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BUILDING AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITIES IN ONLINE LABOUR PLATFORMS

Research Paper

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Abstract

Online labour platforms enable the trading of services by connecting buyers who need services with providers willing to deliver those services. One crucial element to a platform's longevity and success lies in creating and fostering a thriving community – otherwise, the platform is more likely to perish. However, we know very little about how such communities can be built. Extant studies have overlooked different stakeholder groups' roles in community building and how primarily online platforms utilize offline activities. In this paper, we study the community-building efforts of six generalist online labour platforms that have succeeded to thrive longer than an average platform. Beyond the traditional stakeholder roles of providing a marketplace (platform), delivering services (providers) and purchasing services (buyers), we find novel unique and shared roles that foster a well-functioning community. We identify four levers of community building: encouraging community participation, involving users, empowering providers, and empowering buyers.

Keywords: Community building, Online labour platform, Platform stickiness, Multiple case study.

1 Introduction

Online labour platforms (OLPs) – often referred to as gig economy platforms - are digital marketplaces that enable the trading of services by utilizing the untapped potential of the crowd (Cusumano et al., 2019, Evans and Schmalensee, 2016). As two-sided transaction platforms (Cusumano et al., 2019, Evans and Schmalensee, 2016), OLPs connect providers of professional services to buyers who request those services, reducing both sides' transaction costs. However, a successful OLP that thrives over time is an exception. In fact, a platform's average lifespan is only 4.9 years in general and just 2-3 years for OLPs (Yoffie et al., 2019, Cusumano et al., 2019). This is due to difficulties in launching the platform, managing the conflicting interests between participant groups, and key participants avoiding becoming dependent on one platform (Hagiu, 2014). Other pitfalls are mispricing with one participant group, failing to develop trust with users and partners, disregarding the competition or entering the market too late (Yoffie et al., 2019, Cusumano et al., 2019). Still, some platforms manage to overcome these hurdles and have long tenures, but such cases can be seen as outliers or prime examples of platform longevity.

Extant literature on how and why platforms change over time offers some thoughts on platform longevity. Like any business, platforms change constantly as a response to internal and external pressures to improve their competitive position (Staub et al., 2021, Tiwana, 2014). A particularly important predictor of an OLPs longevity is its "stickiness," defined as the platform's ability to draw and retain users (Zott et al., 2000) or as how much sustained use a system sees after its adoption (Tiwana, 2014). The platforms recognize this as well, citing their need to "attract and retain a large community

of buyers and freelancers” as a possible risk in investor documents (Fiverr, 2021, p. 19). Without some capability to retain users, the platform needs to spend resources to continuously attract new users. These resources are then not available for the platform’s development. A lack of experienced users might also manifest as poor quality or ineffective transactions if users are unfamiliar with platform’s functions. OLPs, for example, might require providers to establish a history with the platform before they can access more lucrative features and projects. To increase its stickiness, the platform must ensure that its governance rules and architecture support each other, and that the platform is not in conflict with its environment (Tiwana et al., 2010). For example, as the platform grows, competition between providers tightens, which in turn increases the number of providers leaving the platform, necessitating the platforms to implement governance rules or a strategy to attract and retain providers (Lee et al., 2018).

While ensuring supportive technical architecture and governance structures is important, it is not enough. Previous literature implies that to achieve long-term sustainability, OLPs could turn their platform into *a community* (Zott et al., 2000). However, a large userbase does not automatically equal a community. A group of contributors with only shallow collective commitment is little more than a crowd: they produce simple contributions independently of each other, have little to no visibility to other members’ contributions, and immediately disband after the job is done. Contributors in communities, on the other hand, demonstrate significant collective commitment through depending on each other to make more diverse contributions, relying on the visibility of others’ contributions, and learning to become reputable members of the community over time. (Haythornthwaite, 2012). Even if a buyer and a provider were to transact only once, all stakeholders can benefit from the information created. The platform owner can rarely be directly involved with each user by offering them assistance, guidance and user education individually. However, the users can find these in the forums, community events and in other content produced by other users. Furthermore, a sense of community fosters collaboration and forming teams which for providers means decreased competition and for buyers’ access to bigger projects that can be purchased. This highlights the importance of community building, defined as “the totality of effort exerted by the market maker to create a congenial market environment for participants, which consists of high levels of mutual trust, integrity, and honesty exhibited by participants.” (Grewal et al. 2010, p. 49). Whether or not a platform succeeds in building a community has implications for its longevity and profitability (Grewal et al., 2010, Rothaermela and Sugiyama, 2001). We posit that this is especially true for generalist OLPs intermediating diverse experience and credence services as a community is needed to surface reputable buyers and providers.

Building a thriving community requires deliberate efforts from the OLP (Grewal et al., 2010). While community building has been mentioned in some platform studies (see, e.g., Alaimo et al., 2020, Constantiou et al., 2016, Tan et al., 2015), only a few have focused explicitly on community building in the OLP context. These examples include examining strategies of community building (Gerber, 2021), what kinds of incentives work the best to encourage community participation (Li et al., 2018), and means to achieve provider retention (Ihl, 2022, Wu and Gong, 2021). Still, two important facets have been overlooked. First, OLPs are marketplaces that involve interactions among three key stakeholders: buyers, providers, and the platform itself. Previous work on community building has not explicitly considered the roles of each stakeholder in community building and how platforms can tailor and target their community-building efforts specifically to buyers or providers. Moreover, while OLPs operate in the digital space, some successful platforms have engaged in community-building efforts that take place in offline environments (e.g., in-person group meetings). While the focus of earlier literature has been on digital channels of community building, the ways to support online communities in physical environments have remained unexplored. Understanding these aspects is important as it can help OLPs to engage in more informed and effective community building potentially improving platforms’ long-term success. This calls for a more granular examination of how successful community building on OLPs unfolds. Hence, we ask: *How can online labour platforms leverage the potential of their key stakeholder groups to build and sustain communities?* We explore this question by analysing empirical data from six global OLPs, all of which are still operational and thriving (at the time of writing). In doing so, we contribute to the discussion on how platforms build a sense of community among their users – rather than just trying to increase the user headcount – to achieve long-term success.

2 Literature review

Transaction platforms are intermediaries and marketplaces aiming at removing friction from trading goods and services online (Cusumano et al., 2019, Evans and Schmalensee, 2016). Online labour platforms (OLPs) do this by connecting buyers requesting services with providers (the gig workers) who conduct tasks. OLPs offer buyers access to a talent pool able to complete the requested tasks smoothly and cost-efficiently and access to paid work for providers. (Parker et al., 2016). In this paper, when referring to both stakeholder groups (buyers and providers) together, we use the term “users”. Acting as intermediaries between the two, platform owners do not own or control any of the buyer projects or the provider resources. Instead, they generate revenue by charging transaction fees and selling associated services such as increased visibility of one party to the other and different membership plans. To continue operations and remain sustainable, the platform must be able to constantly balance the interests of different user groups and to ensure that all sides keep participating and showing commitment (Evans and Schmalensee, 2016, Reuver et al., 2018, Wu and Gong, 2021). For the platform to function, platform owners, buyers and providers must collaborate, which collective commitment to shared practices and values supports. Thus, a sense of community should exist between all stakeholders.

2.1 Platform stickiness

In the tightening competition for attention on the web, increasing a site’s stickiness, the “*ability of web sites to draw and retain customers*”, is seen as a better alternative to continuously increasing the marketing budget (Zott et al., 2000, p. 471). Other definitions of stickiness emphasise the user’s point of view and repeated visits to the site resulting from commitment and disregarding other sites’ marketing efforts (Li et al., 2006), attracting and holding the user’s attention by creating a “*compelling and magnetic reason*” to return (Robinson and Cook, 2018, p. 460), and prolonging the duration of each visit (Lin, 2007). Stickiness can also manifest through users’ intentions to continue using the platform (Gefen et al., 2003, Goldbach and Kemper, 2014, Goldbach and Benlian, 2015, Ryu and Suh, 2021) or as habitual behaviours (Limayem et al., 2007). Common to all the definitions is the ability to attract users and retain them by keeping them engaged with the site.

According to Zott et al. (2000), four effective means for increasing stickiness are rewarding customer loyalty, personalizing the product or service, building virtual communities and establishing a reputation for trust. Users' attitudes towards a platform, whether they trust it or not, the quality of the content and the sense of belonging to the platform further affect if and how the stickiness develops (Lin, 2007, Ryu and Suh, 2021). As a measure, stickiness offers a more accurate picture of how well the platform is doing than the mere number of registered users, which does not account for how actively or for how long the platform is used after initial adoption.

2.2 Community building on platforms

Communities must be deliberately built, not only by providing the necessary medium or foundation, such as means of communication, but also by establishing a shared goal, motivation, and practices. We see community building as a related but distinguishable exercise from attracting a critical mass of users to ignite positive network effects. While the latter is about ensuring the growth of the userbase, the former is more about instilling the userbase with a sense of community and responsibility towards each other. Though transactions on OLPs are dyadic, relationships between platform owner, providers and buyers should be seen as triadic as interactions between two stakeholders affect the third stakeholder group as well (Ihl, 2022, Heimburg and Wiesche, 2022).

Community building increases the users’ commitment to the platform through interactions with real people as identifiable peers share similar issues (Gerber, 2021). Supportive relationships between platform owners, providers and buyers form an emotional attachment to the platform improving provider retention (Ihl, 2022). In the context of a microtask platform, community commitment contributed to providers’ continuous participation intention so that being part of the community was more important than extrinsic motivations (Wu and Gong, 2021). However, some users might be averse to community-

building efforts and choose indifference, absenteeism or exiting the platform instead as solving other users' problems has time cost and could result in tightening competition (Gerber, 2021). A lively community also increases the users' feelings of belonging, as switching or leaving a platform might mean losing the relationships already built within the community (Damsgaard, 2002). The expected consequences of leaving the community can be seen to contribute to the platform's stickiness. Furthermore, how users see themselves fitting into the platform has significance on whether they develop favourable attitudes towards it (Ryu and Suh, 2021). Thus, what and how the platform communicates its visions for the future and what kind of community they wish to create, has implications for community-building efforts. Finally, just as users' trust has been for long deemed of crucial importance on e-commerce sites, online communities and virtual teams (see e.g. Gefen et al., 2003, Jarvenpaa et al., 1998), it is also imperative on OLPs and their online communities (Yoffie et al., 2019, Cusumano et al., 2019).

2.3 Platforms' community-building efforts

Gerber (2021) identified two strategies of community building: 1) loose community building through encouraging self-organization and providing open and unmanaged means of interaction while risking irresponsible autonomy and undesired side effects, and 2) controlled community building through encouraging desired behaviours and secured functional outcomes via highly structured technical design and platform's moderation while risking low volume of interaction. Earlier research has reported on platforms using both strategies successfully to improve their stickiness. For example, observed self-control (i.e., loose community building) was found to be more conducive to third-party app developers' intentions to remain on the platform than formal controls because self-determination and self-regulation were seen to cater to app developers' desire for autonomy (Goldbach and Kemper, 2014, Goldbach and Benlian, 2015). In another example, an B2B e-commerce platform successfully used incentives to encourage and reward desired behaviour and peer incentives (users rewarding other users i.e., controlled community building) to encourage community participation (Li et al., 2018). Uber's strict algorithmic control, on the other hand, was found to create tensions between drivers' self-identity as independent workers and a need to belong to a wider community (Möhlmann et al., 2021).

Platforms offer various community-building tools and features for users to connect and communicate with each other. These typically include discussion forums and private two-way messaging, but users might also establish unofficial communication channels and communities (see e.g., Turkernation, RideSharing Forum) outside the platforms to organise and offer further peer support, for example. While forums allow often geographically dispersed communities to connect, they also offer the platform owner a medium to share news about upcoming features and changes with the platform users and to engage in discussions. Forums also decrease support requests as users are able to advise each other and learn from previously answered questions. (Gerber, 2021, Li et al., 2018, Morreale et al., 2017, Damsgaard, 2002). In a natural experiment where an OLP introduced a forum for discussions, the income of inexperienced providers who participated in the community was found to increase significantly compared to those who did not participate during the 24-month observation period (Ye and Jensen, 2022).

Thus far the literature on community building on platforms in general and OLPs, in particular, has not accounted for the different roles the three key stakeholders (buyers, providers, and the platform) may assume in community building. Hence, we know little about how platforms could target their community-building efforts to the distinct and different needs of buyers and providers. In addition, earlier research has not considered the role of physical channels through which community building may be actioned. Therefore, in our study, we focus in detail on the community-building efforts of OLPs and how these efforts relate to the three groups of key stakeholders.

3 Method

To answer our research question, we conducted a multiple case study (Yin, 2014) of six OLPs, utilising publicly available data and qualitative analysis methods. In studying how OLPs can leverage their key stakeholder groups to build and sustain communities, studying multiple platforms yields a broader

understanding of the phenomenon in terms of what are the common ways to achieve this and what are more unique efforts of a particular platform.

3.1 Case selection

The six platforms were selected because their tenure exceeds ten years, they are still operational and there are no reasons to assume they would cease operations in the near future. They are all generalist OLPs, meaning that instead of focusing solely on writing and content creation, design services, programming or any other single category of services, they all intermediate a wide variety of services. The selected six OLPs are as close replicas of each other (Yin, 2014) as possible. Our intention is not to engage in a comparison of platforms in terms of who has or has not expended a certain effort, but rather to collect as many examples of community-building efforts as possible. Finally, a sufficient amount of documentation was publicly available for each platform, enabling the collection of rich secondary data. Selected platforms are listed in Table 1.

Platform (founded)	Period covered	Blogs/press releases	Investor documents	Forum posts	Tweets	Other
Guru.com (1998)	2003 – 2020	232	-	-	161	8
Upwork (2015) • Elance (1998) • oDesk (2004)	2006 – 2021	366	78	338	365	43
PeoplePerHour (2007)	2007 – 2021	250	-	-	268	7
twago (2009)	2003 – 2020	450	-	-	51	6
Freelancer.com (2009) • GetAFreelancer (2004)	2005 - 2021	355	86	-	268	194
Fiverr (2010)	2010 – 2021	201	18	266	266	226
Total		1 854	182	604	1 379	484

Table 1. Selected platforms¹ and the contents of the public data corpus.

3.2 Data collection

In line with previous platform studies (see e.g. Eaton, 2012, Alaimo et al., 2020, Constantiou et al., 2016, Skog et al., 2018) we created a corpus of publicly available documents published by and on the case platforms by the end of 2021. While the majority of our data was collected with web scraping, we also used the Wayback Machine² (a digital archive of the world wide web operated by a non-profit Internet Archive) to view earlier versions of the platforms’ webpages and to manually retrieve documents they held. The majority of the collected data is made of blogs, press releases and investor documents published by the platforms. These sources were complemented with posts made to the “news” or “announcement” sections of the platforms’ forums (if they could be accessed without a login), tweets by the platforms and mentions of the platforms in business and tech press. Twitter’s Academic Research access API allowed us to collect all the tweets by platforms’ accounts since their founding, excluding deleted tweets. The tweets helped us to verify the integrity of our corpus and whether it had

¹ GetAFreelancer was acquired in 2009 and turned into Freelancer.com. In 2013, Elance and oDesk merged to form Elance-oDesk before rebranding as Upwork in 2015. For this study, we charted oDesk’s timeline as it was quicker to assume the new Upwork identity, whereas Elance’s site was shut down in February 2018.

² <https://archive.org/web/>

missed any major changes that were likely communicated on Twitter at the time. A summary of our data collection efforts is presented in Table 1.

3.3 Data analysis

Adopting the analytical strategy of working our data “ground up” (Yin, 2014), we began by consolidating data from different sources to create a timeline of significant events for each platform. The events on the timelines consist of a date, the implemented change, and the given reason for the change. The first versions of the timelines included every change made to the platform. We then engaged in open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) of the given reasons for the changes. We conducted several rounds of coding, developing more refined and robust codes while improving the codes’ consistency. At the same time, the timelines acted as within-case analyses that allowed us to familiarise ourselves with each platform (Yin, 2014, Eisenhardt, 1989). Coding was done manually in Atlas.ti software without any automation. After coding, we built new timelines in Excel spreadsheets, this time from the community-building point of view, including for example changes to communication, collaboration and trust creation, while disregarding other types of changes, such as changes to taxes withheld or platform’s usability. Next, as a form of cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt, 1989), we consolidated the new timelines into one table so that similar community-building efforts with shared goals were grouped together as one mechanism.

Because the selected platforms are much alike, they engage in very similar community-building efforts. There are no significant differences on the mechanism level and even on the level of individual codes unique efforts are rare. For example, all platforms engage with providers and buyers using blogs and allow them to post their own blogs, but only two platforms run podcasts or invite providers and buyers to organise events online and offline. All platforms have also implemented tools for buyers to better cooperate and manage providers. Half of the platforms have implemented a community voting mechanism whereas Fiverr appears to be the only platform that has experimented with a mentor/mentee program where experienced providers showed their junior counterparts how to make better use of the platform.

After categorising the community-building efforts into mechanisms, we marked each mechanism for whether it was about building or utilizing community, its purpose, what type of community building it represents (loose or controlled), whether it takes place in a digital or offline environment and if the effort is targeted towards providers, buyers or both. As a final analytical step, we divided the mechanisms of community-building efforts into four categories, which we call levers, based on their common purpose and by which stakeholders are involved.

4 Findings

We identified four levers of community building: encouraging community participation, involving providers and buyers, empowering providers, and empowering buyers. In this section, we describe each lever with its constituting mechanisms and offer examples of related community-building features. The first two levers are related to building community on a general level, and the other two levers address building community separately from the perspectives of providers and buyers. A summary of the identified community-building levers and associated mechanisms with detailed examples is presented in Table 2.

Community building levers	Mechanisms	Example quotes
Encouraging community participation	One-to-many broadcasting	<i>The blog is a way for us to have a conversation with our great community. (Upwork)</i> <i>Today we're launching Ninetwenty-nine, [...] podcast that offers advice on ways to grow your business through lessons learnt by the world's leading experts. (Fiverr)</i>

	Establishing community values	<i>In order to maintain a respectful, inclusive, and safe environment for everyone, we've created a set of community standards to serve as a moral compass for behavior on our platform. (Fiverr)</i> <i>What the C in CERT measures is how one is engaged as a member of the community, looking after not just their own interests but those of the whole community. (PeoplePerHour)</i>
Involving providers and buyers	Facilitating online interaction	<i>We are introducing new "user levels" [users] can earn for viewing and participation. The higher up you are, the more you can interact with others in the forum and the more features open up. (Fiverr)</i> <i>Connect with other freelancers and build a professional network, you will soon be able to refer work to people in that network and be referred work that's applicable to you. (PeoplePerHour)</i>
	Giving voice	<i>Expert PPHers known as "PPH Ambassadors" are particularly active in answering questions in the Community Q&A forums sharing their wisdom and experience. (PeoplePerHour)</i> <i>We want to give your voice more weight. With the voting feature, you'll be able to show support for suggestions made in the "Suggestion Box". (Fiverr)</i>
	Community recruitment	<i>Our referral program makes it easy and worthwhile (CHA-CHING) to share the awesomeness of Fiverr with your network. (Fiverr)</i> <i>Adding [non-users of Guru] as no-access members for billing purposes. (Guru.com)</i>
	Facilitating offline interaction	<i>Fiverr's Community Team will be flying down to LA this Thursday to talk 2017 with local sellers and buyers. Don't miss a chance to have your voice heard and be a part of the emerging Fiverr brand. [...]</i> <i>We want to hear your ideas, seriously, because it doesn't get better than that. (Fiverr)</i>
Empowering providers	Enabling provider brand building	<i>Sellers can use the Monthly Leaderboard page to compare their activity against others', see the progress they made compared to previous months, and engage in some friendly competition! Buyers will be able to [...] browse their profiles and contact them to collaborate on various Projects! (PeoplePerHour)</i> <i>By adding more skills you improve the value of your [provider] profile. (twago)</i> <i>The "Skills tests" will define your credentials and will help improve your chances of getting more jobs. (Freelancer.com)</i>
	Facilitating collaboration among providers	<i>This new feature will allow you to team up with other professionals who complement your skills and make a more compelling pitch to the Buyer. (PeoplePerHour)</i> <i>With the release of new Guru profiles, you can choose to display any test results your team members have published. (Guru.com).</i>
Empowering buyers	Facilitating collaboration among buyers	<i>We're making it easier for teams of coworkers to track the progress of projects, collaborate more efficiently, and get inspiration for new projects. (Upwork)</i> <i>Guru network allows buyers to recommend sellers to other buyers. (Guru.com)</i>
	Providing management tools	<i>We introduced recurring billing to make it easier for you to manage paying your long-term gurus. (Guru.com)</i> <i>So, we're introducing Fiverr Business Tools, a new and improved set of features intended for small and midsize businesses (SMBs) and their teams working on Fiverr. (Fiverr)</i>

Table 2. Levers of platform community building.

4.1 Encouraging community participation and involving providers and users

In this section, we discuss the categories of encouraging community participation and involving providers and buyers. These mechanisms affect and require both buyers' and providers' actions as well as their connections to the platform, building communities between all three parties.

Community building through encouraging community participation. Beyond just giving access to a marketplace of professional services, OLPs can encourage providers and buyers to actively participate in the community by offering additional motivations and providing a unifying goal or vision for the platform. First, platforms apply *one-to-many broadcasting* to communicate their goals, inform about upcoming changes to the platform, and educate users in the platform's use. This takes place via blogs, podcasts and press releases, for example. *"While we do not want to flood your inboxes with emails about new features, we understand from your questions so far that a lot of you would like to know what features are being introduced so we have decided to start a blog and keep you informed with what is happening..."* – PeoplePerHour blog, 6.6.2007. Even though readers and listeners can comment on the broadcasted content, we perceive blogs as a predominantly one-way type of communication (as opposed to two-way) in that comments are often few compared to the size of the audience. All platforms invite their users to blog about their experiences and to share their tips with the rest of the community, likely strengthening the cohesiveness of the community as users participate in the community-building effort. Press releases are the most formal way of communication, but they demonstrate to users how the platform messages outsiders and wants to be perceived by them. Finally, the focus of OLP podcasts seems to be more on user education and offering other beneficial content than announcing new changes. *"Today we're launching Ninetwenty-nine, our nine minute and twenty-nine second podcast that offers advice on ways to grow your business through lessons learnt by the world's leading experts. Perfect for anyone with an interest in entrepreneurship."* – Fiverr blog 6.4.2020.

Second, platforms *establish community values* by communicating official standards and socializing their vision for the platform. This involves outlining terms of service and values of the community and enforcing them via various measures. *"We are moving from an individualistic platform to a collaborative one, which closer resembles the workspace as we traditionally know it where teamwork is key to innovation and efficient execution. We are moving from a platform where our providers compete with each other to one where they can collaborate with each other, extend their knowledge and skills, build their professional profiles and win more work."* – PeoplePerHour blog, 29.5.2008. To enforce desired behaviours and community values many platforms encourage the community to police itself by giving users means to "flag" content and/or users in breach of community's practices. *"Now you can help us retain the quality of projects posted on twago. If you come across a project and notice that it's not in line with the twago Terms of Service, or is an obvious spam project, simply click the report violation link and select the reason for flagging the project. Another welcomed feature that was implemented after popular request."* – twago blog, 24.7.2014. Furthermore, many platforms provide aggregated scores to signal a user's quality at a glance. In PeoplePerHour's CERT-score, "C" stands for "Community" signalling that participating in the community is valued, and rewarded, by the platform. *"What the C in CERT measures is how one is engaged as a member of the community, looking after not just their own interests but those of the whole community. For example, how much one refers others to the site to help grow the community, how one is engaged in social commenting to help grade and curate great content, and how one creates great original content that is liked and shared by others on the site."* – PeoplePerHour 16.12.2013.

Community building through involving users. Multidirectional forms of communication such as forums, virtual events and different networking features *facilitate users' online interaction* both with each other and with the platform. On forums, the users offer peer support and provide advice and solutions for others' problems. Forums also offer the users a channel for connecting with the platform owner in a less formal way. In PeoplePerHour, requests for new platform features prompted the creation of a separate feature request forum. Fiverr, in turn, implemented "user levels" on its forum in 2016 as a control mechanism to improve the level of meaningful conversations: *"New users coming into the forum need to earn the trust of the community. There are fewer interface options to make it less confusing for*

new users, and we will gradually introduce new functionality you [sic] get more experienced. Thus, new users' members [sic] are restricted for safety – both theirs and yours.” – Fiverr forum post 19.12.2016. Some platforms also host, and more importantly, allow their users to host, different virtual events, such as webinars for learning, and more informal get-togethers for networking and celebrating occasions such as International Freelancer Day.

Different means of user interaction also enable *giving voice to users*. OLPs receive many development ideas from the community, all of which can be difficult to prioritize. Having the community vote on the most interesting updates and the most useful content, for example, allows users to have a say in the platform development while enabling the platform owner to focus on the most preferred improvements and the most useful content. *“Vote questions and answers up or down. Make your voice heard, and move the best questions and answers to the top of the list! Think a question is highly important and relevant? Give it a thumbs-up! Earn badges for your contributions to the community.”* – Guru.com blog, 30.5.2012. OLPs have experimented with a social media type of functionalities or networking features. PeoplePerHour, for instance, implemented in 2011 on its platform “stars” with which the users could follow people they found interesting or just to let them know they liked them. The starred users were then able to star (follow) back, forming networks between users. Later in 2013, PeoplePerHour implemented an endorsement function that allowed personal recommendations in addition to traditional feedback and ratings. Handpicked community members are sometimes granted an amplified voice. For example, Fiverr searched for “Super Sellers” in 2012 to produce content and share tips with other users to educate them on a particular topic. *“Fiverr is packed with amazing sellers and we want you to help us identify the Fiverr Super Sellers among us. [...] These sellers will be asked to share their Fiverr experience and pass on some words of wisdom to the community about their super strengths.”* – Fiverr blog 13.9.2012. Upwork Ambassadors are active community members who host both virtual and offline events in their regions. Active members of the community have also been asked to join the platform’s support team as with PeoplePerHour’s CrowdExperts, who are providers selected based on their community feedback and overall reputation on the platform. What sets the CrowdExperts apart from other users offering advice and support is their more formal “voice” as they are recognised by the platform.

While we emphasise the platforms’ efforts to create a sense of community and to retain its users, attracting new users is also part of community building. In addition to organic growth and acquisitions of competing platforms, OLPs can capitalize on *community recruitment* to attract new users. A referral program, where users are rewarded for bringing in new users is one way to do this. Platforms have also implemented more indirect measures such as “hire me” features that are tools sellers can use to market their services outside the platform, but that direct traffic to the platform for the eventual transaction. For example, twago and PeoplePerHour implemented a “hire me” button a provider could place on their website and Freelancer.com implemented a program where buyers who are invited to the platform by a provider do not pay project fees to the platform when working with the particular provider: *“From the surveys we ran, we found that our freelancers are reluctant to refer their existing employers to our platform because of the project fees. [...] As such, with the HireMe Program, when you refer someone that is new to Freelancer.com, there are no project fees when you work together. Ever.”* – Freelancer.com blog, 2.2.2015. Similarly, buyers are offered “Bring your own talent” programs where they can easily bring in the talent they know off-platform, and providers can bring in talent that is currently not a member of the platform community to join their teams.

Interestingly, while the platforms are global and digital by nature, they also *facilitate offline interaction* by organizing face-to-face events and arranging opportunities for providers to work together offline. While a platform with millions of users cannot expect to reach most users offline, it can signal the userbase about the platform’s community-building efforts and that the community is valued. The offline, in-person events themselves, like the community events Fiverr organises, are likely to attract users who then become more invested in the platform: *“Fiverr’s Community Program takes our colourful world of buyers and sellers and gives them the chance to make useful connections, learn new skills, and, most importantly, make Fiverr an even more engaging marketplace. [...] We are already planning events,*

workshops, and socials that will boost visibility for both buyers and sellers, as well as bring our diverse talents and creativity together in fun and meaningful ways.” – Fiverr press release, 1.12.2016.

4.2 Empowering providers and buyers

The empowerment mechanisms offer both the buyers and the providers means to run their businesses more effectively and to deepen their connection within and between stakeholder groups. However, as is the nature of community, the broader community and the platform benefit from dyadic transactions as they bring visibility and attribution to contributions helping community members to build their reputations and learn from others.

Community building through empowering providers. While providers compete with others with similar offerings, the OLPs attempt to create a sense of community between them by *facilitating collaboration among providers*. Depending on the platform, providers may be able to form teams and/or engage in co-bidding so that rather than competing they are cooperating. For platforms and buyers, this means increased capacity to deliver bigger projects requiring multiple providers: *“Co-bidding allows you to collaborate on work with others in your team. You can still bid for work as an individual, but in essence this new feature will allow you to team up with other professionals who complement your skills and make a more compelling pitch to the Buyer. This is especially so for more complex projects where a multitude of skills is often required”* – PeoplePerHour blog, 29.5.2008. As another example, in 2013 Guru.com implemented multi-user accounts and enabled teams to display their members’ test scores for clients. Later, the platform removed all the fees for transferring funds between the team members to further encourage collaboration. In addition to providers advising each other on its forums, Fiverr experimented with providers’ mentor/mentee programs where more experienced providers would offer personal guidance on how to optimize gigs: *“Follow up on some of the feedback from the ‘What are you looking for in the Forum?’ thread from a few weeks ago. [...] We’re launching a test program to match providers with each other with the goal of creating a Mentor/Mentee bond.”* – Fiverr forum post, 15.6.2017.

In addition to platform-generated signals, providers may also individually increase their visibility and tighten their relationship with the community through *provider brand building*. Personal introduction texts and portfolios in profiles are widespread but, in 2007, Guru.com implemented video profiles with the underlying rationality that: *“Video Profiles create a personal relationship and narrow the physical distance between employer and professional. These video profiles humanize the process by giving employers a virtual ‘face-to-face’ type of experience prior to them selecting a professional.”* – Guru.com, press release 10.8.2007. Upwork and Freelancer.com gave similar reasons for intro videos on profiles. Depending on the platform, providers might also be able to make video bids or take tests to earn certificates to demonstrate their skills and differentiate from other providers. Many platforms offer buyers tools to manage recurring billing, but in 2021, Fiverr introduced subscriptions to its providers allowing them to also sell their services on an ongoing basis without having to sell the same service multiple times. Repeat business is likely to strengthen the relationship with buyers. *“Fiverr has always encouraged long term relationships between buyers and sellers, and now, with the repeat business score and badge on seller profiles, this is recognized even further!”* – Fiverr forum post, 3.8.2021. As a premium service, Fiverr’s providers were also given a chance to track their competitors giving them a better view of the community. PeoplePerHour does something similar by publishing a monthly leaderboard to foster friendly competition among providers also highlighting skilled providers to buyers.

Community building through empowering buyers. We also discovered efforts by OLPs to build communities among buyers. OLPs do not cater only for individual buyers but sometimes for a group of buyers working in the same organisation. In these situations, it makes sense for the platform to *facilitate collaboration among buyers*. For example, in 2018 Upwork implemented an auto-join setting which lets co-workers join a company account at registration and, for instance, refer freelancer providers to their co-workers. Every studied OLP has implemented some form of provider management system for enterprises: *“To make it easier for clients to find their coworkers and collaborate with their team on a company account when registering for Upwork. There are many advantages to sharing a company*

account with your coworkers which make hiring, managing and communicating with freelancers much easier.” – Upwork blog, 10.12.2018.

Finally, buyers need to be equipped with *management tools*. Just as providers may form a team to collaborate on a bigger project, a buyer might need several providers for one project. In the above-described co-bidding and provider teams, it is often the team that coordinates tasks, and the buyer communicates with the team leader. If multiple providers are needed and there is no team available, the buyer needs appropriate team management tools, to coordinate the multi-provider project while, as a by-product, increasing cooperation or at least decreasing competition between the providers. Furthermore, the OLPs have tried to make rehiring easy for both group and individual buyers. While the purpose is to improve the platform’s usability, by making it easy to rehire a good provider and for the provider to get recurring gigs, these features can be seen as deepening the relationship between the provider and the buyer and thus contributing to community-building and the platform’s stickiness. For example, when Upwork implemented a series of features called “Virtual Talent Bench” the stated goal was to make “*relationship building central to the customer experience on Upwork*” and to make “*it easier for all of our customers to build long-term relationships*” – Upwork press release 27.10.2021.

4.3 Stakeholder roles in platform community building

Platform communities are about different parties communicating and interacting with each other on the platform and even beyond it in offline environments. As our discussion above demonstrates, the three stakeholders assume different roles through their primary tasks and purposes, but also in building and sustaining a community. The grey colour in Table 3 indicates the main locus of action in each lever.

Community building lever	Platform owner <i>Creating core interaction</i>	Provider <i>Producing services</i>	Buyer <i>Purchasing services</i>
Encouraging community participation	Communicating values and a common uniting goal, integrating community values into the platform architecture	Receiving messages and information	
Involving users	Soliciting ideas, scaling up customer support and user education, giving users a say in the platform development	Community recruitment, idea/content generation, community voting, participating in the platform maintenance, attending and organizing both virtual and offline events	
Empowering providers	Creating necessary features based on user feedback and platform development goals	Flagging, reputation building, organizing into teams, bilateral feedback, deepening relationships	Making use of teams and provider branding
Empowering buyers	Creating necessary features based on user feedback and platform development goals	Participating in buyer-led multi-provider projects	Reputation maker, managing large-scale projects, deepening relationships with good providers

Table 3. Stakeholder roles in OLP community building.

A vision for the community is created by the platform owner communicating platform values and common goals, integrating them into the platform architecture and rewards. The platform owner may then invite buyers and providers to participate in the community’s development and maintenance by, for example, soliciting ideas and votes, encouraging content creation, scaling up customer support and education by encouraging interaction on forums and having providers and buyers to monitor the platform for content in breach of its terms of service and rules. Furthermore, providers and buyers have roles

specific to them from the community-building perspective. The platform owner can empower the providers with functionalities related to, for example, cooperation with fellow providers instead of competition making providers accountable to each other, giving means to get to know other providers, warning other providers of dishonest buyers and fostering more personal and long-term relationships with buyers. Similarly, the buyers can be empowered by, for example, supporting them in managing large-scale projects and helping them to deepen relationships with preferred suppliers, with the providers benefitting from the multi-provider projects and deepened relationships. However, the most important role of a buyer from the community-building point of view is that of a reputation maker or bringing visibility to providers' contributions with ratings and feedback.

In Table 3, the roles of stakeholders exhibit varying degrees of activeness, depending on the lever. However, none of these levers or roles functions without the other, less active stakeholder groups as it is how well they work together that empowers the benefits of having a strong community. Even actions within one stakeholder group are at least partly dependent on the other: for example, when creating a team of providers, part of its strength is gathered from serving buyers' needs. Seeing the feedback other buyers have given to providers helps another buyer in finding good providers but also enables high-performing providers to make the next trade easier. Hence, these roles serve both the collective and the individual user.

5 Discussion

Many of our observations align with the previous research. The importance of forums for community building is clear (Morreale et al., 2017, Gerber, 2021, Li et al., 2018, Damsgaard, 2002) as platforms use them to connect with users, collect ideas and enable users to help each other driving down platform's costs. Platforms further refine and package user-produced content into more easily accessible forms, for example, by training chatbots with forum data and curating the highest-voted content into resources. We see similarities between the observed co-bidding and teaming-up features and the need for complementor management strategy as platforms grow (Lee et al., 2018), as being able to offer work for multiple providers in the same project means there is more work available which should decrease the number of providers leaving the platform for lack of work. At the same time, it helps the platforms to move from a cottage industry scale where projects are limited to the capacity of the freelancer-and-a-laptop provider to being able to deliver larger projects easier. In line with Grewal et al. (2010), we observed continuous efforts by the platforms to create congenial marketplaces where users can trust each other and the platform.

We also see examples of both controlled and loose community-building strategies (Gerber, 2021). Reporting or "flagging" other users, user levels in forums regulating available functionalities and community values integrated into ranking algorithm are examples of tight control whereas allowing users to work with platform outsiders, increasing means of communication at the risk of disintermediation and allowing users to host own events on and off the platforms represent loose community building strategy. In the studied platforms, contents of encouraging community participation closely correspond to platform incentives encouraging and rewarding community participation whereas users' different ways of endorsing and rewarding good providers and buyers essentially fulfil the role of peer incentives (Li et al., 2018).

Where we contribute novel insights is in examining community building in OLPs through the roles of the different stakeholders, that is, platform owners, providers, and buyers (see Table 3). While the traditional roles of providing a marketplace (platform owners), producing services (providers), and purchasing services (buyers) are naturally clear, our analysis also reveals more fine-grained and novel aspects of these roles that have not previously received detailed attention. Some of them are shared across the stakeholders while some are more focal to a particular group. As community members depend on each other, the roles are in service of the user and the community, fostering commitment between the users and the platform. Naturally, some actions by community members, such as poor-quality work or shirking payment, may harm the community's cohesion. In such cases, the community-building mechanisms described here may enable other members to take corrective actions. Building a community

allows platforms to reap various benefits and remain resilient through granting community members voice and agency in platform development, making them more involved with the platform beyond basic interactions. Building a community is not the only way to improve the platform's stickiness, and by extension its continued operations and success, but it is a crucial element in attracting users and keeping them engaged with the platform.

6 Conclusions and further research

We investigated how six online labour platforms whose tenure greatly exceeds the industry average, leverage different stakeholder groups, themselves included, to build and sustain their communities. Rather than the number of users, with community, we mean the users' sense of responsibility towards each other and commitment to a uniting goal. Community building is seen as one way to increase the platform's stickiness (Zott et al., 2000), i.e. the platform's ability to attract and retain users which is connected to the platform's longevity. Community-building supports the platform's stickiness making it easier to retain providers and buyers saving resources from having to constantly attract them. More experienced providers often also engage in better-paid gigs and are more efficient in using the platform. Commitment to the community also deters opportunistic behaviour where a user maximizes their utility at others' expense. When such behaviour occurs, community members participate in maintaining the platform by notifying the platform owner of users in breach of terms of service. The community also fosters cooperation decreasing inter-provider competition while allowing buyers to purchase larger projects meaning bigger commissions for the platform owner. Furthermore, unofficial communities outside the platform's influence like Turkernation and RideSharing Forum might emerge if the platform does not provide one of its own.

We identified four levers the platforms use to build a sense of community and collective commitment to keep users engaged with the platform: encouraging community participation, involving providers and users, empowering providers, and empowering buyers. Stakeholders' roles and activity levels between levers vary, and this variance is connected to the stakeholders' primary roles of providing a marketplace (platform owner), producing services (providers) and purchasing services (buyers). The roles benefit the member of a stakeholder group but also serve the broader community aiming at improving the platform for all. By having a better understanding of how to target the community-building efforts and how efforts targeted at one stakeholder group can affect other stakeholders, the platform owners can more effectively instil the userbase with a sense of community and responsibility towards each other to better garner the benefits of community described above. Our study answers the call on platform sustainability research and how to ensure that stakeholders keep participating (Reuver et al., 2018) contributing to the discussion on the conditions behind online labour platforms' long-term success. We also show OLPs mixing loose and controlled community-building strategies (Gerber, 2021) which we believe underlines the multifacetedness of building communities on OLPs.

As we focus on community building of long-lived platforms, we have some understanding of what community building looks like in successful platforms. However, we do not know how this differs from community building on platforms that ceased to operate after a few years. Furthermore, our study covered six professional service platforms with generalist offerings, which does not present an exhaustive account of community building in online labour platforms in general. Despite our efforts to retrieve documents lost to website updates through the Wayback Machine and to triangulate and verify our corpus with tweets and mentions in the press, our analysis is subject to the availability of documents. For example, we did not have access to newsletters the platforms send to their users.

Our study and extant research suggest that strong communities are strategic resources for the platforms prompting investment in creating and sustaining them. Further research could study both providers and buyers and how they evaluate if the platform has a good and well-developed community and how they factor that into their decision-making, if at all, regarding joining or leaving a platform or multi-homing. Comparing community-building efforts on short-lived platforms to the efforts of long-lived platforms is another interesting avenue. We believe the identified community-building levers and the roles different platform stakeholders have in them, provide a good starting point for future research to build on.

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