

Publication: The Register Online

Date: 14 December 2017

Headline: Reminder: Vast majority of serfs toiling away as Mechanical Turks for megabucks Amazon earn less than min wage

Reminder: Vast majority of serfs toiling away as Mechanical Turks for megabucks Amazon earn less than min wage



People wanted for tedious work. Low wages, variable hours, location flexible. Career growth doubtful. Not much in the way of recognition or thanks.

That doesn't quite have the heroic ring of explorer Ernest Shackleton's famous ad seeking companions for his expedition to Antarctica. But it's a fair approximation of the pitch for Amazon Mechanical Turk, the e-commerce behemoth's cheap labor platform.

Amazon describes Mechanical Turk as "a marketplace for work that requires human intelligence." The piecework matchmaker also demands a willingness to toil for less than the US federal minimum wage.

According to a research paper scheduled to be presented next year at the ACM CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, only four per cent of Mechanical Turk workers earn more than \$7.25 (£5.40) per hour – America's effective minimum wage. In the UK, the min hourly wage is at least £5.60 for adults.

The paper, "A Data-Driven Analysis of Workers' Earnings on Amazon Mechanical Turk," was penned by a sextet of boffins: Abi Adams, associate professor in economics at the University of Oxford; Jeff Bigham, associate professor at Carnegie Mellon's Human-Computer Interaction Institute; Chris Callison-Burch, computer science professor at the University of Pennsylvania; Saiph Savage, assistant professor and director of the Human Computer Interaction Lab at West Virginia University; Kotaro Hara, assistant professor at Singapore Management University; and Kristy Milland, founder of TurkerNation.com.

The authors acknowledge that past research has found evidence that Mechanical Turk workers frequently earn well below the minimum wage and often aren't paid adequately for completed tasks; but they contend previous studies rely on self-reported data and potentially suffer from bias.

This latest research is based on observations of 2,676 workers who performed 3.8 million tasks (HITs) via Amazon Mechanical Turk, using data captured through the Crowd Workers Chrome plugin between September 2014 and January 2017.

Beyond indicating that 96 per cent of Turkers earn less than US minimum wage, the findings show that the median hourly wage is roughly \$2 per hour, with no benefits.

Publication: The Register Online

Date: 14 December 2017

Headline: Reminder: Vast majority of serfs toiling away as Mechanical Turks for megabucks Amazon earn less than min wage

Past studies have resulted in Amazon Mechanical Turk pay estimates ranging from \$1.20 to ~\$5 an hour.

That's better than unpaid labor to create Facebook content in exchange for algorithmically selected ads and whichever posts from friends make it through the filtering process. For those living in countries without much wealth or opportunity, the pittance might even translate to meaningful income.

Requesters – those posting jobs – pay more than \$11 per hour on average, though the majority of requesters pay below minimum wage.

The researchers attribute the disparity between what requesters pay and what workers collect to inefficiencies in the system: returned HITs (partially completed and abandoned jobs), rejected HITs (jobs rejected by the requester), and time lost while searching for HITs.

"On average, each worker in our dataset returned 26.5 per cent of HITs and spent 17.2 hours on average on them," the paper stated. "Evaluating these tasks at the hourly wage (\$1.77/h) suggests that workers wasted \$30.44 worth of time on average."

The possible reasons HITs get returned unfinished – inadequate instructions, a poor online interface, and tedious tasks, for example – deserve further exploration, the paper says, because dealing with these issues could lead to better pay.

The researchers suggest that tools for making workers better aware of available tasks and of their chance of completing tasks, and for more comprehensive real-time market information, could help improve Turker incomes.

Workers, they recommend, should take a more active role in communicating with each other and with requesters, particularly to encourage those who pay well to post HITs regularly. They even advise workers to "bargain collectively," something of a heresy in the union-averse tech industry. ®

PS: The Jeff-Bezos-run Amazon banked a \$2.37bn profit, from sales of \$136bn, in its latest full financial year.