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Work Organization in Online Platform Ecosystems

Paper-a-thon

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Introduction

Crowdsourcing as a new paradigm how to proceed (paid and unpaid) work has gained momentum in the last years. Numerous companies and other organizations use “the wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki 2004) for their goals. In the context of the paid part of crowdsourcing that is processed via online platforms one can name “crowdworking platforms” (Mrass et al. 2017c), the World Bank recently predicted in a study a global increase in market volume from 2.1 billion USD in 2013 and 4.8 billion USD in 2016 up to 25 billion USD in 2020 (see Kuek et al. 2015, p. 20-25). However, these and other data about such platforms and their surrounding “ecosystems” heavily rely on estimations using only some platforms and trying to project their data to a greater scale. To the best of knowledge of the author of these lines for the paper-a-thon format, there is no data available so far that covers a larger (e.g. a country) definable region (and let alone the whole world) and that relies not only on estimations, but also on “real” data from crowdworking platforms representative for the “total population” of platforms from that region. This view was also confirmed by the answer to a respective request made by the author of this paper to the central official statistical authority in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt/see: www.destatis.de) for that region. Nevertheless, such data would be beneficial for several stakeholders: Economy, since many companies currently wonder if they could and should consider crowdworking platforms for the processing of work (Zogaj 2016). Politics, since a lot of questions regarding minimum wage requirements and the status of crowdworkers arose (see e.g. Benner 2014). And not least science, since research about such platforms with the exception of some US-American crowdworking platforms is scarce and would benefit from more data as a basis for further explorations.

What I can bring to the table

Data from a written survey

The author of these lines recently (in Q1 2017) conducted a written survey among the identified 32 crowdworking platforms with headquarters or at least a (physical) location in Germany (Mrass and Peters 2017). Two-thirds (21 crowdworking platforms) answered the survey (in parts after several follow ups). Since these 21 platforms are relatively equally distributed among the seven archetypes of platforms identified by the author within all 32 identified platforms, the results allow to draw conclusions about the “total population” of these 32 platforms in Germany. The findings of this survey rely on data from those who should best know the market: The crowdworking platform providers. The data I gained includes a broad spectrum – from the number of the internal employees of the respective platform and the number of the external crowdworkers who have signed in over revenue growth and the question if the respective platform has received venture capital to fees, the sort of services the platform delivers or the legal form in which the platform operates. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first dataset of this kind for a definable larger region worldwide (here: Germany as Europe’s largest and the world’s fourth largest economy). It therefore allows to draw conclusions and make predictions on a more valid basis even on a worldwide scale. One could now for example put some known data for Germany into relation to Germany’s “world share” regarding that data and derive some conclusions about the number for that data worldwide. I also asked the platforms about their opinion regarding several future developments such as the sustainability of the business model, the influence of digitization on crowdworking platforms or their estimation how the degree

of complexity of work that such platforms are processing will develop. These results also should provide valuable insights about the future development of this business model respectively branch that I could bring to the table.

Insights from qualitative interviews

In addition to this more quantitative data mentioned above, I also possess rich qualitative data obtained from case studies including 15 in depths-interviews of usually 1 to 1 ½ hours (sometimes longer) with C-level executives (mostly CEO's) of 12 crowdworking platforms and in some cases also with high profile representatives of their customer companies. Many of the interviews took place on site and allowed for additional insights how such platforms are working and what culture is prevalent. Table 1 shows the 12 crowdworking platforms concerned. The insights gained especially from the interviews not only allow to better contextualize the results from the survey mentioned above, but also to give a vivid picture about the “landscape” of crowdworking platforms and this relatively new industry. It especially offers links and starting points for further research in this area. The questions and topics from the qualitative, in-depths interviews range from estimations about the whole market of crowdworking (platforms) and its expected future development over the management of complex work systems via crowdworking platforms and the gearing of external and internal (own employees of a company) crowds (see also Mrass et al. 2017b) to details about how the respective services offered by the platforms are delivered. Since I used a semi-structured interview approach and subsequently let all interviews be transcribed by a student assistant, this allows both cross-case analysis and new rich insights since there has been a lot of room for the respective interviewees to answer according to own content priorities.

Platform	Headq./Location	Services	Main interview partner	Interview Date
 across	Karlsbad/Germany	Marketplace	Christian Weih (CSO)	June 7 th , 2016
 CROWDGURU	Berlin/Germany	Microtasking	Hans Speidel (CEO)	July 6 th , 2016
 jovoto	Berlin/Germany	Design/Inno.	Bastian Unterberg (CEO)	July 19 th , 2016
 Testbirds	Munich/Germany	Testing	Markus Steinhauser (COO)	July 21 st , 2016
 passbrains	Rapperswil/Switz.	Testing	Dieter Speidel (CEO)	August 9 th , 2016
 clickworker	Essen/Germany	Microtasking	Ines Maione (PR Manager)	September 26 th , 2016
 content	Herford/Germany	Content/Text	Dr. Arne-Chr. Sigge (CEO)	September 27 th , 2016
 innosabi	Munich/Germany	Innovation	Jan Fischer/Managing D.	September 28 th , 2016
 twago	Berlin/Germany	Marketplace	Thomas Jajeh/CEO	September 28 th , 2016
 test IO	Berlin/Germany	Testing	Philipp Soffer/CEO	September 30 th , 2016
 mila	Zurich/Switzerland	Sales Service	Christian Viatte/CEO	January 27 th , 2017
 PHANTOMINDS	Hamburg/Germany	Innovation	Dr. Mirko Bendig/Director	February 21 st , 2017

Table 1. Main interview partners at the twelve case study crowdworking platforms

Results from a research project

In addition to the written survey and the case studies, I am also able to bring in results I gained within a project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung/BMBF) that among others deals with issues from the areas mentioned above. The IS department of my university is a core partner of this project and also responsible for a sub-project. The other five core partners include two further academic/research institutions, two unions and a company. In addition, there are twelve value partners, including three big automobile companies, a large software company, a large telecommunication provider and several crowdworking platforms. The knowledge and results gained in the first more than a year of this project (the project runs additional two years) about this new paradigm of work organization (Mrass et al. 2016) can according to my evaluation also be very valuable for the paper-a-thon workshop at the ICIS 2017 conference on December 8th to 9th, 2017, in Seoul.

Which theoretical areas could be affected

The points mentioned above that I could bring to the table (in addition to the “regular” knowledge from our own chair which is one of the leading chairs in the respective fields) can contribute to several theoretical areas. Papers that I could attempt to develop together with other authors at the 24-hour active paper writing workshop could for example come from the realms of platform economy, business process management, distributed collaborative work, value networks, service and work systems or online platform ecosystems in general and crowdworking platforms in particular. The contributions could circle around topics such as governance and management of platforms, measures to adjust the organization of work to the increasingly softening borders of companies/organizations, the gearing of external and internal solution contributors, innovation support via crowds (see e.g. Mrass et al. 2017a), and much more. A main focus of interest of mine is the work organization in online platform ecosystems. I am however flexible and open to other ideas and realms that might arise on site related to the contributions and knowledge areas of other participants.

I would be happy to be able to bring in my insights and knowledge and to commonly contribute to ideas for a both innovative and interesting paper session from which I expect to benefit in any case given my assumption that I would be able to exchange with other active and interested research colleagues and possibly also practitioners from all over the world.

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