

WORKING PAPER-REIHE DER AK WIEN

RIDING IN THE GIG-ECONOMY:
AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF A BRANCH IN THE
APP-BASED ON-DEMAND FOOD DELIVERY INDUSTRY

Benjamin Herr

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**Riding in the Gig-Economy:
An in depth-study of a branch in the
app-based on-demand food delivery industry**

Benjamin Herr

November 2017

Die in den Materialien zu Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft
veröffentlichten Artikel geben nicht unbedingt die
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Zusammenfassung (German summary)

Die Digitalisierung erfasst alle gesellschaftlichen Teilbereiche, so auch die Essenzustellung. Der klassische Weg, welcher noch immer für einen Großteil der Essensbestellungen zutrifft, ist der Griff zum Telefon. Man ruft ein Restaurant an, welches einem dann die gewünschten Speisen zustellt. In der Mitte der 2000er Jahre begannen Plattformen wie *Just Eat*, *takeaway.com* und *Delivery Hero* die verschiedenen Restaurants über ihre Websites zu bündeln. Dadurch stand den KonsumentInnen nun eine viel größere Auswahl an Restaurants zu Verfügung. In Österreich ist das zum Beispiel *mjam* (Abb.1), welches zu *Delivery Hero* gehört, oder *lieferservice.at* (Abb.2).



Abbildung 1

Eine Erneuerung in diesem Sektor stellen Firmen wie *Deliveroo*, *Foodora* oder *UberEats* dar. Diese betreiben nicht mehr nur die Plattform, sondern sind auch im operativen Teil der Zustellung involviert.

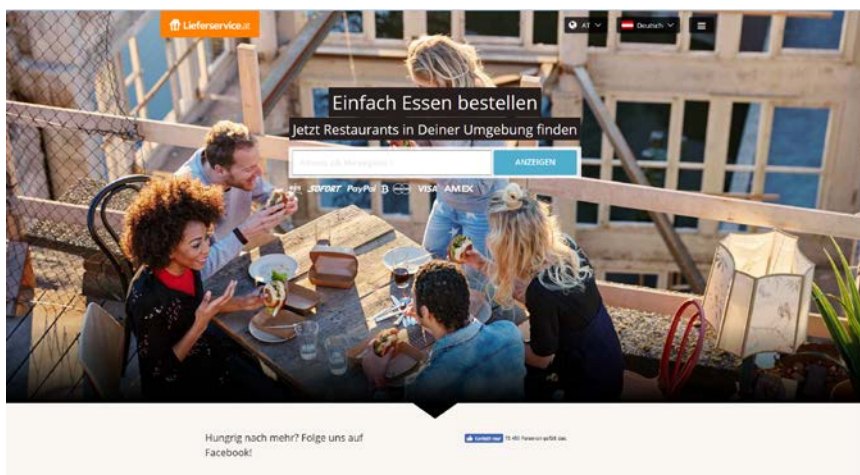


Abbildung 2

Plattform-basierte Arbeit beschreibt die Auslagerung von Jobs durch die Nutzung digitaler Technologien. Plattformen koordinieren den Interaktionsprozess und setzen die Standards zwischen der Person/Organisation, welche auslagern möchte und der Person/Organisation, welche die ausgelagerte Arbeit ausführt (Wobbe 2016). Hierfür gibt es drei AkteurInnen:

- Die ArbeiterIn („service provider“)
- Die NutzerInnen
- Die Intermediäre (Plattformen) (Europäische Kommission 2016: 3).

Über Plattformen können Restaurants ihren Lieferdienst auslagern. Die Plattformen wiederum lagern die Risiken geringerer Nachfrage an die Beschäftigten aus, da diese meistens als Selbstständige unter Vertrag genommen werden. Beispiele an Standorten wie London, Turin oder Berlin zeigen, dass das zu Konflikten führen kann.

Die ersten Proteste fanden im August 2016 in London statt. Deliveroo und UberEats ArbeiterInnen widersetzten sich der Umstellung ihres Gehaltsmodells auf Stücklohn. Zudem kritisierten sie, dass sie als Selbstständige angemeldet sind und daher der Anspruch auf bezahlten Krankenstand und Urlaub entfällt (Woodcock 2016; Waters/Woodcock 2017).

Auch die Proteste von Foodora FahrerInnen in Turin (Oktober 2016) hatten die Umstellung auf Stücklohn im Visier. Ebenso wurde gefordert, dass das Unternehmen Reparaturkosten der Fahrräder, als auch die mobilen Daten, welche für die Inbetriebnahme der App notwendig sind, bezahlen soll (Tassinari/Maccarrone 2017; Animento et al. 2017). Im Mai 2017 demonstrierten Deliveroo und Foodora FahrerInnen in Berlin und forderten auch hier, nicht selber für die Betriebsmittel zahlen zu müssen (Deliver Union Kampagne, FAU Berlin 2017). Anhand dieser Beispiele zeigt sich, dass die on-demand Essenzustellung durch die Auslagerung von Kosten und Risiken auf die darin Beschäftigten charakterisiert ist.

Jedoch fehlt es bisher an einer wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzung mit der spezifischen Funktionsweise dieser Plattformen. Das inkludiert ein tieferes Verständnis des Arbeitsprozesses, der Kontrollstrukturen, der Koordinierungsprozesse und der Entlohnungsschemata im Rahmen qualitativer Betriebsfallstudien (Leimeister et al. 2016: 77). Die vorliegende Studie fokussiert deshalb eine Filiale in diesem Sektor.

Möchte man in der untersuchten Firma arbeiten, bewirbt man sich über ein Online-Anmeldeformular. Das Bewerbungsgespräch besteht aus einem Vortrag des Personalverantwortlichen und aus einem sogenannten *test-ride*. Innerhalb der FahrerInnen gibt es drei verschiedene Hierarchieebenen (siehe Grafik 4). Die unterste Ebene, also die FahrerInnen unterteilen sich in angestellte FahrerInnen (1/6 der Belegschaft) und freie DienstnehmerInnen (5/6 der Belegschaft). Der Stundenlohn der angestellten FahrerInnen ist höher als der der freien DienstnehmerInnen, dafür fällt der Bonus pro Lieferung geringer aus. Freie DienstnehmerInnen haben einen niedrigen Stundenlohn (4€ pro Stunde) und einen höheren Lieferbonus (1.24€ plus 0.76€ Kilometergeld).

Bis Jänner 2017 mussten die freien DienstnehmerInnen jede Woche ihre Verfügbarkeiten angeben, anhand deren dann ihre Schichten für die darauffolgende Woche vom System zugeteilt wurde (siehe Grafik 5 und 6). Seit Jänner 2017 bewirbt man sich direkt auf eine konkrete Schicht (Grafik 7).

Der App kommt in der Organisation des Arbeitsprozesses eine herausragende Bedeutung zu. Durch diese werden die Bestellungen den FahrerInnen zugeteilt (siehe Grafik 8 bis 12). Der größte Kontrollaspekt ist in dem GPS-tracking zu verorten. Dadurch können aber auch personenbezogene Leistungsdaten erhoben werden, die den FahrerInnen im Rahmen von sogenannten *performance reviews* zurückgespielt werden. Diese beinhalten beispielsweise:

- Wie viele Wochenenden hat man gearbeitet?
- Wie lang braucht man bis ein Auftrag angenommen wird?
- Wie oft hat man sich zu spät in die App eingeloggt?
- Wie lang braucht man im Durchschnitt zu den KundInnen?

Seit dem Bestehen der Firma im Sommer 2015 wurde ein Wechsel in der Organisationskultur festgestellt. Diese Veränderungen wurden als negativ beschrieben.

- **Dispatching:** das Disponieren von Bestellungen wurde anfänglich noch in der untersuchten Filiale gemacht. Seit Sommer 2016 ist es in der Firmenzentrale in Deutschland angesiedelt. Dadurch ging einerseits soziale Nähe innerhalb der Firma, als auch lokalspezifisches know-how im Disponieren verloren.
- **Büroöffnungszeiten:** der Personalstand im Büro wurde auf nur mehr vier Personen gekürzt.

- **Kündigungen:** Im Frühjahr 2017 wurden ca. 70 FahrerInnen gekündigt. Dies hängt mit einer fehlgeplanten Einstellungspolitik zusammen. In den Herbst- und Wintermonaten wurden, angesichts der abnehmenden Nachfrage nach der Dienstleistung in den schöner werdenden Monaten, zu viele FahrerInnen eingestellt.
- **Schließung der Garage:** bis Februar 2017 betrieb die Firma eine Garage, in welcher die FahrerInnen ihre Fahrräder reparieren konnten. Zudem war es ein sozialer Treffpunkt, der von vielen FahrerInnen als wichtiger Bestandteil ihres Arbeitsalltags reflektiert wurde. Als dieser Ort aus Kosteneffizienzgründen im Februar 2017 geschlossen wurde war der Effekt eine fortschreitende Anonymisierung innerhalb der Belegschaft, da diese keinen zentralen Begegnungsort mehr hatte.
- **Wenig Transparenz:** Entscheidungen werden in der Unternehmenszentrale in Deutschland getroffen und an den Standort weitergegeben. Oftmals bemängelten FahrerInnen, dass es bei Fragen keine eindeutige und verbindliche Antworten gibt.
- **Hierarchisierung der Entscheidungsprozesse:** Entscheidungsstrukturen wurden in der Firma zunehmend hierarchisiert. Wo in der Anfangsphase noch ein reges Interesse des Managements bestand die Meinungen und Ansichten der FahrerInnen einzuholen, wurden Möglichkeiten der Einflussnahme von FahrerInnen sukzessive rückgebaut.
- **Kürzung von Löhnen:** Im ersten Jahr des Bestehens stellte die Firma die Verträge um, was für angestellte FahrerInnen eine Verminderung des Stundelohns um einen Euro nach sich zog (von 8.5€ auf 7.58€). Seit September 2017 gibt es wieder neue Verträge, die nun kein 13. und 14. Monatsgehalt mehr vorsehen.

Im Frühjahr 2017 gründete sich in dem Unternehmen ein Betriebsrat. Davor war es für FahrerInnen schwierig ihre Interessen durchzubringen. Gab es ein Anliegen, dann war der einzige Weg der beschritten werden konnte die direkte Konfrontation mit dem Management. Viele FahrerInnen schreckten deshalb davor zurück etwas zu bemängeln, da sie „nicht nerven“ wollen.

Der Gründung des Betriebsrates gingen mehrmonatige intensive Diskussionen innerhalb der FahrerInnenschaft voraus. Ziel des Betriebsrates ist es die negativen Veränderungen innerhalb der Firma zu korrigieren und ein Sprachrohr für die individualisierten FahrerInnen zu sein. Bemängelt wurde, dass sie rechtlich gesehen lediglich den kleineren Teil der angestellten FahrerInnen vertreten dürfen, nicht aber den größeren Teil der freien DienstnehmerInnen.

What is this text about?

This text is about food-delivery in a digitalized world of paid work. The majority of meal delivery is carried out offline: the customer calls a particular restaurant, places an order and the restaurant delivers the meal to the customer. Thus, the online handling of delivery services is an emerging market. Relatively new companies, such as Deliveroo, UberEATS and Foodora, are introducing a new sector of the delivery industry by not only bundling restaurants through their platforms, but also by providing the logistics.

These firms started to operate just a few years ago, and since then a knowledge gap has developed due to the lack of formalized study on the industry. We know that this industry is growing and competition is high, we know about labor disputes in different branches and we know about individual accounts of workers¹ and union activists² of that industry. Labor research has begun to find out about the labor process in the on-demand food delivery sector by applying collaborative research (Waters/Woodcock 2017).

However, more long-term in-depth research on individual branches of these multinational companies is needed. This is what the following pages aim to contribute to. This paper is sourced from an in-depth study of one branch of the on-demand food-delivery industry. Data was gathered for almost a year through conducting a participant observation and various interviews with workers.

¹ Take for instance: James Eugen „No More Package Delivery Foodora and UberEats Won me Over“ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SjxEd1ECXP0>)

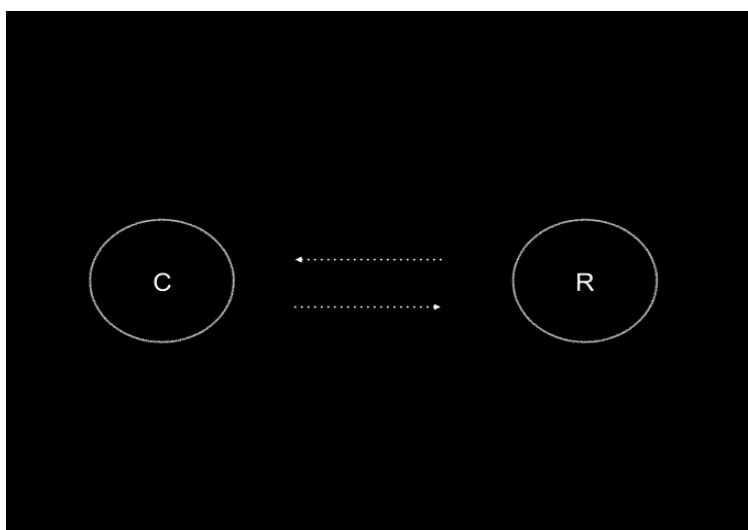
² e.g. Gearhart (2017) and Dewhurst (2017)

App-based on-demand food delivery and platform-based work

This section briefly describes the changes in the delivery sector. It sketches what could be understood by *platform-based work* in order to locate the app-based on-demand food-delivery industry therein.

Food delivery: from a call to a tip with the finger

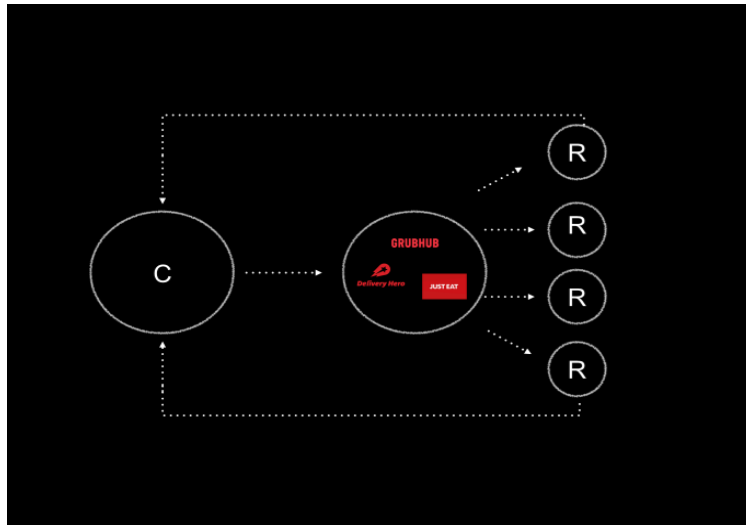
The usual way to order a meal is by calling a restaurant. That restaurant pays a person to deliver the food to the respective household. The ordering process takes place between customer and restaurant (picture 1).



Picture 1

In the midst of the 2000s tech-companies invented platforms such as *Just Eat*, *takeaway.com* and *Delivery Hero*, which started to bundle these independent restaurants for the customer. Through the advent of these services, the customer was now enabled to choose between a variety of meal-providers (picture 2). These corporations maintain nation specific platforms. Take for instance

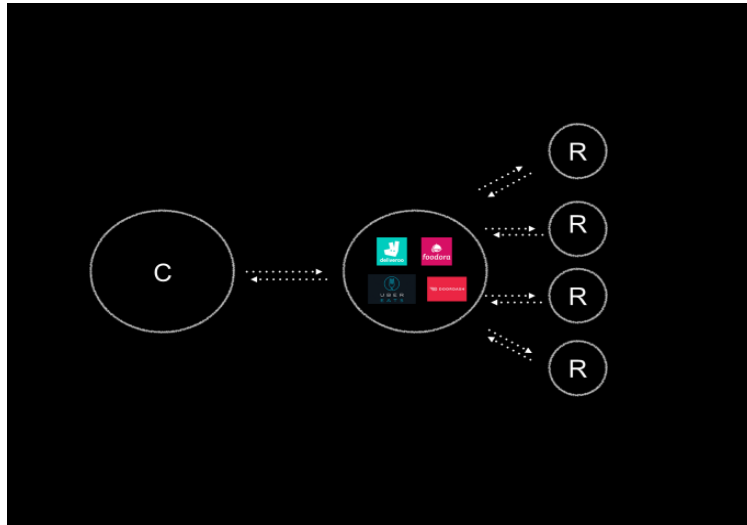
pizza.de which is a subsidiary of *Deliver Hero*, or *Lieferando*, which is part of the *takeaway.com*-group³.



Picture 2

In 2013 and 2014, the second generation of delivery platforms began to operate. Companies such as *Deliveroo*, *DoorDash*, *Foodora* or *UberEats* widen the scope of involvement by carrying out the logistics as well (picture 3). Their business model relies on an app, which allows customers to order food online, on-demand, as well as submit online payment. Food delivery with the tap of an app through workers, where the majority are employed as freelancers, independent contractors or per-piece rate. These companies now exert more operational work than the former generation, by hiring workers, training them, maintaining the equipment or via shift planning.

³ <https://ecommercenews.eu/who-will-dominate-the-food-delivery-market-in-europe/>



Picture 3

The investments in the food-delivery sector are increasing, having 1 billion USD invested in 2015, and 0.5 billion USD alone in the first quarter in 2015⁴. Since food delivery takes place overwhelmingly offline, the transition towards mobile and online devices creates a new market⁵, which manifests in the increasing demand of food delivery⁶.

Outsourcing paid work via platforms: Shifting risks to the workers

Platforms are an ICT-enabled mode of outsourcing paid work tasks⁷. They manage and coordinate the interaction process between the crowdsourcer and the “service provider”. *Platform-based work* refers to the organization of paid work through open market-type relationships mediated by online platforms (Huws 2016). This business model consists of three actors, which are:

⁴ <https://techcrunch.com/2015/07/11/the-billion-dollar-food-delivery-wars/>

⁵ <https://techcrunch.com/2015/05/07/a-secular-shift-to-online-food-ordering/#.bwz6pb:OA8a>

⁶ Home delivery in Britain growing 10 times faster than eating-out market, NPD group, March 2, 2017; retrieved from: <https://www.npdgroup.co.uk/wps/portal/npd/uk/news/press-releases/home-delivery-in-britain-growing-10-times-faster-than-eating-out-market/>

⁷ Of course non-commodified activities can also be coordinated via platforms, such as *Couchsurfing* for instance. However, these aspects of the platform economy will not be focused in this text.

1. The „service providers“ (workers)
2. The users (customers)
3. The intermediaries (platforms) (European Commission 2016: 3).

As intermediaries, platforms set the standards for the service to the customer and the worker (Wobbe 2016). Nevertheless, given the diversity of platforms with regard to specialization, functionality and focus it remains difficult to build a clear-cut taxonomy, which would be able to apply to all of them (Leimeister et al. 2016: 27; Huws 2016).

The outsourcing of paid work via platforms over the Internet is not a completely new idea. Outsourcing itself has a long tradition, for instance in the construction sector (Eccles 1981). Over the past decade outsourcing has been applied beyond the externalization of routine tasks grasping more and more of the organizational core (Eppinger/Chitakra 2006; Kalleberg/Marsden 2005). Thus, organizations and individuals using platforms to include external actors in the respective production processes (Leimeister et al. 2016) are set in relation to broader trends of flexibilization of paid work (Eurofound 2015; OECD 2016).

The emergence of platforms as intermediaries are built on the spread of ICTs and digital skills that enable a greater accessibility and carry importance for common tasks in manual work, such as the job search and application process (Huws 2016). De Stefano (2016) uses the term *work on-demand via apps* to describe the reorganization of existing working activities, such as cleaning (e.g. *Book a Tiger*), transportation (e.g. *UBER*) or logistics (e.g. *Deliveroo*). The work process is organized through apps, which themselves are run by a firm that sets minimum working standards and controls/selects the workforce (de Stefano 2016).

Schmidt (2017) differentiates between *cloud work* and *gig-work* to describe the two overall forms of outsourced labor via platforms. Whereas cloud work is web-based, gig work is location-based. Tasks can be given to selected individuals or to a crowd (Schmidt 2017).

Crowdwork can take place online, but also offline, covering high-skill to low-skill work (Huws/Spencer/Joyce 2016). Web-based tasks that are outsourced to a crowd cover so-called *microtasks* (Lehdonvirta/Ernkvist 2011: 23- 34; Bergvall-Kåreborn/Howcroft 2014) and *contest-based* creative crowd work (Schörpf et al 2017). With regard to location-based platform-work, crowdwork plays a more minor role than tasks given to selected individuals (Schmidt 2017). These location-based platforms can be found in accommodation (such as Airbnb), transportation (such as Uber) or delivery/logistics (such as Foodora). In all of these cases jobs are not given to a crowd, but to a selected individual (Schmidt 2017).

Labor struggle in the on-demand food delivery sector

The on-demand food-delivery industry saw labor struggles happening in different branches. This section describes the examples of London, Turin and Berlin, leaving out the experiences for example in Barcelona⁸, Milan⁹ ¹⁰(both Foodora), Paris, Nantes, Lyon and Bordeaux¹¹ (Deliveroo and Uber Eats) or other parts of the UK, such as Bristol, Leeds or Brighton¹².

The strike among Deliveroo workers in London in August 2016 was the first notable labor dispute in the app-based on-demand food delivery sector. Deliveroo was founded in 2013 by a former investment banker. It operates in 84 cities across 12 countries and has raised \$275m from investors, bringing its total to almost half a billion dollars. Thereby it is one of the most well-funded startups in Europe¹³. When the company told the workers to accept a new pay scheme that would imply a switch from an hourly wage model (£7 per hour + £1 per delivery) to a per delivery scheme (£ 3.75)¹⁴, workers gathered in front of the London Deliveroo Headquarters¹⁵ ¹⁶. The new pay scheme would lead to earning less than minimum wage¹⁷. These plans were later abandoned by the company¹⁸. The disagreement resulted from company delivery employees being counted as independent contractors, which left the workers to pay for bike repairs, scooter insurance, tax accounting. In addition they could not claim paid sick leave or paid holidays¹⁹. Shortly after the Deliveroo strike, on August 26 2016 UberEATS riders protested as well²⁰. The protests were accompanied by huge public support

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/ridersxderechos/>

⁹ Repubblica Milano, July 14 2017 Retrieved from:

http://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2017/07/14/news/deliveroo_biciclettata_protesta_milano-170763557/?refresh_ce#gallery-slider=150050919

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/deliverancemilano/>

¹¹ "France's delivery bike riders take to the streets to protest salary changes", The Local France, August 28 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.thelocal.fr/20170828/frances-delivery-bike-riders-take-to-the-streets-to-protest-salary-changes>

¹² <https://www.weareplanc.org/?s=rebel+roo>

¹³ "Deliveroo nears 'unicorn' status with \$275m funding round", Financial Times. Retrieved from:

<https://www.ft.com/content/d0ac352c-5a20-11e6-8d05-4eaa66292c32>

¹⁴ Readhead, Harry (2016): Deliveroo riders are on strike all day today in row over pay. Metro, August 11 2016. Retrieved from:

<http://metro.co.uk/2016/08/11/deliveroo-drivers-strike-in-row-over-pay-6060741/>.

¹⁵ Benfield, Jim (2016): #Slaveroo, Industrial Action and Cooperativism: What Does the Future of the Digital Platform Economy Hold?; Novara Media, October 27, 2016. Retrieved from: <http://novaramedia.com/2016/10/27/slaveroo-industrial-action-and-cooperativism-what-does-the-future-of-the-digital-platform-economy-hold/>

¹⁶ Woodcock, Jamie (2016): #Slaveroo: Deliveroo Drivers Organising in the 'Gig Economy', Novara Media, August 12, 2016. Retrieved from: <http://novaramedia.com/2016/08/12/slaveroo-deliveroo-drivers-organising-in-the-gig-economy/>

¹⁷ Anonymous (2016): Deliveroo rider: 'After an accident or injury we are on our own', Guardian, August 15, 2016. Retrieved from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/aug/15/deliveroo-rider-after-an-accident-or-injury-we-are-on-our-own>

¹⁸ Rodionova, Zlata (2016): Deliveroo abandons plan to force 'absurd' new contract for staff. Workers win guarantees there will be no job losses or victimization. Independent, August 17, 2016. Retrieved from:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/deliveroo-strike-contract-minimum-wage-protest-plans-wont-be-forced-a7195291.html>

¹⁹ Dewhurst, Mags (2016): Deliveroo couriers are right to strike: the company's claims of freedom are a sham. Guardian, August 16, 2016. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/16/deliveroo-couriers-strike-freedom-william-shu>

²⁰ O' Connor (2016): When your boss is an algorithm. Financial Times, September 8, 2016. Retrieved from:

<https://www.ft.com/content/88fdc58e-754f-11e6-b60a-de4532d5ea35>

(e.g. a solidarity fund to support the actions). Interestingly, the struggle took place outside traditional union structures (Woodcock 2016).

The Fodora-strike in Turin on the other hand, was not so successful. On October 8th 2016 a group of around 50 workers started a protest by calling for a boycott of the app. The protest was rooted in the company ignoring substantial demands, such as the takeover of data and maintenance costs, and higher hourly wages, going back months. The company began hiring workers in September 2017 on new contractual terms (per-piece pay instead of an hourly wage) and announced to extend that new contractual framework to the whole workforce. In addition, the terms of contract categorized them as freelancers, thereby excluding the workers from benefits such as paid sick leave or paid holidays (Tassinari/Maccarrone 2017). Waiting for deliveries at the so-called meeting points, workers had a physical space to actually meet. By March 2016, workers discussed their working conditions at these meeting points. In the same month they started a WhatsApp group chat called *reimbursement repair costs Foodora* (Animento et al. 2017: 276). The workers applied a variety of strategies such as *solidarity walks* in which they visited partner restaurants to inform them about how work was organized at Foodora. A *digital wildcat strike* was carried out by spontaneously logging-out (ibid.: 279). However, the riders did not reach their substantial demands. This was largely connected to the tactic of the company to sit that struggle out and was facilitated by the large pool of labor available to the management (Tassinari/Maccarrone 2017; Animento et al. 2017).

On May 18, Deliveroo and Foodora workers demonstrated in the streets of Berlin to make their struggle visible²¹. After the second call for negotiations was ignored by Deliveroo and Foodora, workers protested again at the end of June 2017²². The main demands were the covering of working expenses, such as maintenance costs, and a wage increase of 1€ per hour, as well as sufficient working hours. Foodora workers in particular demanded one paid hour per week for shift planning (which they have to do on their own), whereas Deliveroo workers demanded more transparency with regard to the hours they worked (Deliver Union Campaign, FAU Berlin 2017).

These cases show some similarities. Firstly, the worker's protest was supported by the management's unwillingness to discuss workers' demands. Secondly, in London and Turin specifically, protests were

²¹ <https://deliverunion.fau.org/2017/06/01/shame-on-you-foodoroo-joint-bicycle-demo-through-the-streets-of-berlin-on-thursday-18th-may/>

²² <https://deliverunion.fau.org/2017/06/27/riders-unite-protest-at-the-offices-of-deliveroo-and-foodora/>

connected to a rapid change of the payment structure, from an hourly payment towards a per-piece rate, which would result into the outsourcing of the risk of unproductivity to the workers. Thirdly, in connection to that, workers were forced to shoulder the costs for the means of production, such as data or maintenance costs. These labor disputes showed the income security workers have to face. The inability to predict working hours, the difficulties to plan ahead and the subsequent income insecurity, as well as the (mis-)qualification as self-employed was also echoed elsewhere (Huws/Spencer/Joyce 2016; European Commission 2016: 11).

On-demand food-delivery is part of what has been termed as *platform capitalism* (Srnicsek 2016). Digital platforms as intermediaries connect customers with workers. Restaurants outsource their fleet to the platform, and the platforms outsource the risk of unproductivity by having the majority of their workers contracted as independent contractors or pushing per-piece rates forward. However, there is a scientific lack of understanding in the literature of how particular platforms function with regard to work organization (Leimeister et al. 2016: p.77). That requires a systematic analysis of the work process, which includes control forms, coordination processes and types of remuneration. In addition, insight with regard to how workers perceive their labor is required, as well as a characterization of distinct workplace culture in order to get in-depth insights of that particular industry.

Gathering material: participant observation and semi-structured interviews

The following research comprises a total of 18 interviews, carried out between January and September 2017. All interviews were held face-to-face, and took between 60 to 180 minutes. The interest of the guided interviews was how the workers experienced their everyday working life and how it affects their current biographical situation. Interviews were fully transcribed and interpreted using content analysis (Mayring 1997; Gläser/Laudel 2010).

Participant observation

The research began by carrying out a participant observation (Dewalt/Dewalt 2002; Jorgensen 1989). By taking part in the daily activities and interaction of the interested field, the researcher is enabled to learn about both the explicit and implicit aspects of the field routines (Dewalt/Dewalt 2002: 1). The benefit of that method is to provide a situated context, which is important to understand how the employment practices as well as the respective business model affect the people who work in that industry (Fincham 2009).

Dewalt and Dewalt (2002: 4) provide a list of aspects, which are crucial for a participant observation. These aspects are:

- „living in the context for an extended period of time“
- „actively participating in a wide range of daily, routine, and extraordinary activities with people who are full participants in that context“
- „using everyday conversation as an interview technique“
- „informally observing during leisure activities (hanging out)“
- „recording observations in field notes (...)“
- „using both tacit and explicit information in analysis and writing“

Taking field notes is an important instrument to utilize during participant observation (Sanjek 1990). It is important to write one's notes down as soon as possible (Seligman 1951: 45; Dewalt/Dewalt 2002: 149). The content of the field notes was the documentation of the researchers' reactions and feelings towards particular contexts and events. One has to carefully record what one sees and feels, conversations one was involved in or just listened to. One must record the physical context, people who were involved, behaviors, nonverbal communication, specific words, terms and vocabulary, impressions, thoughts, explanations and verbatim quotes. The author avoided it to take field notes when being together with other workers (Whyte/Whyte 1984). When being by oneself one can jot down words and phrases that would in turn remind oneself of the larger situation. These starting points can be used to go into detail, when there is more time, such as after the shift.

Fieldnotes are both data and analysis (Dewalt/Dewalt 2002) and a process of reading, thinking, writing and re-reading, re-thinking and re-writing (Ibid.: 163). This continual reassessment of initial hypotheses is described as *being there* (Becker 1970). *Being there* means that one's ideas and notions are constantly challenged. By reviewing and summarizing one's notes, one can look out for patterns

in order to draw conclusions (Wolcott 1994). The goal of the analysis is then to develop a well-supported argument, which helps to understand a particular phenomenon (Dewalt/Dewalt 2002: 164).

Interviews

Participant observation provided the empirical grounds on which semi-structured interviews were conducted. A guideline structured the interview and defined the research interest, for which reconstruction the interview partner participated. An interview partner expresses their narrations towards the dimensions fixed in the guideline (Witzel 1982). By using a guideline, the different cases are comparable, since all participants expressed their thoughts to the particular dimensions. The method focuses on the subject and its experience of social reality (Witzel 2000) and thus is an adequate instrument for learning about the working conditions in the on-demand food delivery industry.

The interviews were interpreted through content analysis (Mayring 1997; Gläser/Laudel 2010): through extracting the information from the transcript, it is possible to reduce information towards the goals of the undertaking and provide an informational basis for answering the respective research interest (Gläser/Laudel 2010: 200). Categories were constructed through the dimensions that were applied in the guideline, but also generated inductively (Gläser/Laudel 2010: 201).

Work process

This section describes the work process at the observed branch. It gives an idea of how the bicycle-based *on-demand food delivery* industry is organized at present, since coordination via apps is similar at other companies.

How to get the job: from the first call to actually deliver meals

The first thing people do is to apply for the job via the Internet. By doing that one has to answer some questions, such as „do you have your own bike?“, „what are your available working hours per week?“ or „do you have a work permit?“, as well as your name, e-mail address and phone number. After that you receive an email, which says that they will call you „within the next couple of days to perform the phone interview“. After a few days the firm calls to conduct a telephone interview. Questions may be: „For how long could you work for us?“ or „Are you willing to work also at the weekends or at night?“. This talk takes just a few minutes. If it is successful the firm will invite you to a test-ride, which is part of the recruitment process. To do so, the potential worker gets an email which lists a few dates one can book. For that one has to bring their own bike and mobile phone. One must also scan their residence registration and official identification document.

After the successful booking of the on-board session one gets an email which informs that the test-ride & the onboarding session is scheduled for the respective date.

What the firm says is that the onboarding session consist of a 30 minute job interview followed by a 60 minutes test-ride and a 60 minute training. The first part consists of an introduction of the firm and aims to introduce certain messages such as that it requires workers to be friendly since they represent the firm and so forth. The test ride then consists of going to three addresses (of which one has to take a picture from in order to prove that one has been there) as fast as possible.

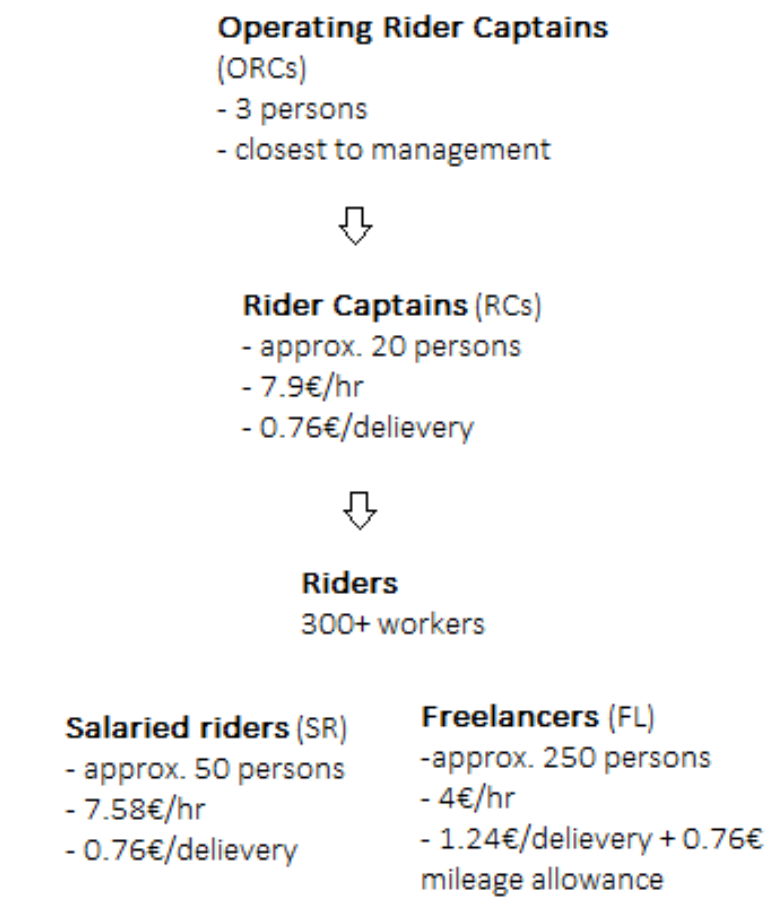
This is then followed by another talk of a staff member that covers some aspects of the work there, such as how the working-time organization is done, how the app works, etc. After that, the participants are shown the garage followed by going back to the office to sign one's contract.

All in all that on-boarding session took quite a time as my field notes reminded me:

„At this point I became kind of tired, because this whole recruiting process took longer than it was announced to be (1pm to 17,30pm instead of 1pm to 4pm)“ (Fieldnotes)

Contractual diversity: different remuneration schemes

The workers at the examined firm consists of three levels. At the bottom there are 300+ riders, who consists of salaried riders and freelancers. An estimated 5/6 of the workforce are working as freelancers²³. The so-called *rider captains* (RC) are supervisors. Each of these RCs is in charge of a group of riders (up to 20) and runs his or her own WhatsApp group chat. If a rider has a questions, they have to contact their RC. RCs are salaried riders, getting a few hours extra paid for the additional work, and is connected to their responsibility (such as the writing of performance reviews or being accessible). Above them are three *operating rider captains* (ORCs), a position which was established in November, 2016. These ORCs maintain the closest contact to the management and brief the RCs about new developments in the firm (picture 4).



Picture 4

²³ Where it should be 3:7 to maintain the service properly.

In the examined firm, there are salaried riders (SR) and freelancers (FL). SRs have to work fixed weekly hours and fixed shifts, while the hours required of FLs are handled more flexibly. Only when the demand for riders exceeds supply, as was the case during the winter, for example, does the company refer to the promised number of hours in the freelance service contract (*freier Dienstvertrag*). The following example is the message sent by an RC to a rider:

“Hey >name<! I’m giving you your weekly performance data. So far you’ve worked 9% (☹️ wtf, is that right??) For the hours we expect you to work, since that’s so little, I’ve got no other data from you apart from 14.92 avg speed, which doesn’t mean much. So, since you’re missing a few hours: Can you please take on some shifts on Saturday? We urgently need riders for Saturday...” (26.01.2017)

In some cases, a fixed work contract was a sort of reward for working several months as a SR. However, one person interviewed said that she actively asked if she could be given a contract. At the office they said: “(...) I would have to commit myself for at least six months” (*Carla*, p.7). There are also interviewees who started with a salaried work contract straight away. In both cases, it was in April 2016. It seems to be normal that SR status is handled as a sort of screening process, and if the rider proves themselves, after some time they are offered salaried employment.

SRs and FLs differ with regards to payment amounts and methods. In general, the payment at the company consists of an hourly wage and a provision-based drop-off bonus. Employed riders earn more money per hour (7.58.7.90€/h) than FLs (4€/h), but less per delivered job (0.60€/order; QF: 2€/order). On average both schemes will earn around 9-10€ per hour. However, when one depends on provision based money, in order to obtain a decent amount of money per hour can be kind of frustrating, when there are no orders as a look in the field notes showed:

„Today I learned what crowdwork means. My shift began at 12 and until 1.30 I just had one drop-off. (...) A foedriver told me later in the garage that the longest time he waited for a pick-up was one-and-a-half hours and on Christmas last year there were just two pick-ups during the whole shift for 6 drivers, so all of them did not have any pick-ups. He said he spent his whole shift in a shopping center. So what can one do? What I did yesterday was to call the dispatcher located in Berlin and asked what was going on. Today, though, I did not want to spend my money on an international call, so I just texted them via Whatsapp saying: „Hey guys, my shift started at 12 and I just had 1 drop-off. Please give me something“ (sent at 13:16). At 1.30 I just had one drop-off with a 1.80 tip, so my hourly wage was 7.8 (excluding the second hour which already started). What can one do? What I did was to drive around, looking on my phone constantly and refreshing the app. (...)

I feel angry, left alone; I cannot use the time where I am waiting for a pick-up in a useful way. It is demotivating when you are waiting at a street, and then you see two colleagues picking-up an order in a restaurant near from you“ (Field notes, 12.11.2016)

By having a part of the workforce depend on per-drop income, the firm can maintain an *organizationally integrated reserve army*. This group does not cost the firm too much per hour in case the orders go down during the day.

Working time coordination: between availabilities and shifts

During the research the firm changed the working time organization, especially for the FLs. I will first describe the old scheme which was the dominant model until the beginning of 2017, and will then go to the new scheme which is currently practiced.

Summer 2015 to January 2017: when are you available?

Working time was organized through an app, wherein every worker has an account, and which time is not covered by the SRs. These *availabilities* provided the system with the information of which periods people were basically available to work (not). These availabilities had to be entered by Tuesday evening and on Wednesday you received your shift plan for the following week. Picture 5 shows a sample week with availabilities (=green) and non-availabilities (=red). The availabilities entered were Monday 1-6pm, Tuesday 12pm-4:30pm and Wednesday 1:45-8:45pm.



Picture 5

Picture 6 shows the shifts generated from the availabilities entered. In the illustrated case, there is only one shift lasting a mere 2 1/2 hours.



Picture 6

One was able to acquire additional shifts or give up their own shifts via a WhatsApp group. Typical messages would be (possible typos have not been corrected):

“Can someone take my Shift wednesday 11.45am-2pm. something at uni came up” (D., 06.12.2016, 11:29am)

“I can take it D. for tomorrow” (F., 6.12.2016, 11:43am)

If the rider then found someone to do their shift, the corresponding message was sent to the office worker responsible for such administrative tasks:

“Thanks a lot! @>Number of office worker< wednesday 11.45am-2:00pm

-D.

+F.” (D., 6.12.2016, 11:45am)

This standardized process was used for every shift swap. The swap was official as soon as confirmation of the office worker was posted.

“D., F.: OK” (6.12.2016, 3:37pm)

Cases where no OK was given occurred when a rider was already booked for a shift or the original shift overlapped with a swapped shift. Nor was a swap accepted if it was too far in the future. For example, on 06/12/2016 two riders wanted to swap a shift on 11/12/2016. This was considered to be ‘too far in future’ and consequently was not approved. Swap requests, for example, half an hour before the start of the shift were considered to be too short notice and so were not considered. However, a swap at 12:02pm for a shift at 4:45pm, with a *confirmation round* at 3:00pm (17.12.2016) was possible.

The WhatsApp group was also used as a tool by management when riders were needed:

“Hey Guys, is anybody up for an evening shift tonight? 6:15pm-9:30pm 3x” (6.12.2016, 3:37pm)

The search of the management for workers for particular shifts was often accompanied by pictures of cats. An interviewee said:

“(…) you certainly are familiar with >office worker<, since he’s always sending cat photos, all the time. (...) I mean, my girlfriend was looking at my photos and said “Dude, are those strange cat photos yours?” (...) and I thought “Oh shit”, I have to make sure I can turn it off, it really gets on my nerves... baby photos from family members and, in-between, these horrible cat photos” (*Arnold*, p.10).

But the WhatsApp group meant that riders could be contacted directly, as shown in the following example (07.12.2016):

RIDER: “I can work tomorrow. If someone can’t do their shift I can probably take it on.” (8:19pm)

OFFICE WORKER: “hey >name<, I can give you a shift anyway! ;)” (8:20pm)

RIDER: "Ok great. What are you offering? Hehe" (8:20pm)

OFFICE WORKER: "3:30pm-8:30pm" (8:21pm)

RIDER: "There's nothing earlier? Otherwise I'll take this one 🙋" (8:23pm)

OFFICE WORKER: "nope, that's the earliest I want to give you" (8:23pm)

RIDER: "Oh well. In that case" (8:24pm)

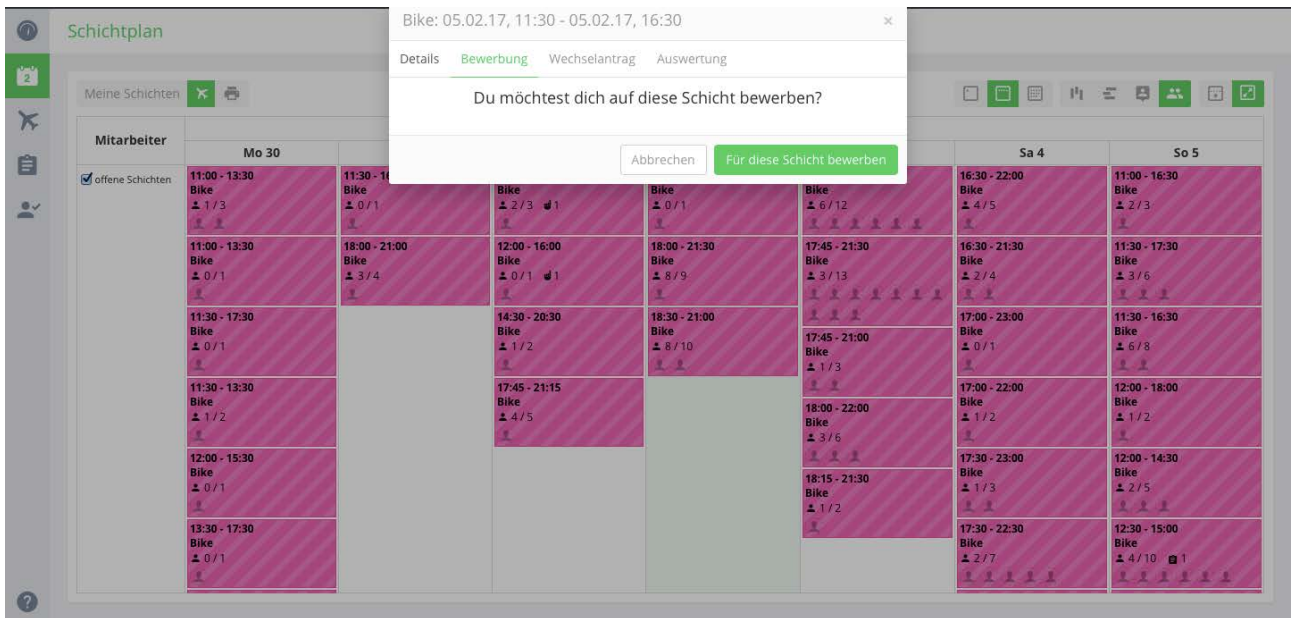
"So it's a deal?" (8:28pm)

"A-ok. It's already in the shift plan. Thanks >name<" (8:29pm)

In accordance with the mode of coordination, the group was provided with a wide variety of news, requests, etc. A first partial step towards regulation was the daily *confirmation* round. Here, the various requests by riders to swap shifts were confirmed at a certain time (normally at around 3:00pm). In a few cases, *emergency confirmation* was given. For example, a rider posted a photo of her child (21.12.2016): "My 4 month old son wants to go to the christmas market tonight. Is there anybody who can help: taking my shift 6:45pm-9:45pm 😊 >Name<". A rider responds: "I could, if it is possible to confirm it" (4:26pm). The office worker responded: ">Name<, >Name<: **emergency confirmation**" (5:09pm).

Since 2017: taking shifts directly

Since January 2017, working hours have also been organized via the working time app, but in a more coordinated manner. Every Tuesday, the FLs receive an email stating the open shifts for the coming week. These are the shifts, which are not covered by the SRs. Afterwards, they can view the various open shifts in the app and apply for them (picture 7). They then receive confirmation that they have been assigned the shift(s) selected.



Picture 7

Shift swaps are also managed in a more coordinated manner. Since the WhatsApp group had become too small because of its standard limitation to 256 people, a new mechanism was introduced. As in the case of the app, riders communicate their requests and coordinate with each other (giving up a shift, swapping a shift). Via a new app (this uses the same login data as the old one) they can select the shift to be swapped. The person who is organizing the swap via that app is informed in an email if the office and the second person have approved the swap.

Guiding you through the city: the app

The work process at the company is largely organized via an app. Picture 8 shows the home page, which appears after logging in²⁴. On starting a shift, the slide under the menu item “Are you working?” must be moved to “Yes”. After that, the dispatchers²⁵ in Berlin can see that the individual

²⁴ The e-mail address is the same as for the working time app; the login password is the same for all riders.

²⁵ Dispatcher = office workers who assign deliveries or who contact customers in the event of an incident.

riders are available and can be assigned deliveries. In order for this to function, the riders must have their mobile phones and GPS switched on so that the dispatchers can locate them.



Picture 8

At the end of a shift and the last drop-off²⁶ has been made, the slide is moved to “No”. Contact with the dispatchers has been cut; this happens basically after the end of the shift, since dispatchers cannot assign the riders an order when their working hours are over. In rare cases, particularly late in the evening, it can happen that someone gets an order²⁷ before the end of their shift, which they can pick up after their shift has officially ended (as observed personally during the period under observation).

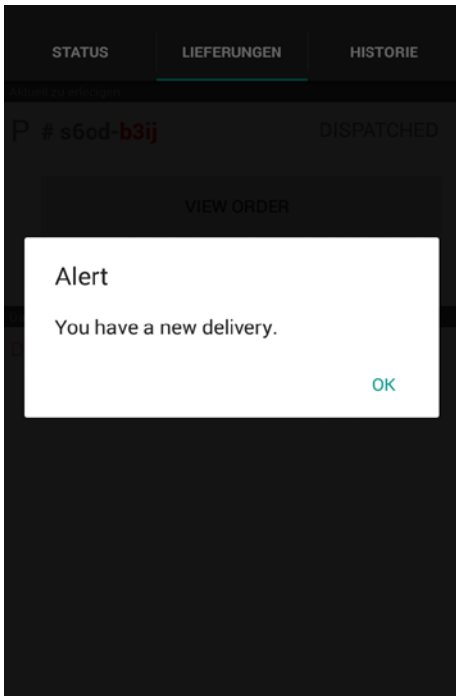
The “Status” menu item shows whether you are connected to the dispatchers. Only when it shows “Connected” can the latter assign an order. After logging on and setting the “Are you working?” slide to “Yes” and being connected, the system can then assign orders to riders. New orders are announced in a clearly audible ringtone (picture 9). If the rider does not hear it, the system triggers an automatic call:

“At the latest after 4 minutes, if the order has not been accepted, you get a call, so at some point you find out about it”
(Chantal, p. 17).

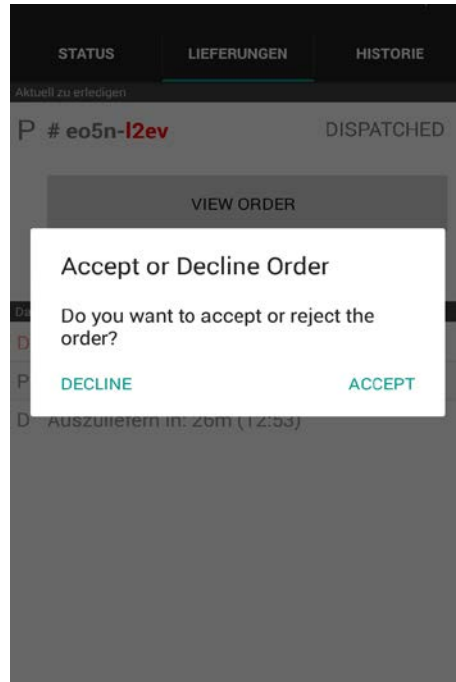
The workers then press “OK”; the app asks them if they want to accept or decline the order (picture 10). If they press “Decline” the same field re-appears, i.e. it is not possible to decline an order in this way. If a rider is unable to carry out an order, for example because it has arrived shortly before the

²⁶ Drop-Off = a delivery received by the customer

²⁷ Order = delivery



Picture 9

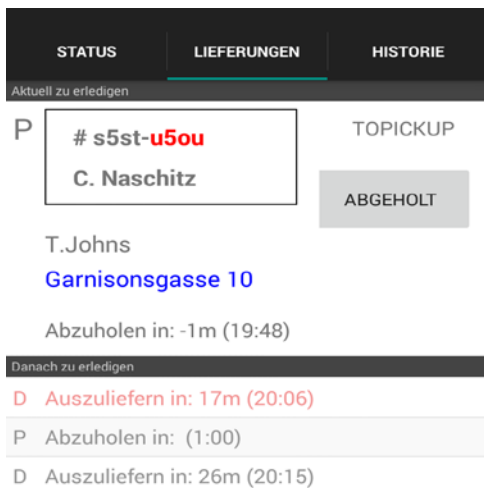


Picture 10

end of shift and the rider has an urgent appointment, the rider has to call the dispatcher and tell them so or ask them to assign the order to someone else.

On accepting the order the following screen appears (picture 11): The “P” next to the box with the delivery number

shows that it is a pick-up, i.e. an order that has to be picked up from a restaurant. A “D” indicates a drop-off. As can be seen in the example, this means the rider must go to the restaurant “T.Johns” in Garnisonsgasse 10. “Garnisonsgasse 10” is highlighted in blue with a hyperlink to Google Maps. Clicking on the link takes you to the web page, which displays a route from your current location (you are connected via GPS) to the restaurant. The screen also shows when the food is to be picked up and delivered. When the food is ready, the rider presses “Picked up” and confirms the different meals ordered. As shown in picture 12, however, it can be the case that deliveries assigned to a rider simply disappear. In picture 11, the food should have been picked up in -1 minute, but in picture 12 the minus has increased to -4 minutes. The reason is that the system has calculated that both meals cannot be delivered in time by that rider, or that another rider was closer to the second order or restaurant.



Picture 11



Picture 12

Re-dispatching is painful when an order is withdrawn, even though the rider is just entering the restaurant or is on the way. In the period under observation, this did not happen, although an interviewee had experienced it herself:

“I was really quick, doing a lot, lousy tips as ever. Go there and when I get to the door, I accepted the order, it’s taken away from me. (...) I called, I was really mad, what’s should I do, I am there, I accepted the order. I should have it accredited. She says, that won’t happen, the order’s placed elsewhere. (...) and stuff like that as well, it shouldn’t be, it’s not right, it can’t just happen like that. That happened at least four, five times that I went somewhere and on the way the order was cancelled” (Bobby, p.4).

Monitoring in the work process

The highest level of monitoring in the work process was reflected in the interviews regarding the GPS locator. Each rider must have GPS activated on their mobile phone during their shift so that the dispatchers can locate them and the system assigns them orders. There is a major difference compared with traditional bicycle courier services: while workers are always visible to the system throughout their shift, traditional bicycle courier services tend to be coordinated via a call-and-

response system. In the courier service where the second period of observation was carried out, the riders carried company telephones with them. This meant that, during their shift, they were in constant telephone contact with the dispatchers. For example, they call in when they are “free” (i.e. no delivery to make). The dispatchers call in to announce a run (“please go to XY, for €XY and ring me up when you’ve picked it up”) or to guide riders from outlying areas into town (go to ... and then call me back”).

At the food-delivery company, this type of instruction is given by an automatic phone call. An interviewee says of a rider he was friendly with:

“On the other hand, I heard a rumor from a friend and believe my friend, who said he simply didn’t get any orders and so went back to the city center. I’m normally too lazy to do that. And then he got a call like this automated call “Please stay in your sector” and apparently you really shouldn’t leave your sector” (Levi, February 2017, p.15).

“Please stay at your sector”, the instruction not to leave a certain area indicates a strategic distribution of riders, as can be observed in traditional courier services. “Please go to center” is another command if you are working a shift with less riders logged on and there is a drop-off more on the outskirts. In that case, the worker is asked to go to the center of town to maintain the density of riders. If you are not connected via GPS, you get a call asking you to check your GPS. At the start of a shift you get a call: “Your shift starts now”. Half an hour before starting a shift you get a message via the app telling you that your shift starts in half an hour. If you do not accept an order that has been assigned to you, you get a call: “This is >name of company<. Please accept your new order”.

“At the latest, four minutes after accepting an order you get a call, at some point you find out about it” (Maurice, March 2017, p. 17).

So, it is practically impossible not to know about an order. If a worker still does not accept an order, the logical consequence would be a call from the dispatchers to check if everything is alright.

The same thing happens if a rider deviates significantly from the route. *Carla*, for example, tells us about a delivery where the incorrect address had been entered. The customer had ordered from another address which is why the address *Carla* went to, and that which was displayed in the app, was not correct. After contacting the customer, *Carla* then went to the right address, which differed from the address in the order. The dispatchers responded:

“Then they rang me from the office, that I'm like, where am I going, that it's not on the way at all” (Carla, March 2017, p. 5)

Another interviewee talks of a similar example; she had forgotten to complete the order and after completing the drop-off was leaving the target address. In this case, she also received a call and was told she hadn't completed her order.

Another form of control are the performance reviews. Performance reviews are written by the RCs and distributed to each worker via WhatsApp. The performance reviews consist of performance data, which is collected through the GPS-tracking of the workers during their shifts. It includes a variety of aspects such as:

- Hours fulfillment: did the worker worked the expected hours?
- Weekends: on how many weekends did the worker work?
- Speed: what was the average speed during the last 20 orders?
- UTR: how many orders did the worker deliver on average per hour?
- Reaction time: how long did it take the worker on average to accept an order?
- Late-logins: how often the worker started a shift more than 5minutes after the shift actually started?
- To the customer: what is the average time to the customer?
- At the customer: how much time did the worker spend at the customer?
- No-show: how often did the worker not show up without an excuse?
- Last order: how long did it take the worker to finish the last order?²⁸

²⁸ This is an interesting strategy workers use: the firm can give an order to a worker at any time during the shift including one minute before the shift ends. It is possible a worker could end up with an order shortly before the shift would have been over. That implies a longer working day (because the order has to be picked-up and delivered). A strategy workers apply then is to simply wait after their last order, until they press „delivered“. The system thinks they are still delivering and does not give them a new delivery. The measurement therefore shows whether the respective worker is applying that strategy. If the measurement shows that a respective worker needs longer for the last order it indicates that they are just waiting until their working time is over.

The workers

What brings them to the firm?

In the interviews and chats, there were two main factors mentioned that encouraged people to work at the company: the omnipresent brand and social networks.

The companies offline publicity strategy aims at massive presence and visibility in the public domain²⁹. Marketing strategies such as the saddle covers on bicycles which are applied all over the delivery areas generate high visibility of the brand, helped by the bright color of the brand. It was this presence that gave some interviewees the idea to start working there.

The second factor arises from social networks and circles of friends: In many interviews, it was friends who were working at the firm and who made the interviewees think about working there.

“(...) two pals were working at >name of the company< and they told me about it, I thought I would read about it online... and it sounded pretty good, and that’s how I ended up there” (*Emanuel*, March 2017, p. 1).

Social contact was also identified by the company as a hiring strategy, which is why workers who recruit someone receive a bonus.

Why do they work there?

The motivation factors to work at the firm were complex. The main expectations expressed, especially at the interviewed FLs, were flexibility and physical exercise. The low threshold was also emphasized, i.e. the high probability of being taken on.

Carla is 27 years old and is doing her masters in the history of art. She says that it is really difficult to find a job in her discipline while you are studying. After a summer writing applications and being rejected, she tried the company:

“And then I sort of saw the [job offer] and thought it’s easy money, you’re doing sport at the same time and so I signed up and one day later I got a call for a run [test ride]. (...) that you sign up and when you can like ride a bike a bit then

²⁹ As Marina Hofmann, Global Head of Offline Marketing at Foodora, said at the SCALE16 conference: “We go where you are. We go to places you love, we go to places you trust and we want to become part of these spots. We want to become part of your everyday” (5:33-5:42; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g2Nz9DxIsZk>; last access 08.04.2017)

you get the job. That's why it was really nice to be accepted after all those rejections and to earn money relatively easily because you know quite quickly that they're going to take you (*Carla*, March 2017, p. 1)

In some cases, the interviewees said they were not ultimately dependent on their income from the firm. For example, one interviewee still lived with her parents and the money she earns there is extra money for her that she uses to make more expensive purchases. Another interviewee emphasizes the physical exercise as the main motive. The university grant he gets from his home country is so generous that the money he earns at the company is a minor consideration in working there. Other riders talk of financial straits if you are dependent primarily on the money you earn there. One rider underlined the precarious remuneration as the main reason for leaving after a couple of months. Taking a look at the bicycle courier sector as a whole, the impression is confirmed that these jobs are the main source of income for a minority of riders only. However, this is just a hypothesis, since there is no data available, that shows how many workers are depend on that work primarily. At least for employed riders, the work has to be more than just an occasional side-earning, since they are working at least 20 hours per week and more.

Are workers stressed?

The majority of interviewees said that stress did not play a major role in their daily working lives.

“(...) personally I don't get stressed because the computer normally calculates it so that orders, including pickup and drop-off... so that everything makes sense and works out” (*Emanuel*, March 2017, p. 4).

However, in periods with a high level of orders (evenings, especially at weekends) there may be several orders to complete. This can cause stress, especially if some orders are assigned with a minus already attached, i.e. they should really have been picked up already.

“The number of orders doesn't worry me, what bugs me is so many of them together, how I'm supposed to manage it in time, which is expected of me. Simple things that no one could manage. One can't cross the whole of the inner city in two minutes, it's not possible” (*Levi*, p. 17). “(...) when the times calculated are ridiculously short (...)” (*Levi*, February 2017, p. 18)

The conclusion to be drawn from the interviews regarding the question of stress at work is that the approach and strategy of the individual plays a major role. During interviews and during active observation, no mechanisms of the company were identified that were intended to push riders during work. Rather, there are “silent” conditions that cause stress, such as an order assigned with a minus.

Riders develop different strategies in such cases, for example sending a text message to the customer, informing them that they will be late. But some interviewees simply didn't care whether they were late as long as they were not responsible.

Passing time: what do workers do between orders?

A working day also includes breaks between orders. Riders develop different strategies to bridge these gaps, of which they do not know how long they will last. This can be quite relaxing when the weather is nice and permits one to stay outside, but can be also a burden when the weather conditions are unfriendly. One interviewee (*Josh*) says that when it's cold, he sits in one of the firm's partner restaurants to warm up, while *Levi* uses banks. Another rider (*Chantal*) lives near the head office and can sit at home waiting for orders. *Carla* uses the breaks between orders to ride around the city and to design eggs for Pokémon-Go³⁰. *Emanuel* in turn drops in on friends who live near where he happens to be. This shows the creativity of riders when faced with gaps in orders and the manifold strategies they develop to avoid simply waiting around. Workers apply strategies during their workday to avoid waiting, but maintain an extra use value out of their working time.

³⁰ These are developed as the miles mount up.

Changing workplace culture

Interviews cover the period from late summer 2015 to September 2017. What they say about the company and their experience working there gives a general picture which allows us to trace the trends and changes since the company was founded up to the present day.

The firm started operations in Vienna in mid-2015. “In contrast, 2016 was a year characterized by great expectations. During this period, >name of company< had to demonstrate growth, sales figures and good performance” (a quote from an e-mail to staff, 03.01.2017). Since the beginning of 2017, many structures have been removed and centralized.

Dispatching

At the beginning of the firm, another software package was used for dispatching. The level of automation was lower at that time. The dispatchers still assigned orders to the workers manually, and in exceptional cases also had telephone contact with them. From the summer of 2016, local dispatching was removed and centralized to be managed in Berlin. From then on, there were still dispatchers who could be reached via WhatsApp. They are friendly and helpful to a great extent. However, the internal social contacts were lost. There are also reports that there are long waiting times to reach a dispatcher by phone if a problem should occur.

„Yeah, the difference was that it was more humane. Today, if you want to reach one of the dispatchers behind their computers in Germany, that is simply impossible. (...) All these personal touches are missing and this is something what I know from the messenger scene, that this is enormously important. This personal relationship, this personal connection, if that is gone then a lot is gone and then all the motivation is gone. (...) Today everything is automatized, we live with that automated voice, which calls us all the time“ (David, April 2017, p. 23).

The in-house closeness diminished. Now it is more or less just a system that navigates you, rather than a human you have a connection with.

Office hours

Until the beginning of 2017, the *rider management* (RM) and individual office staff could be reached by phone, SMS and WhatsApp via their telephones and by e-mail. It was also possible to get help spontaneously by going in person to the office (open door policy). These options have been reduced and centralized since the beginning of 2017: Workers are now required to check the updated *rider guide* and a FAQ sheet for general questions. More specialized questions are delegated to the RCs. In addition, the RM is now only open for riders at specific office hours (Mon-Fri, 4-6pm). Apart from this, there is only an e-mail address where questions can be sent.

Staff cutbacks

This change to a centralized procedure is linked to a reduction in the number of employees. The massive reduction of office staff, to only four people, is connected to the fact that establishing the company and its processes required a significantly higher level of manpower that is now the case, where everything is running smoothly. Centralization is necessary so that so many workers can actually be managed with a skeleton office staff.

During Spring 2017 around 70 riders were sacked. One quarter of them were SRs, whereas the other three quarters were FLs. This is due to the start of warmer weather and a drop in turnover during the summer period. People order less food at home, tending to eat out instead. One worker comments that hiring policy:

„See, they could have known that. That is just so stupid. Come on, we have seasons, that is not a big surprise
>laughing<” (salaried rider, July 2017, 7:59-8:08).

Closing of the garage

The garage was the place where workers picked up their equipment (power banks, backpacks, helmet) and returned it at the end of their shift. It was also possible to have their bicycles repaired there or to ask for help. In interviews, it appeared as an important place for social interchange in their daily working lives. Workers often spent a bit of time there after their shift, chatting with fellow workers, hang out or get some fruits in between of their shift. Every time, especially in the evening,

you saw people sitting there, relaxing after work. Riders would often warm themselves there in winter or when waiting for new orders. The garage provided a social basis in the work process, which relied on an individualized workforce.

„I liked it to be at the garage, because you could always have fun with the people there. To kick off the evening there was a genuine part of my working day“ (Tamino, March 2017, p.5).

When a competitor entered the market in October 2016, the management sent out an email to the workforce. In that email they described all the advantages their firm provides for the workers, such as a “(...) garage where you are supported in maintaining and repairing your bikes”³¹. What just a few workers knew was that at this time it was already decided to close the garage soon. These workers who were already informed that the firm is going to close the garage in the near future were shocked by insincerity of the management, which leads the uninformed majority of the workforce to believe in the continuity of the garage, when it was already decided to shut it down.

Closing the garage at the end of February 2017 symbolized a break and the elimination of an important social factor in the work process at the company. In an interview, *Jeffrey* said: “We all are now essentially homeless workers”, reflecting on the fact that the workers are further isolated and have lost the social foundation to their work process. Since the garage was closed, there are six areas where the workers can log into the app to start their shift. At the end of their working day, they log out and drive home. Even though there are certain advantages in not having to make the trip to the garage to return equipment, the complete loss of the garage was described as problematic in some interviews and discussions.

The result of the shutdown of the garage was a decline in community among the workers. With newer workers joining the workforce and older ones leaving it, the part of the workforce which knew about that former community space diminished. Eventually, the knowledge that such a community space existed will vanish, simply because of fluctuations in the workforce.

Lack of transparency

Decisions-making processes are often unclear, and passing on requirements from the head office in Berlin to Munich (and then on to Vienna) was shown to be too hierarchical. The turnover the company

³¹ Email city head to workforce, October 18, 2016.

earns worldwide, as well as locally in Vienna, is not communicated. Furthermore, criticism was voiced that riders are not informed of the actual ownership structure. Many believe that they are doing it for a start-up, although this is not the case. The desire for clear and binding answers to questions was formulated.

The decision-making processes were reflected as non-transparent due to the top-down model applied. As a result, it was often not clear how decisions were made. This was connected with the absence of clear cut answer to different topics. For instance, a respondent told me that the firm employs workers after a while, when they proved to be trustworthy. When I asked this person if that was a rule I get this answer:

„I can't tell you if it was an official line. Was it that I heard people in the office tell me? Yes. Or tell to somebody? Absolutely. But was it an official line that came from >name of the firm<, from Berlin, just from Munich? No idea.“–

(Rita, April 2017, 19:58-20:14)

Hierarchization in the decision-making process

The history of the company shows an increasing hierarchization of decision-making processes. Although previously, decisions were not made primarily in Vienna, nevertheless the RCs were able to express their views at their weekly meetings with the *rider management*. These meetings were then shortened to 90 minutes and the intervals in-between lengthened (instead of once a week now only every two weeks). In addition, since October/November 2016, a new level of hierarchy has been introduced, the ORCs. They are closer to management and communicate the flow of information to the RCs. The meetings, which previously were held with management, are now held by the SRCs and are reduced to passing on information.

This is connected with a growing impatience of the management which led to a transformation of the office culture:

„ Every talk you have with the office ends after five minutes (...) There is no communication, and that was a core thing why we gathered (...) to form a workers' council“ (David, April 2017, p.7)

Pressing down wages

In 2015 SR earned 8.5€/hour. In Spring 2016 the firm changed the model, and as a result employees earned just 7.58€/hour³². In addition to that approximately three fourth of all employment relationships were changed to freelance service contracts (freier Dienstvertrag). In September 2017 the firm created new contracts and asked all employed riders to switch to those. These new contracts imply a decline in working standards, since they do not include anymore the 13th and 14th monthly salary, which is part of the old contracts. The additional hours RCs get paid for, because of their additional duties (accessibility, meetings, etc.) was reduced as well.

³² RCs earn 7.9€/hour

Conflicts, demands, contestation

This section deals with the way individualized workers were confronted with the management when there was a conflict. It shows that what was needed was an intermediary that takes care of workers interests. This was in formation and by the end of March 2017 the first workers' council in an app-company worldwide has been elected.

Singled out: handling conflicts

The firm displayed a post-union notion, negating that there was a conflict of interests between the management and the workers and implying that everything could be worked out, disregarding power relations.

The following example (December 2016) illustrates how such demands are dealt with; until January 2017, a WhatsApp-group to swap shifts was available as a digital space for exchanging views (although the admin function was exercised by RM, who read the posts). It starts with the statement of a rider in the group chat:

“Extra money for these conditions would be nice though...more risk more money.” (L., 7:56pm)

A little later, another rider joined the conversation:

“Is there no chance of getting any kinda bonus while working at -10 degrees? I mean, that's brutal” (S., 11:05pm)

Another worker contributes to the discussion, stating that the money was a reason why it is difficult to find riders in winter:

“Yeah i think it's a good idear (sic!) S. I think there would be less sick people 😊 (no doubt about that same are really ill) and less Problems with finding riders for shyfts” (F., 11:12pm)

Another rider says:

“-10 is extreme, was working aswell had problems with batteries. And everybody gets sick 🤒” (R., 11:26pm)

L. explains his/her viewpoint in the discussion:

“For me it isnt bout the cold, it is about the risk. It is more dangerous if we go with the same speed as usual, but if we go slower we make less deliveries = less money for us” (L., 00:12).

Half an hour later (00:41) an RM office worker joins the conversation:

“I see. That is a valid point “L.”. We’ll discuss it with the team and give your rider captains a feedback about the topic”.

As the documented discussion shows, several riders were able to express criticism of the firm’s handling of winter work and were able to support each other. However, in the first sentence, the discussion is focused on one rider, L. S_he is selected from the group of riders and the focus is put on the respective worker.

“In some other cities there is extra payment for everything. For a bicycle courier that is the wrong attitude though, you take the good and the bad and live to tell the story”.

A motif is being used that the company likes to play with in its external image: that of a bicycle courier service. A messenger takes the good with the bad of the work and it’s more a case of the whole narrative. But what that is actually about is not specified and so is very useful in calming conflicts. Using that image is a powerful rhetoric weapon, because it subtly delegitimizes the worker as not being part of that certain culture.

The argument then develops by focusing on the particular firm:

“The founder figure of >name of company< was very aware of this subject and consciously avoided a culture of “paying extra” for this and that”.

Apparently the company is well aware that there are several aspects of the work which could be remunerated additionally to workers. But it consciously avoids that. How does management plead its case? 1.) “Either your offer is attractive or it is not”. This is a general argument taken from daily life: you don’t have to do a particular job if you don’t like the conditions. 2.) “If you pay extra here and there it cultivates a culture of not taking responsibility for facing difficulties and indeed overcoming them”. So, it is a question of not giving riders a certain level of comfort in order to maintain a fuzzy sense of responsibility. If workers have it too good, to put it in other words, then they won’t be motivated to show good performance. 3.) “So I and many of us here are very much in line with this general philosophy”. The office worker here is creating unity of employees in the office vis-à-vis the isolated riders described in the first section.

But now he makes a move towards considering the demand:

“However your philosophy of how to run a business and shape working environment should not become a dogma. So we will discuss your input”.

Despite his clear statement, he indicates that something might change. The material demand for better working conditions during a season which is demanding for the health and the body of the workers is toned down, the talk is of “input”. This approach ends with a self-image of the company, which presents itself as a start-up, where there are no hierarchies or only flat ones, and where everyone has a say.

At this point, the discussion leaves its original direction and the demand for a winter bonus or similar is reduced to the question of the right clothes for work that people have to find for themselves (or ask their RCs for assistance). It is now the isolated rider (the message is intended for L.) who has problems and should ask for help. What is interesting here is by doing so, the manager turns the initial argument upside down. The worker’s demand was not based upon the cold weather, but on the inherent risk incurred from fast winter riding and on the overall dependency of the FLs on orders. Due to the unidirectional way of the WhatsApp conversation, the manager is not required to argue the claims and in addition to that, turns the demand of the worker upside-down.

The message ends with a thank-you to all riders, whether they work 3 or 10 hours: “you are all contributing to a team effort during the most challenging time of the year, which this job knows”.

Turning the riders’ role into a passive one with such an approach is illustrated by the closing statement of L.:

“Thanky (sic!) for your response >office worker<. I dont wanna be annoying or sth and i dont want extra payment for every little thing which comes across me. It is just more risky right now for us. And i have to work more to reach the same amount of deliveries if i wanna be save. I think u understand what i mean. Thanks for considering it and have a good night zzz” (00:50).

The riders are in an environment which does not allow any space for exchanging views independent of management. Furthermore, they are forced to express their concerns directly in an argument with management. In this situation, it is understandable that L. is driven into a corner, adopts the phrase the office worker introduced to the discussion and tries to legitimize his demand by stating he doesn’t want additional payment for every little thing. In his statement, he illustrates subservience, for example by stating that he doesn’t want to be annoying. This concern to not be annoying when expressing a concern was reflected in some of the interviews.

Formation of a workers' council

The idea of establishing a workers' council has been around since 2015. This comes after an initial, unsuccessful attempt (one of the three initiators introduced the idea during an RC meeting. In addition, two of the three initiators left the company in the following months and the project came to naught). After many informal talks, primarily among the RCs who were faced directly with the decision-making processes, a group came into being that discussed the working conditions in the firm. Since November 2016, they have been meeting regularly to exchange views and discuss trends in the company. One interviewee underlined that fact that setting up a workers' council was the result of these discussions, but not actually the reason for the meetings.

David, who was involved in this discussion process, cites the lack of interest of management to listen as a factor that led to the group being formed:

“And I always wanted there to be a large company in Vienna, a large courier service that wakes up and sees that there is a lot of potential for the future, which you have to invest in a little as well. Not with money, I don't mean money, I mean time and you have to listen to people. (...) There's no communication, those are the main factors why we started to (...) sit down together and set up a workers' council” (*David*, April 2017, p. 7)

This general lack of communication is also revealed as the symptom of a deeper restructuring process within the company. When talking to *Dora*, I learnt of the increasing Hierarchization within the company. Further changes that led to a workers' council being formed are also written down in a declaration. This document shows exactly which factors led to a deterioration in the work process. It was drawn up by three workers the weekend before the official announcement of the election board and was given to management when the announcement was made.

The discussion process took several months, which by necessity had to be done behind the backs of management if it was to be successful. The trust within the group not to betray the group was a major factor. *Dora* explains how they did it.

“The advantage is that normal riders don't give a damn about management and there's no one who prefers management over other riders, and when you do your *weekly performance reviews* sometimes you realize when someone is not satisfied and then you ask 'Hey, are you interested?' and when we contacted people to elect the election board (...) then we got a lot of others to come because we saw that they were interested or wanted to be involved (...)” (*Dora*, March 2017, 1:28:51-1:29:36)

At an earlier stage, the group was recruited from union workplace representatives among members of the group. Of the 43 members of the WhatsApp group, almost 20 are admins of that very group, speaking for the flat hierarchies there. However, *Jeffrey* was of the opinion that the WhatsApp group would be done away with when the workers' council is established because it no longer plays a role as a central coordination and information medium, since there are now official channels.

"It is not a place for people who want to burn the company" is *Josh's* response to the question what the workers' council is to do in the future. Other workers were also at pains to emphasize in discussions and interviews that the aim is to (re-) create constructive cooperation. "These people have to be brought in" (David, April 2017, p. 25). The self-perception of the workers' council is to introduce transparency and representation of workers' interests into the company. The declaration states: "A workers' council is not a threat or a danger to a company but ensures productive cooperation and ethical standards which our discerning customers expect of their premium delivery service."

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