and evaluation operate as disconnected, largely informal processes rather than a coherent system. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964) is similarly only partly borne out: the near-universal "buy, not build" posture documented in Theme 3 treats workers' skills as costless to access rather than something requiring investment, a short-term rationality that, aggregated across the ecosystem, constrains both worker earning potential and overall talent quality. The partial exception at the Technology and Skills Platform, where investment did occur, reinforces rather than contradicts Becker's central logic.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) requires the most significant contextual qualification. Autonomy was experienced as meaningful only once a baseline of income security was met; in its absence, it functioned as exposure rather than freedom. This does not refute SDT so much as clarify a precondition, extrinsic security that the original formulation does not fully anticipate, but which appears necessary before autonomy, competence, and relatedness can sustain engagement in this setting.

Together, these engagements suggest the three frameworks remain analytically useful but require contextual qualification: Talent Management Theory describes an aspirational standard rather than current practice; Human Capital Theory's logic holds but reveals a collective action problem at the ecosystem level; and Self-Determination Theory's predictive power depends on a precondition frequently unmet in this setting.

4.11 Answers to the Research Questions

This section answers each of the four research questions that led to this study directly, drawing on the research results presented in Chapter Four and the discussion in Section 5.2

> **RQ1:** *How do Ethiopian gig workers and HR professionals on digital platforms view existing talent management practices (recruitment, engagement, performance evaluation, skill development, and retention)?*

Gig workers and HR professionals view existing talent management practices as informal, inconsistent and poorly structured. Recruitment was opaque and trust-based; engagement was informal; skill development was the worker's job; performance evaluation was unfair for 12 of 16 workers; and retention was mainly based on fair and timely payment, a basic extrinsic condition that organisations struggled to provide consistently.

> **RQ2:** *What are the key difficulties and enabling environments experienced by gig workers and organisations in managing and participating in Ethiopia's emerging gig labour market?*

The difficulties for gig workers are the cold-start trust barrier; chronic income instability; lack of L&D support; opaque evaluation systems; no career progression pathways. Ethiopian-specific challenges include the ETB/USD currency divide, infrastructure instability and a social legitimacy gap. For companies, challenges include verifying soft skills and commitment before hiring, retaining successful employees in a competitive global market and having HR systems suited for gig work.

Enabling environments identified include: the strong convergence of reform agendas of workers and employers, which will lay the groundwork for collaboration; the potential of ecosystem-level skill investment in the TSP model; structured criteria-communicated recruitment to bridge the transparency gap; and the retention advantage of payment reliability and clear briefs as organisational differentiators.

RQ3: *Where do gig workers' expectations and organizational HR strategies align or diverge across the five HRM domains?*

The analysis reveals a pattern of partial alignment in some domains and significant divergence in others. Strongest alignment was observed in the retention domain, where both workers and employers identified fair pay as the primary driver and burnout plus better opportunities elsewhere as the primary exit triggers. Strong alignment was also found in the skill development domain, where both groups confirmed that self-directed learning is the norm though workers viewed this as exploitative, while employers viewed it as an efficient outsourcing of development costs. Partial alignment was observed in the recruitment and performance evaluation domains: both sides acknowledged trust verification and evaluation subjectivity as shared problems, but differed on whose responsibility it was to address them. The biggest divergence was in the engagement area: workers attribute disengagement to structural income instability, and employers to worker multi-homing behaviour, each group diagnosing a different cause for this and thus suggesting a different remedy. This interpretive gap is important: it means organisations continue applying behavioural engagement solutions to a problem that is structural in origin, producing engagement strategies that are well-intentioned but systematically misaligned with the actual drivers of worker disengagement.

RQ4: *What strategic frameworks or HR practices can help organizations overcome challenges and capitalize on opportunities in managing gig workers in Ethiopia's digital economy?*

Three strategic orientations are emerging from the findings. First, a shift from transactional to partnership-based engagement where gig workers are treated as professionals in their own right, not only as interchangeable task-completers with clear expectations, future payment structures and professional recognition. Second, ecosystem-based skill investment with micro-L&D in the form of project-specific micro-L&D, portfolio development support and professional education. Third, a transparent evaluation process with pre-specified criteria, multi-source feedback and mechanisms for workers to respond to negative assessments.Together, these represent a transition from the dominant plug-and-play model toward a sustainable gig talent management system consistent with the convergent reform agenda identified in this study.

4.12 Summary of Key Challenges and Opportunities in Gig Talent Management in Ethiopia

4.12.1 Key Challenges

The findings of this study identify together a set of interconnected challenges that are currently affecting gig talent management in Ethiopia. These challenges operate at three levels: domain level (in each HRM function), organisational level (management philosophy and capacity) and structural level (economic, institutional and sociocultural context of Ethiopian economy).

At the domain level five HRM gaps were identified. In recruitment, the biggest problem is the lack of transparency in informal, network-based hiring which leaves workers without clear expectations and organisations without formal verification mechanisms. In engagement, the main difficulty is income instability, which erodes intrinsic motivation and leads to disengagement in ways that current organisational strategies designed for permanent employees are not able to achieve. The primary challenge in skill development is the systemic rejection of gig workers from enterprise L&D investment that limits their capacities, restricts their earning potential and creates a long-term cycle of underinvestment.

In performance evaluation, the main challenge is opacity of evaluation - there is a lack of clear criteria, accessible appeal mechanisms and a contextual weighting process that would make assessment outcomes fair and equitable. In retention the biggest problem is the absence of career paths and the accumulated financial and developmental exits identified in Theme 5. At the structural level, three Ethiopian-specific conditions compound these domain-level challenges. The ETB/USD currency hierarchy produces a bifurcated labour market in which organisations operating in local ETB markets are structurally unable to compete with global USD-paying clients for the most skilled workers. Infrastructure instability particularly internet and power unreliability creates recurring income shocks that deepen the financial precariousness already documented at the engagement level. The social legitimacy deficit in gig work is undervalued as an occupational category, causing clients to be unwilling to pay fair market rates and undermining the professional recognition that workers feel is necessary to remain committed.

4.12.2 Key Opportunities

Alongside these challenges, the findings identify a set of meaningful opportunities that suggest a more sustainable gig talent management model is achievable within the Ethiopian context not as a distant aspiration, but as a near-term organisational and policy priority.

The most significant opportunity is the convergence of reform agenda among workers and employers across this study. Both groups identified fair pay, clear contractual structures, organized professional status and equal evaluation systems as top priorities. Such a common diagnosis provides a solid basis for collaboration in the future: the gap is not one of motivation or awareness but implementation capacity and coordination of systems.

The TSP's ecosystem-level skill investment model represents a demonstrated organisational opportunity proof that structured L&D for gig workers is operationally feasible within the Ethiopian context and produces mutual benefits for workers (marketability and professional development) and organisations (higher-quality output and stronger worker commitment). This model is replicable and adaptable to other organisational contexts within the study.

The 'demo-first' recruitment approach demonstrated by ETP represents a low-cost, high-validity improvement to gig talent selection that any organisation can implement without significant resource investment. By shifting selection from credential-based to performance-based

assessment, it addresses both the trust verification problem and the Expert vs. Educator gap identified in the tutoring sector and the underlying principle is applicable to other gig work domains.

The convergent appetite for portable reputation systems identified by both workers (who want their track record to transfer across engagements) and employers (who want verified performance data before committing to new workers) represents an ecosystem-level opportunity that, if developed, would significantly reduce the cold-start barrier that currently disadvantages all new gig work entrants. This is an opportunity that may be best pursued through industry association, platform collaboration, or policy initiative rather than individual organisational action.The strong preference for stability among gig workers represents an opportunity in itself: a workforce that is reflective, engaged, and willing to commit, if organizations and policymakers meet the structural conditions that make commitment viable

4.13 Theoretical Contributions of the Study

This study offers three theoretical contributions to the existing literature on gig work, talent management and human capital in emerging markets.

First, it provides a contextually relevant perspective on gig work motivation in those emerging economies. The fact that 69% of individuals reported that stability was more important than flexibility challenges the dominant autonomy-first framing by (Manyika et al., 2016; Lepanjuuri et al., 2018). The results suggest that extrinsic needs, such as income stability, need to be met before intrinsic motivators can be maintained. In standard SDT formulations, intrinsic and extrinsic motivators operate in parallel; this study suggests they operate sequentially in conditions of structural economic constraint, with financial security functioning as a prerequisite. This warrants further empirical investigation in comparable emerging economy settings.

Second, the study proposes the concept of ‘evaluation opacity’ understood as the absence of transparent criteria through which client assessments are translated into opportunity allocation decisions, compounded by the disproportionate weight carried by single negative assessments. It is important to distinguish this concept from ‘algorithmic management’ as described by Duggan et al. (2020) and Rosenblat and Stark (2016), which refers specifically to automated, platform-mediated control systems. Evaluation opacity, as proposed here, is a broader governance concept: the data demonstrate that the same pattern of unfair, opaque, and disproportionate

evaluation operates in organisation-based gig contexts where no algorithm is involved including informal supervisor feedback, parent-driven tutor ratings, and direct client assessments. The contribution of this study is precisely to show that evaluation opacity is not a product of algorithmic systems but a structural feature of gig work governance more broadly, present wherever evaluation criteria are informal, unilateral, and inaccessible to the worker being evaluated. This concept extends existing performance management scholarship beyond its platform-centric focus and offers a preliminary framework applicable to the full range of gig work governance arrangements.

Third, the study documents a currency-stratified gig labour market structure, in which access to USD-paying global clients constitutes a qualitative divide within the Ethiopian gig workforce itself. This construct which produces fundamentally different career trajectories, earnings ceilings, and organisational relationships for workers in the two tiers has not been described in the existing literature and warrants further theoretical and empirical development in African and emerging economy contexts.

Beyond their empirical value, the findings carry theoretical implications for three established frameworks; Self-Determination Theory, Human Capital Theory, and Talent Management Theory, each of which requires contextual qualification when applied to emerging economy gig labour markets.

4.14 Limitations of the Study

The sample of twenty-two participants across three organisations cannot represent the full range of gig work in Addis Ababa or Ethiopia. In informal transportation, domestic services and agriculture-adjacent gig work, we did not include these, and findings can not be generalized beyond the professional urban sector. Second, data collected at a single point may not represent career trajectories or seasonal income variation. Social desirability bias is a known risk: HR respondents may have presented practices more favourably than internal realities warrant, and workers may have moderated critical accounts. This protocol reduces but fails to remove entirely such risks.

The exploratory nature of this study is to emphasize depth of understanding over breadth. The five themes are well-designed but cannot be viewed as causal explanations. The relationships

between variables are not established by observations or statistical analysis but from participant testimony.

4.15 Directions for Future Research

Researchers could confirm whether the "stepping stone" pattern is a permanent or just a temporary phenomenon in the current development stage of the gig economy by conducting a longitudinal study of gig worker career trajectories in the Ethiopian gig economy over a period of two to five years. They could also obtain evidence of skill development, earnings progression, and occupational mobility.

Second, a quantitative study with a larger and more representative sample would enable the themes identified here to be tested for prevalence and statistical significance across a wider population of Ethiopian gig workers and organisations.

Third, comparative studies on gig talent management in other African economies such as Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, where gig ecosystems are more developed would put the Ethiopian data in a regional context and offer lessons for policy and practice.

Fourth, future work could explore the gender aspects of gig work in Ethiopia, which was not studied systematically in this study but is at least suggestive that there are certain gender-specific structural opportunities and challenges for women gig workers.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary

This study explored the challenges and opportunities in gig worker talent management in Ethiopia's digital economy through an exploratory multiple case study design. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted in three organisations in Addis Ababa (human resources consultant, tutoring service provider and education technology platform) with sixteen gig workers and six HR professionals.

These findings have been found across five HRM domains and share the same themes: workers bear the majority of the risk and cost while organisations benefit from flexibility and cost cuts. Recruitment was informal and trust-based and workers were not given any clear expectations. Work engagement was undermined by income uncertainty, with 69% of employees choosing stability rather than flexibility. The workers' development was seen as the sole responsibility of the worker and the 'buy, not build' model was adopted. Performance evaluation was perceived as opaque and unfair with no formal systems in three of six organisations. Retention was driven by fair and timely payment and six exit triggers were identified for financial and developmental dimensions.

These findings are also informed by Ethiopian-specific structural factors such as the ETB/USD currency divide, infrastructure instability and a cultural legitimacy gap around gig work. All together they point to a gig ecosystem at a critical early stage, and its future will depend on how organisations, platforms and policymakers turn to more equitable gig talent management to better create a more sustainable gig talent management model.

5.2 Conclusions

This study set out to explore the challenges and opportunities in the talent management of gig workers in Ethiopia, through an exploratory multiple case study of selected organisations in Addis Ababa. The results from twenty-two semi-structured interviews in three organisations in Addis Ababa provide a contextually grounded and exploratory picture of a gig ecosystem that is newly emerging, informal, and opportunity-laden.

The overall idea of this study is that gig talent management in Ethiopia is characterized by a systematic pattern of worker burden-bearing and is present in all five HRM domains examined. Workers enter gig relationships without much knowledge about what is expected of them. They stay engaged in a time of income instability without organisational buffers or support structures. They learn their own skills at their own cost and risk. They are evaluated through opaque, often unfair systems and no meaningful appeal mechanisms. And they leave when financial or developmental conditions become unbearable for them, finding no career pathways or stability mechanisms in the gig relationship itself. And in all five domains, organizations benefit from the flexibility and cost savings of gig work and offload the risk and cost of gig work onto the workers who make it work.

The Ethiopian case is unique in that the layered impact of structural conditions (high graduate unemployment resulting in gig work being necessary; the ETB/USD currency hierarchy dividing the labour market; infrastructure instability that leads to recurrent income shocks; and the social legitimacy gap that puts gig work outside formal recognition frameworks) all create a lot of opportunities in the workplace. The workers are not rejecting gig work, they're calling for stable work but for the structure that would make it sustainable: reliable income, fair evaluation, meaningful skill development and professional recognition.

Ethiopia is at the beginning of its gig economy and a particularly important stage. In future years, the organisations, platforms and policymakers will need to decide whether this ecosystem will distribute its benefits in a fair manner or in a way that reproduces on a large scale the structural disadvantages of the people that have been in this study alone.

The future is not set. If firms move from transactional to partnership models when hiring transparently, getting them to talk to each other, sharing skills and being evaluated in a fair manner, and if policymakers come up with ways to provide income floors, portable reputations and professional recognition for gig workers, Ethiopia's gig economy could turn into a model that is sustainable for the future. If not, the future is one of a two-tier labour market in which a small fraction of people worldwide benefit and the rest of us are stuck in unstable, undervalued and unsupported working arrangements.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, discussion and challenge-opportunity synthesis presented above, we offer specific recommendations for organizations working with gig workers in Ethiopia and platform operators and intermediaries. Policymaker recommendations are limited to areas clearly demonstrated in the data.

5.3.1 Recommendations for Organisations

Table 8: Organizational Recommendations by HRM Domain

HRM Domain	Challenge Identified	Recommended Action
Recruitment & Selection	Informal, network-driven recruitment; expectations not communicated to workers; portfolio based and experience dependent selection	Gig recruitment should be formalized through selection criteria, written briefs, and clear performance expectations. When possible, use demo or portfolio selection. Provide internship and mentorship programs for new graduates in the gig market in order to reduce reliance on experienced candidates and build the talent pool
Engagement & Motivation	Absence of formal engagement strategies for gig workers; income instability as the primary structural driver of disengagement	Create payment systems based on milestones for project completion so that they can get income in the process. Reward consistency and quality through incentives (performance bonuses, priority assignments, public recognition, etc.) and incentive mechanisms. Think of it as a long-term partnership and not a one-off transaction.
Skill Development	Buy, not build' posture; L&D exclusively for permanent staff	Introduce project-specific micro-L&D targeted skill inputs that improve output quality and signal investment in worker development. Consider ecosystem-level skill support as a recruitment and retention differentiator.
Performance Evaluation	Informal PMS; evaluation opacity; disproportionate weight of single negative assessments	Develop structured evaluation frameworks with pre-specified criteria communicated before engagement begins. Use multi-source feedback and contextual assessment to reduce subjectivity. Create accessible channels for workers to respond to negative evaluations.

Retention & Loyalty	No career pathways; six cumulative exit triggers across financial and developmental dimensions	Develop tiered engagement models that reward high-performing gig workers with more complex, better-compensated work over time. Formally acknowledge gig worker contributions. Build inflation-responsive contract frameworks where currency volatility is a factor. Invest in L&D and career-adjacent recognition to address developmental exit triggers.

5.3.2 Recommendations for Platform Operators and Intermediaries

Platform operators and gig work intermediaries operating in Ethiopia should consider the following structural reforms, identified through both worker and employer perspectives in this study.

First, commission structures should be reviewed with worker sustainability in mind. Nine of sixteen gig workers cited high commission rates as an exit trigger, suggesting that current commission models may be self-defeating extracting maximum short-term revenue while accelerating worker attrition and degrading the talent pool over time.

Second, evaluation systems should be redesigned to include contextual weighting and open appeal mechanisms. In an ecosystem that needs more platforms where contextual assessment differentiates worker-controllable from worker-uncontrollable, transparent appeal mechanisms will be able to help workers to be satisfied and quality of output to be achieved.

Third, portable reputation systems should be developed that allow workers to transfer verified performance records in their organisations.

5.3.3 Recommendations for Policymakers

First, a legal and regulatory framework for gig work should be developed to guarantee minimum social protection, dispute resolution and contract laws without the administrative burden of full employment classification. for independent workers so that the Ethiopian regulatory framework would work in the country.

Second, gig work as an occupational category must be recognized as a legitimate profession by formal credentialing pathways, educational programs, and public communication initiatives. The

legitimacy gap hinders access to high-quality talent and client willingness to pay fair market rates.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

College of Business and Economics

MBA Program

The purpose of this study is to gather information on: "Challenges and Opportunities in Talent Management of Gig Workers in Ethiopia: An Exploratory Multiple Case Study of Selected Companies in Addis Ababa."

Dear Sir/Madam,

Noah Hailemelekot: I am a graduate student at Addis Ababa University, College of Business and Economics, pursuing a Master of Business Administration (MBA). The research is part of my academic preparation for the MBA. I am doing it for academic purposes. The study aims to better understand how talent is recruited, developed, managed, and retained within Ethiopia's growing digital and gig economy. I want you to answer it in your full and complete way.

With your approval, I will record the conversation in order to ensure accuracy. Your answers will be kept private, and your name will not be mentioned in any report.

If you have any questions or need clarification, please contact me:

Email:Noahhaile64@gmail.com

Phone: +251908786123

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: Gig Workers

Background and Context

Q1: Can you tell me about yourself and your work?

Probes:

- What type of gig work do you do?
- How long have you been in the gig economy?
- Which platforms or organisations do you currently work with?
- Is this your primary income or supplementary?

Q2: What motivated you to start working as a gig worker rather than seeking traditional employment?

Probes:

- Was it flexibility? Income? Lack of alternatives?
- What did you expect vs. what you experienced?

Section 1: Recruitment and Selection

Q1: Can you walk me through how you first joined the platform or organisation — from the moment you decided to apply to when you received your first job?

Probes:

- How did you hear about it?
- What steps were required to register or get started?
- Was there any screening process (e.g., tests, portfolio, verification)?
- How long did it take to receive your first opportunity?
- What challenges or difficulties did you face during this process?
- What were your expectations before joining, and how did the actual process compare?

Q2: How clear and transparent was the process of getting started and succeeding?

Probes:

- Were expectations clearly communicated at the beginning?
- Did you understand what you needed to do to succeed?

- Were there things you only learned after starting?
- Do you think there are any “unwritten rules” for success?
- What do you think should have been made clearer from the beginning?

Q3: To what extent do you think the system for getting opportunities is fair?

Probes:

- Do all workers have equal chances, especially at the beginning?
- Do you think some workers are favoured over others? Why?
- What do you think actually determines who gets selected?
- Have you ever felt disadvantaged or overlooked?
- How would you expect a fair system to work, compared to your experience?

Q4: Have you changed how you present yourself or approach work in order to succeed?

Probes:

- Have you modified your profile, pricing, or work strategy?
- What changes made the biggest difference in getting opportunities?
- Did you learn these changes through guidance or trial and error?
- Do you feel you are adapting to clear rules or figuring things out yourself?
- Does success depend more on skill or understanding how the system works?

Section 2: Engagement and Motivation

Q1: How would you describe your overall experience working in gig work so far?

Probes:

- What do you enjoy most about the work?
- What do you find most frustrating?
- Do you feel connected to the organisation or mainly using it as a tool?
- Would you recommend this type of work to others? Why or why not?
- What were your expectations before starting, and how does your experience compare?

Q2: What keeps you motivated to continue working?

Probes:

- Is it mainly income, flexibility, independence, or something else?

- What aspects of the work feel most rewarding?
- Can you describe a time when you felt highly motivated? What caused it?
- What specifically makes you continue instead of stopping?

Q3: Have there been times when you felt like reducing your effort or stopping work?

Probes:

- What caused that feeling?
- Was it related to income, treatment, lack of opportunities, or something else?
- What was the closest you came to quitting?
- Why didn't you leave (or why did you stay)?
- What would have needed to change in that moment for you to stay more engaged?

Q4: Do you feel recognised or valued for the work you do?

Probes:

- Do ratings, reviews, or feedback reflect your effort accurately?
- Are there ways to be recognised beyond ratings?
- Do you feel "replaceable" or important?
- What would make you feel more valued?
- What level of recognition did you expect when you started, compared to now?

Section 3: Skill Development and Learning

Q1: What skills are most important for you to succeed in your work?

Probes:

- Technical skills, soft skills, or context-specific skills?
- How have your skills changed since you started?
- What skills did you lack at the beginning?
- What skills did you expect would matter most, and has that changed?

Q2: How have you developed or improved your skills since joining?

Probes:

- Self-learning (online courses, practice, tutorials)?
- Learning through experience or trial and error?

- Learning from other workers or informal networks?
- Any formal training or structured programmes?
- Who is mainly responsible for your learning, you or the organisation?
- Did you expect to receive more structured support when you started? Why or why not?

Q3: Does the organisation or platform provide any support for skill development?

Probes:

- Training programmes, resources, guidelines, or feedback?
- Are these helpful or not? Why?
- If no support exists, how does that affect you?
- Do you think organisations should invest in worker development? Why or why not?
- What level of support did you expect, compared to what you receive?

Q4: To what extent do your skills actually affect your opportunities or income?

Probes:

- Do better skills lead to more jobs or higher pay?
- Are there other factors that matter more (e.g., ratings, visibility, timing)?
- Have you improved your skills but not seen better results? Why?
- What matters more: skill level or platform visibility?

Q5: Do you feel your skills are properly recognised and valued?

Probes:

- How does skill level affect your earnings or opportunities?
- Is there a clear way to demonstrate or signal higher skill?
- Do you think some skilled workers are undervalued? Why?
- What would a fair system of recognising skill look like to you?

Section 4: Performance Management

Q1: How is your performance evaluated?

Probes:

- Ratings, reviews, or informal feedback?
- How often are you evaluated?

- Who evaluates you (clients, organisation, or both)?
- What did you expect the evaluation system to be like before you started?

Q2: Do you receive feedback on your work, and how useful is it?

Probes:

- Do you receive feedback from clients, the organisation, or both?
- Is the feedback clear, detailed, and actionable?
- Do you have opportunities to improve based on feedback?
- Have you ever received feedback that was unclear or unfair?

Q3: How fair and transparent do you think the evaluation system is?

Probes:

- Do you think ratings accurately reflect your performance?
- Have you experienced unfair ratings or reviews?
- Do you feel in control of your performance, or controlled by the system? Why?
- Have you ever changed your behaviour just to avoid bad ratings?
- What would a fair evaluation system look like to you?

Q4: What happens when your performance is rated poorly or you receive negative feedback?

Probes:

- Are there consequences (e.g., fewer jobs, warnings, suspension)?
- Is there any support to help you improve?
- Can you appeal or challenge ratings?
- How do these consequences affect how you work?
- Do you feel pressure or stress related to maintaining ratings?

Section 5: **Retention & Loyalty**

Q1: What factors influence your decision to continue working in gig work?

Probes:

- Income, flexibility, independence, or other factors?
- What keeps you coming back?
- Why do you choose this arrangement over alternatives (if applicable)?

- What did you expect would keep you engaged when you started, and is that still true today?

Q2: Have you ever considered leaving? Why or why not?

Probes:

- What factors made you consider leaving?
- Was it related to income, treatment, or lack of growth?
- Have you ever left a platform or organisation before? Why?
- What would make you leave immediately?
- What would need to change for you to stay long-term?

Q3: Do you see yourself continuing gig work in the long term?

Probes:

- Why or why not?
- Do you see this as a career, temporary option, or stepping stone?
- What would make it sustainable for you long-term?
- What concerns you most about continuing in this type of work?

Q4: What types of support or benefits, if any, do you receive?

Probes:

- Income stability, training, equipment, or other support?
- How important are these to you?
- What benefits do you think should be provided?
- How does the absence of these benefits affect your decision to stay?
- What level of support did you expect when you started, compared to now?

Closing

Is there anything else about your experience as a gig worker that we haven't discussed that you think is important for me to understand?

Do you have any questions for me about the research?

APPENDIX B: Semi-Structured Interview Guide, HR Professionals and Organisational Managers

Section 1: Recruitment and Selection

Q1: Can you walk me through how workers join your organisation — from initial application to receiving their first opportunity?

Probes:

- What steps are involved in onboarding?
- Are there screening mechanisms (tests, verification, portfolio review)?
- How long does it typically take for workers to get their first assignment?

Q2: In practice, what determines which workers receive more opportunities, especially at the early stage?

Probes:

- Role of ratings, activity level, skills, or availability?
- Are these decisions automated or manually influenced?
- Are some workers naturally advantaged within the system?

Q3: How do workers learn what is required to succeed in your organisation?

Probes:

- Are expectations formally communicated or learned over time?
- Do workers generally understand how the system works?
- Are there gaps between what is communicated and how the system actually operates?

Q4: How would you describe the fairness of the system in terms of access to opportunities?

Probes:

- What mechanisms are there to ensure fairness?
- Are there known challenges or biases in the system?
- How do you handle complaints about unfair treatment?

Section 2: Engagement and Motivation

Q1: How does your organisation encourage workers to remain active and engaged?

Probes:

- Incentives (financial or non-financial)?
- Flexibility, autonomy, or recognition mechanisms?
- Communication or support systems?

Q2: Why do you think workers continue working with your organisation?

Probes:

- Income, flexibility, lack of alternatives, or other factors?
- Do motivations change over time?
- Do you think workers stay because they want to, or because they need to?

Q3: What typically causes workers to become less active or stop working with your organisation?

Probes:

- Income instability, lack of opportunities, or other factors?
- How does your organisation respond to this?
- Are these patterns tracked or analysed?

Section 3: Skill Development

Q1: What role does your organisation play in supporting or developing worker skills?

Probes:

- Are training programmes or resources provided?
- Is skill development expected to be self-driven by workers?

Q2: In practice, what matters more for success: worker skill level or other factors like visibility, ratings, or availability?

Probes:

- How are skills assessed or recognised?
- Do higher-skilled workers consistently receive better opportunities?
- Are there cases where skill does not translate into success?

Q3: How does your organisation decide whether or not to invest in worker development?

Probes:

- What cost-benefit considerations are involved?
- Does the non-employee status of gig workers affect this decision?
- What return on investment would justify such investment?

Section 4: Performance Management

Q1: How is worker performance evaluated in your organisation?

Probes:

- Ratings, reviews, or informal feedback mechanisms?
- Role of clients vs. organisational systems in the evaluation?

Q2: How do you assess whether performance evaluations are fair and accurate?

Probes:

- How are biased or unfair ratings handled?
- Are there mechanisms for appeal or correction?
- Are there known limitations of the evaluation system?

Q3: How do performance evaluations influence worker behaviour in your organisation?

Probes:

- Do workers change their behaviour to avoid negative evaluations?
- Is this an intended feature of the system?
- Does the evaluation system create pressure or stress for workers?

Section 5: **Retention & Loyalty**

Q1: How does your organisation approach worker retention?

Probes:

- Is retaining workers a stated priority?
- Are there strategies specifically aimed at keeping high-performing workers?

Q2: Do you see gig work as a sustainable long-term option for workers in your organisation?

Probes:

- What opportunities for growth or stability exist within the current model?

- What are the limitations of the current arrangement?
- What would need to change to make it more sustainable?

Q3: 'How does your organisation balance flexibility for workers with stability and security?'

Probes:

- Why is flexibility prioritised (if it is)?
- Are there trade-offs the organisation knowingly makes?
- Are there plans to introduce more structured support for workers?

Closing

Is there anything else about your organisation's approach to managing gig workers that we haven't discussed, that you think is important for me to understand?

Do you have any questions for me about the research?

APPENDIX C: Coding Framework and Thematic Map

This appendix presents the initial coding framework developed during the open coding phase of thematic analysis. Codes were generated independently for each participant group using Microsoft Excel, then merged into five overarching themes through category coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). All participant identifiers have been anonymised: gig workers are coded GW1–GW16, and HR/manager respondents are coded HRC-1, HRC-2, TSP-1, TSP-2, ETP-1, and ETP-2.

Table 9: Open coding results from gig worker participants

No.	HRM Domain	Participants	Initial Code	Notes
1	Recruitment & Selection	GW1, GW2, GW3	Reputation-based exclusion of newcomers	Stronger mechanism
2	Recruitment & Selection	GW5, GW8, GW9	Review and portfolio paradox for new entrants	Core mechanism
3	Recruitment & Selection	GW2, GW15	High competition and experience bias	Structural barrier
4	Recruitment & Selection	GW9	Necessity-driven entry into gig work	Motivational context
5	Performance	GW1, GW5,	High vulnerability to negative	Power dynamic

	Management	GW15	ratings	
6	Performance Management	GW5, GW2	Unfair ratings due to external/uncontrollable factors	Fairness issue
7	Performance Management	GW8	Subjectivity in client evaluation	Evaluation challenge
8	Performance Management	GW5, GW2	Algorithmic and reputational control over opportunities	Systemic control
9	Performance Management	GW1, GW15	Long recovery from rating damage	Behavioural pressure
10	Engagement & Motivation	Multiple	Flexibility and autonomy as core non-financial incentive	Positive motivator
11	Engagement & Motivation	GW3, GW5	Income instability and financial anxiety	Core precarity
12	Engagement & Motivation	GW1, GW16	Workload uncertainty and waiting stress	Emotional toll
13	Engagement & Motivation	GW3	Intrinsic motivation through impact and passion	Positive dimension
14	Engagement & Motivation	GW2	Continuous learning as personal growth motivator	Positive
15	Engagement & Motivation	GW3	Need for emotional resilience	Coping mechanism
16	Skill Development	GW2, GW1	Self-directed and informal skill development	Dominant pattern
17	Skill Development	GW5, GW8	Skills–rewards mismatch	Structural gap
18	Skill Development	GW4, GW15	Perceived unfair revenue sharing	Exploitation perception
19	Skill Development	GW10	Global price competition undermining local skill value	Contextual pressure
20	Skill Development	GW1	Continuous self-upgrading pressure	Self-management demand
21	Retention & Loyalty	Multiple	Strong preference for income stability over flexibility	Core tension
22	Retention & Loyalty	GW9, GW15	High commission as exit trigger	Economic disincentive
23	Retention & Loyalty	GW15	Demand for payment security and protection	Worker expectation
24	Retention & Loyalty	Multiple	Gig work perceived as temporary stepping stone	Career orientation
25	Transversal	GW3, GW6	Payment delays and insecurity	Systemic issue
26	Transversal	GW2, GW15	Poor client communication and	Relational

			unrealistic expectations	challenge
27	Transversal	GW5	Absence of social protection and benefits	Structural precarity
28	Transversal	GW15	Burden of unpaid revisions	Hidden labour cost
29	Transversal	GW1	High self-discipline and self-management pressure	Individual burden
30	Transversal	GW3	Client unreliability and wasted effort	Relational risk

Table 10: Open coding results of HR/Manager Participants

No.	HRM Domain	Participant	Initial Code	Notes
1	Recruitment & Selection	HRC-1	Strong reliance on informal recruitment networks	Informal hiring practices
2	Recruitment & Selection	HRC-1	Portfolio-centric selection mechanism	Evidence-based selection
3	Recruitment & Selection	TSP-1	Global currency disparity in talent competition	USD/ETB structural gap
4	Recruitment & Selection	ETP-1	Expert vs Educator gap in worker selection	Skill–communication mismatch
5	Recruitment & Selection	Multiple	Reliability and professionalism prioritised over brilliance	Reliability premium in selection
6	Performance Management	HRC-1	Absence of formal performance management system	No formal PMS
7	Performance Management	ETP-1	Heavy reliance on student/parent/client feedback	Client-driven evaluation
8	Performance Management	TSP-1	Milestone and output-based evaluation approach	Output-focused assessment
9	Performance Management	Multiple	Short project cycles limit depth of assessment	Short-term contracts constrain evaluation
10	Engagement & Motivation	HRC-1	No specific engagement strategies for gig workers	Systemic exclusion from engagement
11	Engagement & Motivation	TSP-1	Output-based autonomy as engagement mechanism	Flexible professionalism model
12	Engagement & Motivation	ETP-1	Recognition through worker-impact feedback	Emotional recognition via impact
13	Engagement & Motivation	Multiple	Irregular projects and payment delays reduce motivation	Workflow inconsistency as demotivator
14	Skill Development	HRC-1	No training programmes for gig workers	Complete exclusion from structured L&D

15	Skill Development	TSP-1	Plug-and-play talent model: buy, don't build	Transactional approach to talent
16	Skill Development	ETP-1 / TSP-1	Limited informal mentorship and practical exposure	Ad-hoc and experiential learning only
17	Retention & Loyalty	HRC-1	Retention driven by scarcity of good alternatives	Scarcity-based retention strategy
18	Retention & Loyalty	Multiple	Better financial opportunities cause high turnover	External financial pull as exit driver
19	Retention & Loyalty	TSP-1	Project burnout from intense short cycles	Burnout from high-intensity work
20	Retention & Loyalty	Multiple	Need to shift from transactional to partnership model	Strategic partnership aspiration
21	Cross-Cutting	TSP-1	Currency volatility (USD vs ETB) affecting negotiations	Currency disparity in rate-setting
22	Cross-Cutting	Multiple	Multi-homing and divided worker commitment	Workers balancing multiple clients
23	Cross-Cutting	HRC-1 / ETP-1	Poor expectation setting and unclear communication	Lack of clear organisational expectations
24	Cross-Cutting	TSP-1	Need for dynamic and agile compensation frameworks	Adaptive payment structures required

Table 11: Category-to-Theme Mapping

The following table shows how initial codes were grouped into categories, and how categories from both participant groups were merged into the five overarching themes reported in Chapter Four.

Table 11: Category coding - Category - Theme Mapping

Theme No.	**Gig Worker Categories**	**HR/Manager Categories**	**Overarching Theme**
1	Reputation-based exclusion; portfolio paradox; experience bias; necessity-driven entry	Informal recruitment networks; portfolio selection; reliability premium; Expert vs Educator gap	Structural Barriers to Entry and Talent Acquisition
2	Income instability; workload uncertainty; flexibility vs	No formal engagement strategies;	Engagement, Motivation, and the Flexibility–

	stability tension; emotional resilience	output-based autonomy; workflow inconsistency as demotivator	Stability Paradox
3	Self-directed learning; skills–rewards mismatch; unfair revenue sharing; self-upgrading pressure	No structured L&D; plug-and-play talent model; ad-hoc mentorship only	Skill Development and Organisational Investment Gaps
4	Vulnerability to negative ratings; unfair/external ratings; subjectivity; long rating recovery	Absence of formal PMS; client-driven evaluation; output-based assessment; short-cycle limitations	Performance Evaluation and Contested Fairness
5	Stability preference; commission as exit trigger; gig work as stepping stone; payment security demand	Scarcity-based retention; external financial pull; burnout; transactional vs partnership model	Retention, Sustainability, and the Need for Systemic Reform

Appendix D: Sample Coded Interview Transcript

This appendix presents a sample coded transcript from one HR/manager participant (HRC-1) interviewed as part of this study. The transcript demonstrates the manual Excel-based coding process applied across all 22 interviews, showing how raw participant responses were assigned initial codes that subsequently aggregated into the five overarching themes reported in Chapter 4.

The coding process involved three stages: (1) open coding, reading each response and assigning a descriptive initial code; (2) category coding, grouping related codes under sub-category labels; and (3) thematic synthesis, merging sub-categories into the five final themes through cross-participant pattern analysis. This transcript illustrates stages 1 and 2 in practice.

Participant Code	HRC-1
Role	Marketing Manager (HR/Manager participant group)
Organisation	HRC (anonymised)
Gig Worker Types	Graphic designers, event planners, printing specialists

Managed	
Interview Format	Semi-structured, in-person, conducted in English
Data Collection Period	March 2026

Section 1: Recruitment and Entry

Interview Question: How do you recruit and select gig workers?

Participant Response (verbatim/Quoted)	Initial Code Applied	Theme
"Hiring is done via recommendation through close friends or professional connections."	Strong reliance on informal networks	**Theme 1:** Recruitment & Selection
"We also post jobs on the portal and look for alignment of experiences with the job requirement in the JD — three shortlisted candidates are then contacted."	Hybrid recruitment: informal + formal channel use; portfolio-centric selection	Recruitment & Selection
"Portfolios of candidates are chosen as a primary way of verification. We don't see their activity — more focus on their skills and portfolios."	Portfolio-centric selection; experience-biased entry barrier	Recruitment & Selection
"What is expected is not usually communicated."	Absence of pre-entry expectation communication; transparency gap	Recruitment & Selection
"No structured systems to ensure fairness, we just make sure to use multiple channels to reach out to candidates to ensure a diversified candidate pool."	Absence of formal fairness mechanisms; multi-channel outreach as informal substitute	Recruitment & Selection

Section 2: Engagement and Motivation

Interview Question: How do you keep gig workers engaged and motivated?

Participant Response (verbatim/Quoted)	Initial Code Applied	Theme

Participant Response (verbatim/Quoted)	Initial Code Applied	Theme
"There are no employee engagement strategies specifically for gig workers."	Systemic exclusion from formal engagement frameworks	**Theme 2: Engagement & Motivation**
"We invite them but can't include them in normal employee engagement activities since the flexibility of gig workers makes them unavailable, they usually decline to participate."	Flexibility as barrier to organisational integration; structural exclusion rationalised by worker behaviour	**Theme 2: Engagement & Motivation**
"Gig workers do have a lot of opportunities and the amount of work being little aids in motivation, plus the flexibility of their job keeps them motivated."	Assumed autonomy-as-motivation; limited understanding of income instability as demotivator	**Theme 2: Engagement & Motivation**
"Disengagement usually occurs when the expectations of the company don't align with the skills and abilities of the worker — responded to by dismissal and finding alternatives."	Transactional disengagement response; replacement over retention strategy	**Theme 2: Engagement & Motivation**

Section 3: Learning and Development

Interview Question: What role does your organisation play in skill development for gig workers?

Participant Response (verbatim/Quoted)	Initial Code Applied	Theme
"There are no training and learning programs designed separtely for gig workers, they are expected to have enough skills to operate in that job role. Learning is expected to be self-driven."	Complete exclusion from structured L&D; self-directed learning as default organisational expectation	**Theme 3: Skill Development**
"L&D programs are only for permanent workers or 9-to-5 ones."	Formal/informal worker binary; gig workers excluded by employment category	**Theme 3: Skill Development**

Section 4: Performance Management

Interview Question: How is gig worker performance evaluated in your organisation?

Participant Response (verbatim/Quoted)	Initial Code Applied	Theme
"There are no formal PMS — performance evaluations are done via informal methods of feedback."	Absence of formal performance management system; informal feedback as substitute	**Theme 4: Performance Management**
"Gig workers usually react negatively to negative feedback and alter their behaviour."	Disproportionate behavioural impact of informal evaluation; evaluation opacity reinforcing anxiety	**Theme 4: Performance Management**

Section 5: Retention and Sustainability

Interview Question: How do you retain gig workers and what does long-term sustainability for gigs look like?

Participant Response (verbatim/Quoted)	Initial Code Applied	Theme
"we prioritize retention for gig workers since it is difficult to find alternate and it is done by paying a better salary and offering flexible work hours."	Scarcity-based retention strategy; financial compensation and flexibility as primary tools	**Theme 5:** Retention & Loyalty
"There are no structured growth positions for gigs, to get growth in position, workers must be in a full-time job. We may consider higher pay during contract renewal as growth."	Career ceiling for gig workers; incremental pay as only progression mechanism	Retention & Loyalty
"No relation between security and stability."	Structural disconnect between job security and income stability; no formal sustainability framework	**Theme 5:** Retention & Loyalty

D.6 Coding Summary: HRC-1 Transcript

The table below shows a view of all codes extracted from this transcript and their mapping to the five thesis themes.

Code No.	Initial Code	Sub-Category	Theme
C-H1	Strong reliance on informal networks	Recruitment informality	Theme 1
C-H2	Portfolio-centric selection; experience-biased entry barrier	Selection bias	Theme 1
C-H3	Absence of pre-entry expectation communication	Transparency gap	Theme 1
C-H4	Multi-channel outreach as fairness substitute	Fairness mechanism absence	Theme 1
C-H5	Systemic exclusion from formal engagement frameworks	Engagement absence	Theme 2
C-H6	Flexibility as barrier to organisational integration	Structural exclusion	Theme 2
C-H7	Assumed autonomy-as-motivation	Motivation misreading	Theme 2
C-H8	Transactional disengagement response	Replacement not retention	Theme 2
C-H9	Complete exclusion from structured L&D	L&D gap	Theme 3
C-H10	Formal/informal worker binary	Employment category exclusion	Theme 3
C-H11	Absence of formal PMS	Evaluation opacity	Theme 4
C-H12	Disproportionate behavioural impact of informal evaluation	Evaluation anxiety	Theme 4
C-H13	Scarcity-based retention strategy	Retention precarity	Theme 5
C-H14	Career ceiling for gig workers	Progression absence	Theme 5
C-H15	Security-stability structural disconnect	Sustainability gap	Theme 5

Note on Anonymization:

All In accordance with the ethical obligations assumed by participants, this transcript has been devoid of any identifying information. The participant's organisation is referred to throughout as 'HRC' (its anonymised designation). No actual names, institutional names, or identifiable details appear in the body of this thesis or its appendices. The participant was informed of this anonymisation procedure prior to the interview and provided written consent.

APPENDIX E: Ethical Clearance

This research (**challenges and opportunities in talent management of Gig workers in Ethiopia: a multiple case study of selected organizations in Addis Ababa**) was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards for academic research and received ethical approval from the **Department of Management, Addis Ababa University**.

Before the study was conducted, permission was obtained from the relevant organizations participating in the study. All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their rights to leave or refuse to participate.

The participation in this research was completely voluntary and consent forms were signed by all the interviewees prior to the interview process. Any personal identifiers were removed from the transcript of the interviews, and pseudonyms were used when reporting on their findings.

All data gathered through the research was intended for academic use only. Interview records, transcriptions, and other research documents were properly secured and only available to the researcher and his/her academic advisor. The research was conducted in line with confidentiality, anonymity, voluntary participation, informed consent, and respect for the participants throughout the research process.