

The Gig Economy And Workforce Inclusion: A General Overview Of Challenges And Opportunities For Underrepresented Groups.

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Abstract

This research delves into the intricate dynamics of the gig economy and its impact on people with disabilities, with a particular focus on diversity and inclusion. The gig economy's flexible work arrangements and remote opportunities offer significant potential benefits for individuals with disabilities, including enhanced autonomy, better work-life balance, and the ability to tailor work environments to their specific needs. Despite these advantages, the study identifies substantial barriers that hinder full participation, such as accessibility challenges, algorithmic biases in gig platforms, and insufficient accommodations for disabilities. Through a quantitative survey, this study captures the experiences of individuals with disabilities in the gig economy and provides actionable recommendations to foster a more inclusive environment. These recommendations underscore the importance of improving platform accessibility, implementing robust anti-discrimination policies, and promoting disability awareness training to ensure that the gig economy can truly be a space of opportunity for all.

Keywords: Gig economy, workforce inclusion, disabilities, accessibility barriers, flexible work arrangements, disability awareness.

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I. Introduction

The rapid expansion of the gig economy has significantly transformed traditional employment models, offering workers greater flexibility, autonomy, and varied income streams. Unlike conventional jobs that often require a fixed schedule and long-term commitment to a single employer, gig work allows individuals to select when, where, and how they work. This shift has been particularly notable in India, where increased digitalization driven by the pandemic has led to a surge in demand for gig workers, especially in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities (Business Today, 2022).



High-demand roles include marketing, sales, business development, and digital promotion, highlighting the growing importance of these areas in a digital-first economy. Recent data reveals that approximately 60,000 gig workers were active on a platform in May, reflecting a 15.38 percent increase in workforce participation from the previous month. Over the past five months, this marks a 50 percent rise in active gig workers, with around 10,000 daily job allocations and 300,000 monthly tasks reported.

For individuals with disabilities, who have traditionally faced significant barriers in the conventional job market, the gig economy offers both opportunities and challenges. The advent of digital platforms, remote work, and flexible arrangements has created new pathways for this marginalized group, enabling greater workforce participation and economic empowerment. This is especially relevant in India, where the expansion into smaller cities and adoption of flexible work models have increased opportunities for diverse and inclusive workforce participation. The gig economy is predominantly comprised of Millennials and Gen Z, with increasing participation from women, further diversifying its demographic profile.

However, the gig economy is not without its inclusivity and accessibility challenges. The adequacy of accommodations provided by gig platforms is a major concern, as many platforms do not fully address the needs of workers with disabilities, which can hinder their effectiveness. Additionally, the algorithms employed by these platforms may unintentionally introduce biases, potentially limiting opportunities for individuals with disabilities. For example, algorithms prioritizing speed and efficiency might disadvantage those needing more time or special accommodations. Furthermore, gig workers with disabilities often lack traditional employment benefits such as health insurance and job security, making gig work less sustainable and more precarious for those relying on it as their primary income source.

Attitudinal barriers and negative perceptions toward individuals with disabilities persist, even within the gig economy. These biases can further marginalize workers with disabilities, restricting their access to meaningful employment. For instance, preconceived notions about the abilities of workers with disabilities can lead to fewer job offers or lower pay rates. In a reputation-based system like the gig economy, such biases can be amplified, making it challenging for workers to build a positive reputation despite their actual performance and capabilities.

This research paper aims to explore the impact of the gig economy on workforce diversity and inclusion for individuals with disabilities, identifying both the challenges and opportunities presented by this evolving employment landscape. By examining the experiences of gig workers with disabilities, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how the gig economy can become more inclusive and accessible. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, platform designers, and employers committed to promoting diversity and inclusion. Ultimately, the goal is to ensure the gig economy can serve as a source of economic empowerment for all workers, including those with disabilities (Business Today, 2022).

II. Objectives Of The Study

Despite the potential opportunities presented by the gig economy for individuals with disabilities, significant gaps and challenges persist in promoting diversity, inclusion, and equal access to opportunities within this rapidly evolving employment landscape.

The research aims to address the following key problems:

1. Identify the barriers and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in accessing and navigating the gig economy, including physical, technological, attitudinal, and systemic obstacles.
2. Explore the perceptions and experiences of individuals with disabilities regarding the inclusivity and accessibility of gig economy platforms, as well as the adequacy of accommodations provided.
3. Develop recommendations and strategies for gig economy platforms, policymakers, advocacy groups, and other stakeholders to foster a more inclusive and equitable gig economy ecosystem that empowers individuals with disabilities and promotes equal opportunities.

III. Literature Review

The gig economy, characterized by short-term contracts and flexible work arrangements, has emerged as a significant phenomenon in the modern workforce. Several studies have explored its impact on diversity and inclusion initiatives, shedding light on the barriers and opportunities faced by workers, particularly those with disabilities. Researchers like Dr. Rashmi Subbiah (2023), Qi Zheng and Weiguo Yang (2020), Nilanjan Banik and Milind Padalkar (2021), and Olga A. Shvetsova (2022) have provided insights into the rise and characteristics of the gig economy, highlighting potential benefits such as flexibility, autonomy, and access to a broader labor pool. However, they have also acknowledged the lack of regulation, job security, and benefits for gig workers, which can disproportionately affect vulnerable groups, including individuals with disabilities.

Numerous studies have highlighted the significant barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in the workplace and the gig economy. Barry Cooper (2022), Udeme Samuel Jacob et al. (2022), and the research paper titled "People with Disabilities in the Workplace" (2023) have discussed the accessibility challenges, discrimination, stigma, and negative employer attitudes that hinder the employment of individuals with disabilities. Warren Paul et al. (2023), Fitore Hyseni et al. (2023), and Lisa Schur et al. (2017) have explored the conceptual, infrastructural, managerial, and organizational barriers that contribute to the socio-economic marginalization of individuals with disabilities in the workplace. These barriers can range from physical accessibility issues to attitudinal biases and lack of accommodation policies, creating significant obstacles for individuals with disabilities to secure and maintain employment.

While the gig economy presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Rachele Bosua and Marianne Gloet (2021) have highlighted the potential of flexible work arrangements to enhance accessibility for individuals with disabilities, but they have also noted barriers such as management attitudes, physical infrastructure, and social isolation. Shruti Sannon and Dan Cosley (2022) and the research paper titled "Changes in the world of work and associated impacts on employment of persons with disabilities" (2022) have discussed how technological advancements and the gig economy can create new opportunities for

individuals with disabilities, but they have also introduced challenges related to algorithmic control, performance evaluation, and accessibility of gig platforms. The gig economy's flexibility and remote work options can be advantageous for individuals with disabilities, but accessibility and inclusivity remain critical issues that need to be addressed.

Several studies have delved into the complex attitudes and rationalizations surrounding disability in the workplace, underscoring the importance of fostering inclusive work environments and addressing attitudinal barriers. David Hanley (2014) and Francisco J. Medina and Nuria Gamero (2017) have shed light on the mixed perceptions of managers and employees towards individuals with disabilities, ranging from sympathy to apprehension about their integration into the workforce. They have emphasized the need to understand and address these rationalizations to promote inclusivity effectively. Negative attitudes and biases can create significant barriers for individuals with disabilities, hindering their employment opportunities and career advancement. Addressing these attitudinal barriers through education, awareness, and inclusive policies is crucial for creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace.

Additionally, researchers have proposed potential solutions and recommendations to enhance the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the gig economy and the broader workforce. Paul Harpur and Peter Blanck (2020) have emphasized the need for innovative regulatory responses and universally designed solutions to address the unique challenges faced by gig workers with disabilities. Danny Chung and Naryoung Yu (2022) have suggested that entrepreneurship and startup employment offer attractive options for individuals with disabilities, potentially providing a more inclusive and accommodating work environment compared to traditional firms. These solutions highlight the importance of creating tailored policies, accessible platforms, and supportive environments to empower individuals with disabilities in the gig economy and the broader labor market.

Furthermore, gendered and generational inequalities have also been observed in the gig economy. Brendan Churchill et al. (2019) and Jyoti Joshi Pant and Madhumita Guha Majumder (2022) have focused on the precarity and challenges faced by younger generations and women in securing stable employment within the gig economy. These studies have shed light on the intersectional nature of the barriers faced by individuals with disabilities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and policies that address the unique challenges faced by different demographic groups within the gig economy.

In addition to addressing the barriers and challenges, some researchers have also explored the potential benefits and opportunities presented by the gig economy for individuals with disabilities. Sandra L. Fornes (2013) and Anthony Hogan et al. (2012) have emphasized the need for proper training, assessment, and support programs to facilitate the integration of individuals with developmental disabilities into the workforce, including the gig economy. These programs can help individuals with disabilities acquire the necessary skills and resources to navigate the gig economy effectively, enhancing their employability and economic independence.

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While the gig economy presents challenges, several researchers have identified potential opportunities it offers for individuals with disabilities. Rachele Bosua and Marianne Gloet (2021), Shruti Sannon and Dan Cosley (2022), the research paper "Changes in the world of work and associated impacts on employment of persons with disabilities" (2022), and Araten-Bergman (2016) have discussed how flexible work arrangements, remote employment, and technological advancements in the gig economy can enhance accessibility and autonomy for individuals with disabilities. However, they have also acknowledged barriers such as management attitudes, physical infrastructure, social isolation, algorithmic control, performance evaluation, lack of job security, access to benefits, and discrimination. These studies highlight the need to address these challenges while leveraging the potential benefits of the gig economy for individuals with disabilities.

Some studies have delved into the complex attitudes and rationalizations surrounding disability in the workplace, emphasizing the importance of addressing attitudinal barriers. David Hanley (2014) and Francisco J. Medina and Nuria Gamero (2017) have shed light on the mixed perceptions of managers and employees towards individuals with disabilities, ranging from sympathy to apprehension about their integration into the workforce. Additionally, Rani and Singh (2019) identified negative societal attitudes as a significant barrier faced by individuals with disabilities in the workforce in the Delhi region of India. These studies underscore the need for education, awareness, and inclusive policies to promote inclusivity effectively and counter negative attitudes and biases that can hinder employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Researchers have also proposed potential solutions and recommendations to enhance the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the gig economy and the broader workforce. Paul Harpur and Peter Blanck (2020) emphasized the need for innovative regulatory responses and universally designed solutions, while Danny Chung and Naryoung Yu (2022) suggested entrepreneurship and startup employment as attractive options for individuals with disabilities. Sandra L. Fornes (2013) and Anthony Hogan et al. (2012) emphasized the importance of proper training, assessment, and support programs to facilitate the integration of individuals with developmental disabilities into the workforce. Latz (2021) offered recommendations for policymakers, gig economy platforms, and advocacy groups to promote inclusivity and address the unique needs of workers with disabilities in the gig economy.

Harpur and Blanck (2020) explore the challenges and opportunities for individuals with disabilities in the gig economy, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. They argue that existing labor and employment laws often fail to provide adequate protections for people with disabilities, especially in the gig economy. The authors suggest that governments should consider alternative approaches, such as providing direct supports to people with disabilities to help them operate their businesses and using accessible technologies to facilitate their participation in the gig economy. They conclude that higher-level intervention is needed to support gig workers with disabilities. Harpur and Blanck (2020) propose abandoning the traditional employment relationship as the trigger for regulatory intervention and instead focusing on providing direct supports to people with disabilities. Additionally, they suggest that the use of accessible and universally designed technologies and services by gig companies can be beneficial for gig workers with disabilities. The authors emphasize the need for regulatory intervention to ensure equal access to employment opportunities for people with disabilities in the gig economy (Harpur & Blanck, 2020).

Furthermore, studies have explored the intersectional nature of barriers faced by individuals with disabilities in the context of the gig economy. Brendan Churchill et al. (2019) and Jyoti Joshi Pant and Madhumita Guha Majumder (2022) focused on the precarity and challenges faced by younger generations and women with disabilities in securing stable employment within the gig economy. Mitra and Kruse (2016) investigated the likelihood of job displacement among workers with disabilities, emphasizing the need for policies and programs to promote job retention and mitigate displacement risks. Additionally, Hemphill and Kulik's (2017) study examined the experiences of gig workers with disabilities during job transitions and their reactions to unemployment, highlighting the importance of social support systems and coping strategies. The report by the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) in the UK also offered insights into creating a fairer and more inclusive gig economy, addressing issues of worker protections, fair pay, and access to benefits.

IV. Materials And Method:

Research Design

A quantitative, survey-based cross-sectional design was chosen to collect measurable data from a diverse group of individuals at a single point in time. This method allowed for the efficient gathering of a large amount of data, providing a snapshot of the current state of barriers and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in the gig economy. The use of Google forms facilitated easy distribution and collection of responses, enhancing accessibility for participants.

Sample size:

A sample size of 104 respondents was chosen because the study was conducted over a relatively short period of two months. This number is manageable within the given timeframe, allowing for thorough data collection and analysis.

Sampling Methods:

A simple random sampling technique was used to collect responses from participants. The survey was conducted by circulating Google forms.

Simple random sampling ensured that every individual in the target population has an equal chance of being selected, reducing bias and enhancing the generalizability of the findings. Circulating Google forms was a practical approach to reach a wide audience, especially given the digital nature of the gig economy.

Nature of Sample:

Including both individuals with disabilities and the general public allowed for a comparative analysis of perceptions and experiences. This can highlight differences and similarities, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the inclusivity and accessibility of gig economy platforms.

Data Analysis:

- Descriptive statistical methods (Excel)
- Graphical representations (Bar charts, Pie charts)

V. Data Analysis

The gig economy has emerged as a transformative force within the global labor market, offering workers increased flexibility, autonomy, and a variety of income opportunities. However, for individuals with disabilities, the gig economy presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Barriers such as accessibility challenges, discrimination, and inadequate accommodations can limit their full participation and impact their experiences within this evolving employment landscape.

This study aims to explore the impact of the gig economy on workforce diversity and inclusion, with a specific focus on the experiences of people with disabilities. By identifying the obstacles and opportunities within this sector, the research seeks to propose actionable recommendations to foster a more inclusive gig economy.

To achieve this, a survey was conducted with a diverse demographic group. The majority of respondents are aged 18-24, followed by those aged 25-34 and 35-44, with a smaller number aged 45 and above. Gender distribution is relatively balanced, with nearly half identifying as male, slightly fewer as female, and a small proportion choosing not to disclose their gender. This demographic diversity allows for a comprehensive examination of the gig economy’s impact on different age groups and genders, providing valuable insights into the inclusivity of this sector.

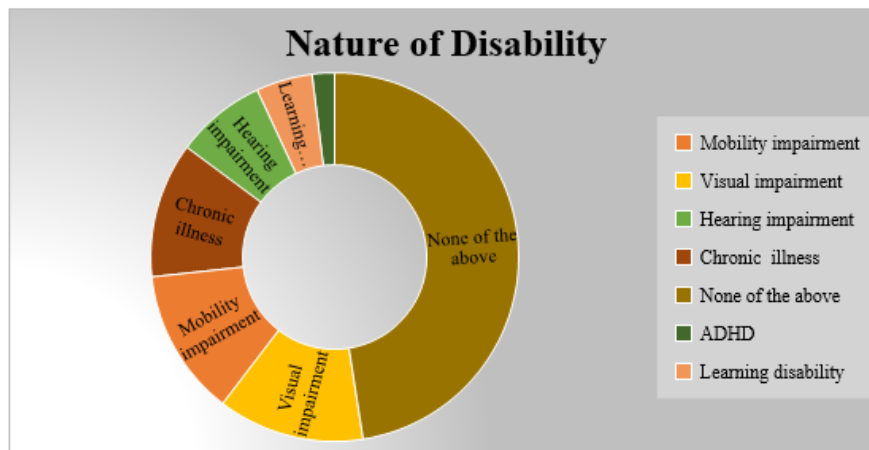


Figure 1: Nature of Disability

In terms of disability status, more than half of the respondents reported no disabilities, while a substantial portion identified various types of disabilities. These included chronic illnesses, mobility impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, learning disabilities, and ADHD, with each of these categories representing a relatively small percentage of the total respondents. Concerning gig work participation, freelance work was the most common (32.7%), followed by contract work (21.2%), delivery services (16.3%), ride-sharing (14.4%), and 11.5% indicated no involvement in gig work. Other types of gig work mentioned included online tutoring, transcription, dog walking, and self-employment.

Types of Gig Work

Respondents engaged in different types of gig work, with freelance work (35%), contract work (25%), delivery services (20%), and ride-sharing (15%) being the most common. Other types of gig work, such as online tutoring, transcription, and dog walking, collectively accounted for about 5% of responses. Approximately 10% reported not engaging in any gig work at the time of the survey. Notably, 70% of those with mobility impairments were involved in freelance or contract work that could be performed remotely, whereas respondents without disabilities showed a more even distribution across various gig work types.

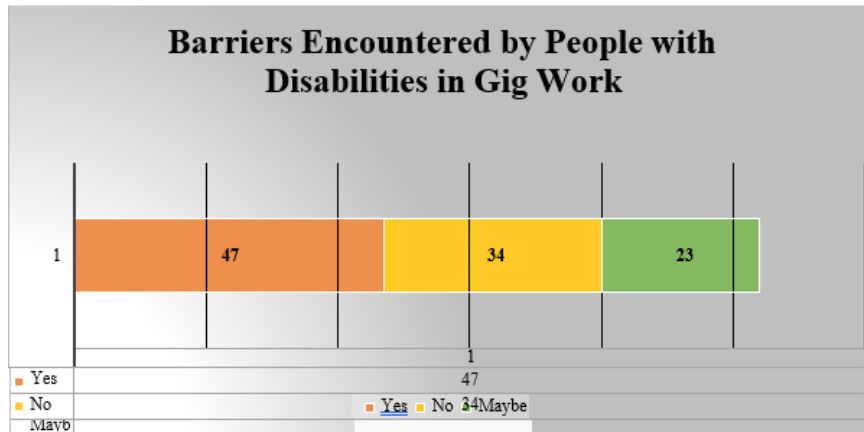


Figure 2: Barriers Encountered By Disable People In Gig Work

Experiences with Disability and Barriers

Experiences related to disability and barriers in the gig economy were mixed. A majority (55%) of respondents encountered barriers related to disability in gig work. However, these experiences varied widely, with 30% reporting significant barriers and 25% experiencing few or no barriers. There did not appear to be a clear correlation between having a disability and facing more barriers, suggesting that awareness of disability-related issues might be widespread among gig workers.

Perceptions of Accommodations and Inclusivity

Perceptions of the adequacy of accommodations and inclusivity provided by gig economy platforms varied. A substantial portion of respondents felt that these platforms did not offer sufficient accommodations, or were uncertain about their adequacy, highlighting areas where improvements could be made. Despite these concerns, many respondents recognized the flexibility offered by gig work as a significant benefit, suggesting that the gig economy may provide valuable opportunities for workers with disabilities, even amidst existing challenges.

Inclusivity in the Gig Economy

Opinions on the inclusivity of the gig economy were similarly divided. Responses indicated a range of views on whether the sector is inclusive of diversity, with some respondents expressing doubts while others viewed it more positively. Respondents with disabilities were more likely to perceive some degree of inclusivity in the gig economy compared to those without disabilities. This difference in perception underscores the need for greater awareness and education on diversity issues among all gig workers.

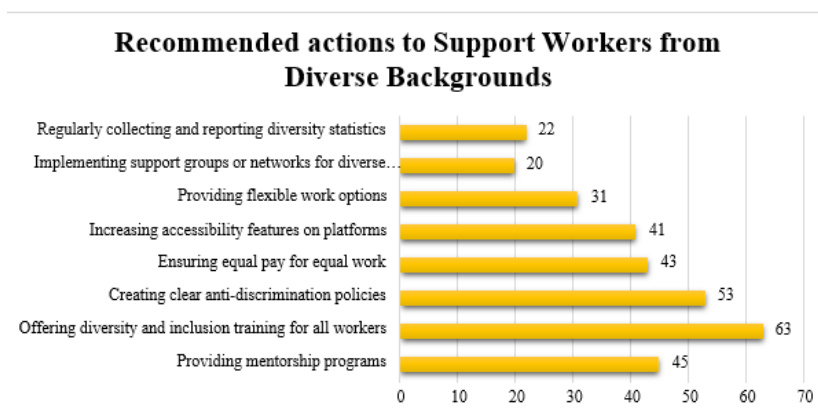


Figure 3: recommended actions

Respondents proposed several measures to enhance inclusivity within the gig economy. Common suggestions included improving accessibility features on platforms, establishing anti-discrimination policies, providing diversity and inclusion training, and offering flexible work arrangements. When considering specific actions, many respondents advocated for initiatives such as mandatory diversity and inclusion training, the implementation of clear anti-discrimination policies, ensuring equal pay for equal work, the development of mentorship programs, and further enhancements to platform accessibility.

Age and Gender Differences in Responses

The data revealed interesting patterns when examining age groups in relation to perceptions of inclusivity and suggestions for improvement. Younger respondents (18-24) were more inclined to propose mentorship programs and diversity training, whereas older respondents (45 and above) placed greater emphasis on the importance of clear anti-discrimination policies and equal pay. Gender also influenced responses. A higher percentage of female respondents reported encountering barriers related to disability, regardless of whether they themselves had a disability, compared to their male counterparts. Female respondents were also more likely to suggest flexible work options and the establishment of support groups as measures for improvement.

VI. Conclusions

The study on the impact of the gig economy on workforce diversity and inclusion for people with disabilities has shed light on the complex interplay of challenges and opportunities within this rapidly evolving employment landscape. While the flexibility, autonomy, and remote work options inherent in the gig economy hold promise for individuals with disabilities, significant barriers persist that hinder their full participation and inclusion. The findings underscore the need for a multifaceted approach to address these barriers and foster a more inclusive and equitable gig economy ecosystem. Despite the potential benefits, the study reveals that the gig economy is not immune to the long-standing issues of accessibility, discrimination, and lack of accommodations that have historically hindered the employment prospects of individuals with disabilities in the traditional workforce.

A key takeaway from the study is the prevalence of accessibility challenges, discrimination, and lack of accommodation policies that individuals with disabilities face in the gig economy. Many gig platforms are not fully accessible, with inadequate features and interfaces that fail to cater to various types of disabilities. This lack of accessibility severely limits the ability of these individuals to find, navigate, and maintain gig work effectively. Furthermore, attitudinal barriers and negative perceptions towards individuals with disabilities continue to perpetuate their marginalization and hinder their employment opportunities, even within the supposedly progressive gig economy ecosystem. The study highlights how deeply ingrained societal attitudes and biases can manifest in subtle yet impactful ways, contributing to the exclusion and underrepresentation of individuals with disabilities in the gig workforce.

Despite these significant challenges, the study also highlights the potential benefits of the gig economy for individuals with disabilities. The flexibility and autonomy offered by gig work can be particularly advantageous for those managing disabilities, allowing them to accommodate their specific needs, preferences, and work-life balance requirements more effectively. Remote work options can also mitigate physical accessibility barriers and transportation challenges, enabling greater participation in the workforce. However, these potential benefits are often overshadowed by concerns around algorithmic biases in performance evaluation, lack of job security, and absence of traditional employment protections and benefits for gig workers with disabilities. The study underscores the need to address these issues and ensure that the purported advantages of the gig economy are not undermined by systemic shortcomings that perpetuate marginalization and inequality for individuals with disabilities.

VII. Recommendations

To create a more inclusive gig economy, a comprehensive and collaborative effort is required from various stakeholders, including gig economy platforms, policymakers, advocacy groups, and the broader society. Firstly, enhancing platform accessibility should be a top priority. Gig platforms must prioritize the development of accessible websites and applications that cater to various types of disabilities, ensuring equal access and opportunities for individuals with disabilities.

Implementing robust accommodation policies and guidelines is crucial to support the unique needs of workers with disabilities. Gig platforms should provide clear guidelines and support mechanisms for accommodations, ensuring that workers with disabilities can perform their tasks effectively and without undue barriers. Additionally, fostering a culture of inclusivity through training and awareness programs is essential. Employers, managers, and workers within the gig economy should receive comprehensive training on disability awareness, inclusive practices, and strategies to promote positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

Furthermore, addressing the broader societal attitudes and biases towards individuals with disabilities is paramount. Advocacy efforts, public awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives can play a vital role in challenging negative perceptions and promoting greater understanding and acceptance. Additionally, policymakers should consider implementing robust anti-discrimination policies and regulations to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities and ensure equal opportunities within the gig economy. By adopting a multifaceted approach that involves stakeholders at various levels, the gig economy can become a more inclusive and empowering environment for individuals with disabilities, leveraging their talents and contributions while promoting diversity and equal opportunities in the workforce.

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