

Platform-Mediated Work and Professional Identity: Experiences of GIG Workers in the IT Sector

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Abstract

Digital labor platforms have become a significant labor-market intermediary for IT work, reshaping how software developers, data specialists, cybersecurity professionals and related knowledge workers secure projects, present expertise and build careers. While platforms promise autonomy, flexibility and global opportunity, they also impose distinctive forms of control through algorithmic ranking, standardized profiles, reputational scoring and contractual infrastructures that reconfigure how workers understand “who they are” professionally. This paper develops an integrative, literature-grounded analysis of how platform-mediated work affects professional identity among IT gig workers. Drawing on research on the platform economy and platform governance, algorithmic management and “platformic” management and identity-work perspectives, we synthesize evidence about identity construction under conditions of market visibility, evaluation by clients and platform rule enforcement. We propose a conceptual framework in which IT gig workers’ professional identities are (1) decomposed into modular signals (skills, badges, ratings), (2) continuously negotiated through client-facing performance and feedback and (3) stabilized through off-platform “identity anchors” (e.g., GitHub portfolios, professional communities) and peer support structures that function as holding environments. The analysis generates a set of research questions and propositions for future empirical study and offers practical implications for platforms, clients and policymakers seeking to promote fairer evaluation, transparency and sustainable careers in IT platform work. ([SSRN](#))

Keywords: platform-mediated work; online freelancing; professional identity; identity work; algorithmic management; IT gig workers; reputation systems; career sustainability ([Springer Link](#))

1. Introduction

Digital labor platforms increasingly mediate the exchange of IT labor, enabling clients to procure services and talent on demand while enabling workers to access projects across geographic boundaries. In contrast to organization-based careers—where professional identity is often shaped by membership, internal progression and institutional credentialing—platform work places identity formation in a public, market-facing arena where visibility, evaluation and matching are embedded in platform design. This shift is particularly pronounced for IT professionals, whose work is knowledge-intensive and frequently performed remotely, making it well-suited to digital labor markets. Recent research on IT freelancers on platforms highlights

how success becomes tied to profile signals, review histories and platform-generated badges, underscoring that career outcomes depend not only on technical skill but also on effective self-presentation within platform constraints. ([Springer Link](#))

A defining feature of platform-mediated work is the combination of proclaimed autonomy with intensified evaluative pressure. Across the remote gig economy, algorithmic management can grant workers flexibility while simultaneously producing risks such as income volatility, irregular working hours and reputational vulnerability. Empirical work on online labor platforms documents how algorithmic control shapes job quality through mechanisms including ranking, monitoring and feedback loops—dynamics that are not merely operational but identity-relevant because they determine which aspects of a worker are legible and rewarded. ([PubMed](#))

Professional identity—understood here as a worker’s self-concept as a competent member of a field, validated through social recognition and meaningful work narratives—becomes harder to sustain when work is fragmented into short contracts, evaluated by heterogeneous clients and governed by platform rules that standardize how expertise is displayed. Vallas and Schor argue that platforms operate as powerful governance mechanisms that reshape labor markets while externalizing responsibility, suggesting that workers face concentrated platform power even in nominally “independent” arrangements. ([SSRN](#))

Within this setting, the IT sector offers a strategically important and theoretically revealing case. IT gig workers are often portrayed as “high-skilled” and therefore insulated from the precarity associated with other platform labor. However, research focused specifically on IT freelancers identifies distinctive challenges: rapid skill obsolescence, intense global competition, high client expectations for demonstrable proof and the need for continuous signaling to stand out. These pressures make professional identity both a resource (a differentiator) and a site of strain (a constantly evaluated performance). ([Springer Link](#))

This paper addresses the following overarching question: **How does platform-mediated work shape professional identity among gig workers in the IT sector?** Rather than presenting new primary fieldwork, the paper provides an integrative synthesis of relevant peer-reviewed research and develops a conceptual framework that can guide future empirical investigation and platform design decisions.

To ground the topic in present-day labor-market relevance, Table 1 summarizes recent U.S. freelancing scale indicators and the prominence of knowledge services (including programming/IT) within freelancing. These figures establish the macro-level significance of independent work and the salience of IT within freelance labor markets.

Table 1. U.S. freelancing scale and knowledge-services share (2022)

Indicator	Value (2022)	Notes / Definition
Share of U.S. workforce freelancing	38%	Based on a representative survey of 3,000 professionals
Number of Americans who freelanced	64 million	Freelanced in the past year

Annual earnings contributed by freelancers	\$1.27 trillion	Contribution to U.S. economy (annual earnings)
Freelancers providing “knowledge services” (incl. computer programming/IT)	47% (~30 million)	Knowledge/skilled services category
Regular generative AI use: freelancers vs non-freelance professionals	20% vs 9%	“Multiple times per week” usage frequency

Source: Upwork Research Institute, “Freelance Forward 2022”

2. Literature Background

2.1 Platforms as labor-market Intermediaries and Governance Actors

A foundational insight in contemporary platform scholarship is that platforms do more than “match” workers and clients; they govern transactions through rules, metrics and infrastructures that distribute risk and power. Vallas and Schor’s synthesis frames platforms as distinctive governance arrangements that retain concentrated power while shifting costs and responsibilities outward. This is consequential for professional identity because governance determines what forms of competence are recognized, how legitimacy is earned and how disputes over evaluation are adjudicated or ignored. ([SSRN](#))

Complementing this view, the ILO’s comparative work on digital labor platforms documents how platform-mediated work can involve hidden and unpaid labor (search, bidding, qualification tasks), uncertain demand and weak social protections. Although much ILO evidence focuses on microtask platforms, the broader implication generalizes: platforms restructure work conditions in ways that influence not only earnings and security but also workers’ sense of occupational standing and social recognition. ([International Labour Organization](#))

2.2 Algorithmic and plat formic management

The platform economy has accelerated interest in algorithmic management: the use of data-driven systems to allocate work, evaluate performance and enforce rules. A widely cited empirical study of the remote gig economy shows that platform-based algorithmic control is central to shaping workers’ experiences- producing flexibility and autonomy alongside low pay risks, overwork and social isolation in some contexts. ([PubMed](#))

For knowledge-intensive freelancing, Jarrahi and colleagues extend this conversation by introducing **plat formic management**: a broader sociotechnical view of how platforms such as Upwork structure gig work through interfaces, policies and boundary resources that both enable autonomy and maintain platform control (including protections against disintermediation). Their analysis matters for identity because boundary resources (profiles, messaging systems, standardized categories, dispute procedures) define the “grammar” of professionalism that workers must adopt to be seen as credible. ([Springer Link](#))

2.3 Professional identity under precarious, personalized work

Professional identity is often stabilized by organizational membership, professional communities and shared standards. In gig contexts, those stabilizers weaken. Research on independent workers highlights emotional and identity tensions when individuals lack organizational or established professional membership, motivating the search for alternative “holding environments” that provide continuity and meaning. (The Petriglieri, Ashford and Wrzesniewski study is widely cited for this argument, though full text access may be restricted in some venues; its abstract and bibliographic details are available through Sage and related scholarly indexes.) ([SAGE Journals](#))

More directly focused on identity processes in gig work, Karriker and colleagues theorize gig workers’ identity dynamics through affect and agency, emphasizing that identity can shift from positive identification to ambivalence when expectations about income, stability, or control are unmet. While not IT-specific, this work helps explain why even highly skilled freelancers may experience identity strain when platform realities conflict with narratives of independence and professional mastery. ([NA Business Press](#))

2.4 IT GIG work: signals, challenges and career construction

Sector-specific research is crucial because professional identity is shaped by occupational norms. In IT, expertise is often demonstrated through portfolios, certifications and continuous learning and work quality can be difficult for clients to assess ex ante. Gussek’s work on IT professionals in digital labor markets shows that IT freelancers’ earnings and objective career success are associated with different categories of signals—activating, pointing and supporting signals—suggesting that identity becomes operationalized as a signal bundle optimized for platform sorting and client inference. ([Springer Link](#))

In related work, Gussek and colleagues synthesize the challenges IT freelancers face on digital labor platforms using large-scale forum data and qualitative analysis, identifying both generic freelancing pressures (competition, application costs) and IT-specific issues (skill evolution, collaboration needs, complex project execution). This evidence supports the claim that IT gig workers’ professional identity is not merely “self-authored,” but continually shaped by platform constraints, peer problem-solving communities and the need to convert complex expertise into platform-readable markers. ([Springer Link](#))

3. Conceptual Framework: Professional Identity in IT Platform Work

Building on the literature above, this paper proposes a framework in which IT gig workers’ professional identity is shaped by four interacting mechanisms:

- (1) identity decomposition into signals,**
- (2) identity performance under client evaluation,**
- (3) identity governance through platform rules and algorithms and**
- (4) identity stabilization via off-platform anchors and communities.**

3.1 Decomposed identity as signal architecture

On platforms, identity is rendered legible through standardized fields: skill tags, work histories, hourly rates, badges, test scores and ratings. This produces a **decomposition** of professional identity into modular units that can be sorted, compared and priced. Research on IT freelancers' success supports this logic: measurable profile signals influence outcomes, incentivizing workers to invest in the "right" visible attributes and to curate an identity optimized for platform search and ranking. ([Springer Link](#))

3.2 Performed identity in client-facing markets

Unlike organizational settings where professional reputation can be mediated through managers and internal networks, platform workers face direct, repeated evaluation from clients. Reviews and feedback become durable identity traces. Empirical work on global gig labor underscores how feedback and algorithmic control systems can heighten insecurity and pressure, shaping how workers narrate competence and manage impressions to protect future access to opportunities. ([PubMed](#))

3.3 Governed identity through platformic management

Platform governance shapes not just what workers do, but who they can credibly be. Jarrahi et al. show that platforms can simultaneously enable autonomy and act as control systems that structure interaction, enforce policies and prevent disintermediation. These governance mechanisms constrain identity expression by privileging standardized professionalism (skills-first profiles; compliance with messaging rules; dispute procedures) and by turning professional standing into metrics that can be re-ranked or penalized. ([Springer Link](#))

3.4 Stabilized identity through identity anchors and holding environments

Because platform work can be isolating and episodic, workers often seek stabilization through "identity anchors" and supportive environments. In the IT sector, such anchors may include GitHub repositories, open-source contributions, LinkedIn networks, certifications and participation in communities of practice (e.g., forums, professional groups). Evidence from IT-freelancer forums suggests that peer interaction can partially replace missing colleagues and supervisors, functioning as an informal support system for learning and sensemaking. ([Springer Link](#))

4. Research Questions and Propositions

To guide future empirical work (e.g., interviews, diary studies, digital ethnography), the framework yields the following research questions (RQs) and propositions (Ps):

RQ1: How do IT gig workers construct and maintain a coherent professional identity when identity is decomposed into platform signals? ([Springer Link](#))

P1: The more workers depend economically on a single platform, the more their professional identity becomes aligned with platform-legible signals rather than broader occupational narratives (e.g., craft, ethics, community standing). ([SSRN](#))

RQ2: How do client rating systems and algorithmic ranking shape identity performance strategies (e.g., self-branding, selective disclosure, over-delivery)? ([PubMed](#))

P2: Reputational fragility (fear of negative reviews) increases identity-conserving behaviors such as risk avoidance, unpaid “extra” work and narrowing of service offerings to safer, more reviewable tasks. ([PubMed](#))

RQ3: What role do off-platform identity anchors and peer communities play in buffering identity strain and supporting career sustainability? ([Springer Link](#))

P3: Strong off-platform anchors (portfolio artifacts, community recognition) reduce dependence on platform ratings as the primary identity validation mechanism and enable greater bargaining power in pricing and client selection. ([Springer Link](#))

5. Empirical Context: The Centrality of IT in Online Freelancing

IT work is structurally prominent in online freelancing marketplaces. Evidence summarized in research linked to the Online Labour Index (Oxford Internet Institute) and the ILO indicates that software development and technology constitutes the largest occupational category in online freelancing demand, increasing in share between 2018 and 2020. Table 2 summarizes key global indicators that contextualize the competitive and identity pressures facing IT gig workers.

Table 2. Global online freelancing growth and the share of software development/technology work

Indicator	Year(s)	Value	Notes / Definition
Implied annual growth rate of online freelance demand	2016–2021	11% per year	Reported growth rate in online freelancing demand over a multi-year period
Share of global online freelance demand in software development & technology	2018	39%	Occupational category share in online freelancing demand
Share of global online freelance demand in software development & technology	2020	45%	Increased from 2018 to 2020

Sources: Oxford Internet Institute (labour/Online Labour Index) and ILO-linked reporting

This empirical context matters for professional identity because category dominance increases competition and amplifies the importance of differentiation through credible signaling. When a large share of platform demand is concentrated in software and technology, workers’ professional standing is increasingly shaped by platform-specific evaluation architectures (ratings, rankings, badges, standardized skills) rather than by organizational affiliation.

6. Practical Implications

6.1 For platforms

1. **Improve transparency of evaluation and ranking.** When identity is tied to metrics, opaque changes can destabilize careers and undermine trust. Evidence on algorithmic control suggests that transparency and due-process mechanisms are critical to mitigating insecurity. ([PubMed](#))

2. **Support richer professional narratives.** Beyond skill tags, platforms could enable portfolio-based identity, standardized ways to document complex project outcomes and mechanisms that reduce the outsized impact of single reviews on visibility. ([Springer Link](#))
3. **Strengthen worker support ecosystems.** Given the role of forums and peer communities, platforms can invest in moderated, worker-centered knowledge spaces and learning pathways that support professional growth without penalizing workers for seeking help. ([Springer Link](#))

6.2 For clients

1. **Adopt evaluation practices suited to IT work.** Short-term metrics can misrepresent complex engineering outcomes; clients should use milestone-based validation, code review standards and clearer scope definitions to reduce identity-threatening disputes. ([Springer Link](#))
2. **Recognize platform constraints.** Clients influence identity by how they rate and describe workers; responsible feedback practices reduce reputational harm from misunderstandings. ([PubMed](#))

6.3 For policymakers and labor-market institutions

Policy frameworks that treat platforms as mere intermediaries may understate their governance role. The platform-economy literature highlights how platforms externalize responsibility while maintaining concentrated power—raising questions about transparency, contestability of decisions and fair contracting. ([SSRN](#))

7. Limitations and Future Research

This paper is an integrative synthesis and conceptual contribution; it does not present original interview or ethnographic data. Future research should (1) compare identity dynamics across IT specializations (software engineering vs. data science vs. cybersecurity), (2) examine cross-national differences in professional identity claims under global competition and (3) evaluate how generative AI tools (e.g., code assistants) interact with signaling, pricing and identity narratives for IT freelancers. Sector-specific longitudinal work—combining interviews, platform trace data and diary methods—would be particularly valuable for capturing identity change over time. ([Springer Link](#))

8. Conclusion

Platform-mediated work reshapes professional identity in the IT sector by converting complex expertise into platform-legible signals, exposing workers to continuous client evaluation and embedding identity governance in platform rules and ranking systems. Even for highly skilled workers, the promise of autonomy coexists with reputational vulnerability and market pressures that can fragment or “deconstruct” professional self-concepts. At the same time, IT gig workers are not passive: they develop strategies to stabilize identity through portfolios, community participation, diversified income sources and deliberate signal management. By integrating platform governance scholarship, algorithmic/platformic management perspectives and identity-work theories with IT-specific evidence on signals and challenges, this paper

offers a structured framework for understanding experiences of IT gig workers and provides actionable directions for research and practice. (SSRN)

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