

Occupational Choices and Mobility of Young Flexible Workers—Empirical Evidence from Tianjin

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Abstract: *In the era of rapid digital economy advancement, the burgeoning flexible youth workforce plays an increasingly pivotal role in China's labour market. Nonetheless, the research focus on their career choices and mobility remains inadequate. By using Tianjin as a case study, this research undertakes an initial investigation through an online survey. The key discoveries are as follows: (1) Flexible employment is predominantly prevalent in the e-commerce and sharing economy domains. (2) The primary sources of flexible workers include former government and institutional employees, full-time homemakers, migrant workers, and retired military personnel, with the former group constituting the majority at over 60%. (3) The primary reasons for selecting jobs revolve around seeking higher earnings and pursuing personal interests. (4) Notably, this cohort exhibits a substantial job retention rate and limited mobility post-employment. These revelations offer a preliminary insight into this subject, underscoring the necessity for further longitudinal and subsequent studies.*

Keywords: *Flexible Employment, Youth Employment, Occupational Mobility, Tianjin, China*

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the development of the digital economy, flexible employment has grown rapidly and has become one of the main sources of employment growth in China^[1]. Flexible employment is contrasted with stable employment, the latter referring to full-time, indefinite labour relationships directly established between employees and employers. Traditional flexible employment mainly consists of temporary, low-income, low-skill auxiliary jobs. However, with the advent of the digital era, new forms of flexible employment driven by the “Internet Plus” concept have rapidly developed^[2]. These are characterized by internet information platforms becoming new ways to organize labour resources, including platform economies, sharing economies, and entrepreneurial employment. Due to its flexibility, compatibility, and openness, many workers have entered this field. By the end of 2021, there were already 200 million flexible workers in China^[3].

Tianjin is one of the Chinese cities where flexible employment has developed rapidly. Tianjin has the advantage of higher education resources and can also attract talent from the entire Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei coordinated development area. Flexible employment has become an important career choice for young people in Tianjin, but this group has not received sufficient research attention. There is a lack of systematic empirical research on their occupational status, career mobility, and future development. Addressing this issue will help deepen the understanding of improving the flexible employment environment and enhancing mechanisms to promote flexible employment, providing important academic support for promoting high-quality and full employment.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Flexible Employment in the Digital Age

The development of the internet has driven the progress of flexible employment, with workers in various industries finding employment through internet platforms. On one hand, many researchers have focused on and discussed the new characteristics of this employment form. Liu^[4] explains the “new” aspect of this employment form from the perspective of the sharing economy. He points out that the traditional economy mainly reflects the relationship between “workers—companies—consumers”,

where the key function of companies is to reasonably arrange resources for production or service delivery. In contrast, the sharing economy is characterized by the relationship between “providers—sharing platforms—consumers”, where the roles of consumers and providers can be exchanged at any time. Azeem and Kotey^[5] believes that this new employment form represents an entirely new way of labour resource allocation. Many enterprises that primarily produce services or intellectual products do not require their employees to work in fixed locations. On the other hand, internet platforms have expanded employment opportunities for workers, creating new points of employment growth^[6].

While these changes are taking place, internet platforms have also brought new challenges to workers and labour relations^[7]. Labour issues in the internet age include both traditional topics and new areas of labour, production methods, labour organization forms, and modes of expression^[8]. For example, Carreño and Uras^[9] deny the existence of a labour relationship between ride-hailing drivers and platforms, considering it a service relationship instead. However, some studies suggest that although individual and collective labour relations have undergone new changes in the internet age, the essence of the employment relationship has not fundamentally changed, and the subordination of workers remains^[10].

2.2 Research on Employment Promotion Policies

Currently, research on employment promotion policies in China mainly focuses on two groups: college graduates^{[11][12][13]} and women^{[14][15]}. Regarding college graduates, scholars attempt to explore differences in employment policies through comparative analyses between China and other countries. For example, Yang and Wang^[11] found that the United States adopts measures such as waiving student loan obligations to promote the supply of college graduates. To reduce information asymmetry in the labour market, many universities in the United Kingdom have established dedicated career services departments and implemented reform strategies for career guidance services. Wu and Zhang^[13] point out that the Japanese government has also formulated a series of public policies to promote college graduate employment, such as the “Labour Standards Act”, “Employment Security Act”, and “Employment Measures Act”.

For the female employment group, scholars mainly discuss employment promotion policies and measures from the perspective of promoting gender equality in the labour market. Hu^[14] discusses Japan’s policies and measures to encourage childbirth and promote women’s employment, such as enacting a series of laws and regulations to ensure women can balance work and child-rearing, and urging companies to implement “childcare leave” systems. Yang^[15] further discusses China’s paths to promote women’s equal employment under the “universal two-child” policy, proposing the completion of laws to promote equal employment and strengthening the labour market supervision system.

Against this background, this study aims to build on previous research findings to support youth employment and sustainable career development as practical concerns. It seeks to clarify the functional positioning of the young flexible employment group in the digital age and provide empirical support for establishing and improving a labour market that aligns with the realities of Chinese society.

3. Research Method

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics.

Variables		Frequencies	Percentage
Gender	Male	171	53.1
	Female	151	46.9
Educational level	Elementary school or below	12	3.7
	Junior high school	24	7.5
	High school	59	18.3
	College	89	27.6
	Undergraduate	127	39.4
	Master or above	11	3.4
Household registration status	Locals	180	55.9
	Non-locals	142	44.1
Marital status	Unmarried	73	22.7
	Married	229	71.1
	Divorced	20	6.2
Total		322	100

This research team conducted an online survey targeting the online sample pool in Tianjin (totaling 58,762 individuals, with 57% male and 43% female). The survey was distributed in March 2024, and a total of 322 questionnaires from the flexible employment group were collected. Descriptive statistics of the sample are shown in Table 1.

4. Findings

4.1 The Current Industry of the Flexible Employment Group

The industry distribution of young people engaged in flexible employment is relatively diverse. Overall, it can be divided into four categories: e-commerce platform type, sharing economy type, entrepreneurship type, and traditional casual labour type, each category also includes several specific industry divisions (Table 2). Specifically, the distribution of practitioners in each category is as follows:

(1) E-commerce Industry: With a value of 154, it ranks first, indicating that the e-commerce industry is one of the most popular industries among the flexible employment group. The rise of the e-commerce industry is closely related to the development of internet technology, providing individuals with low-cost and efficient sales channels. This allows many people to sell products through online stores or platforms, achieving flexible employment.

(2) Sharing Economy: With a value of 105, it follows closely behind. The sharing economy meets demand by sharing resources, such as ride-sharing and short-term rentals. This model provides flexible employment workers with a variety of job opportunities.

(3) Entrepreneurship: The value is 50, which is relatively low, but entrepreneurship as a form of flexible employment allows individuals to start businesses based on their own creativity and market demand, offering a high degree of flexibility and autonomy.

(4) Traditional Casual Work: Although there is no specific value in the chart, traditional casual work such as temporary work and part-time jobs is also an important part of flexible employment. It provides opportunities for those who need flexible working hours or wish to find a balance among multiple jobs.

Table 2: Analysis of industry segmentation for the flexible employment group.

Industry Sector		Frequencies	Percentage
E-commerce Platforms	E-commerce (Taobao store owners, WeChat business, live stream sales, etc.)	37	11.5
	Internet (online anchors, e-sports, online entertainment, etc.)	57	17.7
	Express Logistics	11	3.4
Sharing Economy	Ride-hailing, designated driving services	21	6.5
	Food delivery	28	8.7
	Cultural and creative (writers, artists, photographers, etc.)	26	8.1
	Knowledge and skills services (image processing, advertising design, online data analysis, online translation, etc.)	69	21.4
	Domestic workers, renovation and maintenance workers, etc.	10	3.1
Entrepreneurship	Inn, homestay	10	3.1
	Self-employed	40	12.4
Traditional Casual Work	Migrant workers, other types of temporary or hourly workers, etc.	13	4
Total		322	100

From these data, we can analyze several key points: Firstly, the rise of e-commerce and the sharing economy largely benefits from technological progress, especially the popularization of the internet and mobile devices, making flexible employment easier and more common. Secondly, the flexible employment group tends to choose jobs that offer higher autonomy and flexibility, reflecting the modern labour market's emphasis on work-life balance. Thirdly, the flexible employment group is not limited to a single industry, and their employment choices are diverse, indicating that the labour market provides a wide range of employment opportunities for individuals. Fourthly, the rise of flexible employment may be related to economic and social factors, such as economic globalization, changes in the labour market, and the pursuit of work freedom. Fifthly, government policies and regulations also affect the development of flexible employment, such as support for the e-commerce industry, incentives for entrepreneurship, and regulation of the sharing economy.

In summary, the industry distribution of the flexible employment group reflects the changing trends

of the modern labour market and the pursuit of work flexibility and autonomy by individuals. With the development of technology and social progress, we can foresee that flexible employment will continue to be an important part of the labour market.

4.2 Composition of Flexible Employment Workers' Occupational Origins

The occupations or identities of flexible employment workers before engaging in flexible employment show a state of one main and multiple diversities (Figure 1).

Firstly, former employees of government agencies and enterprises account for the majority of the flexible employment group (Frequency: 218 times, Percentage: 67.7%). Most flexible employment workers were employees of government agencies and enterprises before changing careers. This may be related to the industrial structure of Tianjin on one hand. On the other hand, it may also mean that there is a large fluidity between traditional full-time work and flexible employment, or these individuals may have turned to flexible employment in search of more flexible working hours, higher autonomy, or other personal reasons.

Secondly, full-time homemakers/househusbands (Frequency: 50 times, Percentage: 15.5%) and migrant workers (Frequency: 39 times, Percentage: 12.1%) are the second and third sources of flexible employment. Homemakers or househusbands may switch to flexible employment because they need to earn income while fulfilling family responsibilities, or they wish to re-enter the labour market to enhance personal career development. Migrant workers may turn to flexible employment because they need more flexible work arrangements to adapt to seasonal work or family responsibilities, or because flexible employment offers more employment opportunities and sources of income.

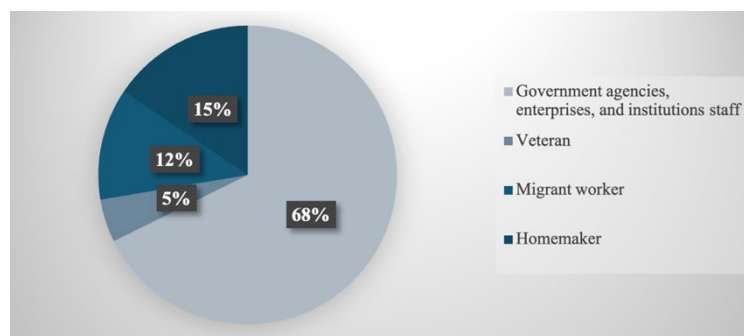


Figure 1: Analysis of the identity status before engaging in flexible employment for the flexible employment group.

Thirdly, retired military personnel (Frequency: 15 times, Percentage: 4.7%) constitute a smaller but significant part of the flexible employment group. This may be related to their desire to quickly integrate into the civilian labour market after ending their military career, and flexible employment provides a way of transition.

The analysis above indicates that the flexible employment group is composed of individuals with different professional backgrounds, which shows that flexible employment offers job opportunities to people with various career experiences. Different professional backgrounds may correspond to different employment motivations. For example, retired military personnel may seek employment opportunities that utilize their military skills, while homemakers may focus more on the balance between work and family responsibilities. Moreover, transitioning from traditional occupations to flexible employment may face a series of challenges, including skill conversion, unstable income, lack of social security, etc. Understanding these challenges is crucial for supporting the flexible employment group. The rise of flexible employment may be related to changes in market demand and personal preferences for work flexibility. Understanding these factors is of great significance for predicting the development trend of flexible employment and formulating relevant policies.

The flexible employment group is composed of individuals with different professional and identity backgrounds, reflecting the inclusiveness and diversity of the flexible employment market. Understanding the backgrounds and needs of these individuals is crucial for providing effective employment support and services. At the same time, it also suggests the need for more in-depth research on the flexible employment market to promote its healthy development and meet the needs of different groups.

4.3 Reasons for Flexible Employment Group's Career Choice

According to the survey results, there are multiple reasons for the flexible employment group to change from their original profession and industry to the flexible employment industry, among which economic factors and personal interest motives are the main driving forces.

Firstly, seeking higher income (Frequency: 99 times, Percentage: 30.7%) is the main reason for the flexible employment group to change jobs or industries, reflecting the importance of economic factors in career choice. For many flexible employees, improving the level of income may be the key to improving the quality of life and achieving personal goals.

Secondly, pursuing personal interests (Frequency: 31 times, Percentage: 9.6%) is another important motivation, indicating that the flexible employment group pursues personal satisfaction and self-realization in career choice. This motivation may be closely related to personal values, life goals, and job satisfaction.

Thirdly, seeking better career opportunities (Frequency: 25 times, Percentage: 7.8%) and dissatisfaction with the industry (Frequency: 24 times, Percentage: 7.5%) are two other important reasons. Seeking better career opportunities, including broader career prospects and a working environment more conducive to personal growth, is also a reason for some people to change jobs or industries. Dissatisfaction with the current industry prompts some people to change jobs or industries. This dissatisfaction may stem from various factors, such as industry prospects, working environment, career development opportunities, etc.

Fourthly, passive resignation (Frequency: 4 times, Percentage: 1.2%), such as being fired or company restructuring, is a minor factor leading to job changes. This may indicate that most flexible employees have a high degree of initiative in career transition.

The above analysis shows that, firstly, in terms of the reasons for the flexible employment group to change industries, economic motivation (seeking higher income) is the most important driving force, but personal motivation (pursuing personal interests, seeking better career opportunities) also occupies an important position. This indicates that the flexible employment group considers both economic factors and personal satisfaction and career development in career choice. Secondly, dissatisfaction with the current industry may lead to reduced job satisfaction, thereby triggering career transition. Understanding the views of flexible employees on the industry is crucial for improving job satisfaction and retention rate. Thirdly, the flexible employment group shows adaptability to market changes in career transition, and they respond to market demand and personal career planning by changing jobs or industries. Understanding these reasons is of great significance for formulating effective employment policies, providing vocational training, and guidance. At the same time, it also suggests the need to pay attention to missing data to ensure the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the survey results.

4.4 Career Change Status of Flexible Employment Group After Employment

The flexible employment group is generally considered to have high job mobility. However, according to this survey, among all respondents, 81% of respondents have not changed jobs in the past 3 years, and only 19% have changed jobs at least once. Most respondents have maintained a relatively stable work status in the past 3 years, which may be related to the economic environment, industry characteristics, or personal choice.

Firstly, changes in economic conditions and market demand may affect the job stability of the flexible employment group. In times of economic prosperity, job opportunities may be more abundant, thereby increasing the frequency of job changes; during economic downturns, maintaining existing jobs may be more important. Secondly, individual career planning and development goals may also affect the decision to change jobs. Some flexible employees may prefer to delve into the same field or company, while others may seek to achieve rapid career growth by changing jobs. Thirdly, the flexible employment group may face social security and welfare issues different from traditional full-time employees. The level of job stability may affect their needs and expectations for social security.

The above analysis reveals the job change situation of the flexible employment group in the past 3 years, with most respondents maintaining job stability. Although there is a certain proportion of job changes, overall, the group shows a high job retention rate. This finding helps us to better understand the characteristics of the flexible employment market and the various factors affecting job stability. At the same time, it also suggests that policymakers and employers need to consider how to provide more

support and protection for the flexible employment group to promote their long-term development and well-being.

5. Conclusion

The current surge of flexible employment driven by mobile internet technology is significantly influencing the sustainable development of labour markets and industries. Using Tianjin as a case study, this research delves into the career choices and mobility patterns of young professionals engaged in flexible employment. The study reveals a predominant presence of flexible employees in the e-commerce and sharing economy sectors, with a notable proportion also engaged in entrepreneurial endeavors. Noteworthy sources of flexible workers include former government and corporate employees, stay-at-home parents, migrant workers, and retired military personnel, with the majority coming from the first category. Motivations for transitioning to flexible employment from traditional professions vary, with the pursuit of higher income and personal fulfillment ranking as primary drivers. Despite the dynamic nature of the industry, most practitioners exhibit stability in their career trajectories, displaying limited job changes likely attributed to a combination of factors.

This research centers on the topic of career selection and advancement among youthful and adaptable workforce segments, addressing a gap in scholarly investigations within this realm. This initial inquiry serves to enhance comprehension and scrutiny of this emerging workforce sector. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that this study represents a preliminary examination of the subject matter. Future scholarly endeavors should delve into longitudinal analyses of the career trajectories of this demographic and the myriad factors influencing their professional development, thus fostering a more comprehensive and systematic grasp of the phenomenon.

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