Meet the App That Helps Gig Workers Know How Much They Really Make

A former Uber employee created an app to help drivers. The platforms that hire them are fighting back.

By Erin Griffith
Erin Griffith, who writes about start-ups and venture capital, reported this story in San Francisco.

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Uber says its drivers average $30 an hour. The delivery service DoorDash says its drivers make at least $25. In reality, many of their drivers aren't sure how much they make when taking all their costs into account.

David Pickerell discovered this while working as an operations manager at Uber from 2015 to 2017. It didn't seem fair, he said, that drivers didn't have access to the same information he had sitting behind his computer.

"The information is there — we're just not empowering people," he said. "Why wouldn't we tell the driver and help them with that math?"

So Mr. Pickerell left Uber and built his own app, Para. Released last year, the free app aims to give gig economy workers more information about their work to help them maximize their earnings — even as the platforms that dispatch them resist.

The app's most popular feature allowed DoorDash drivers to know the tip for each job before they accepted it. Other than in New York City (where, since last year, apps have been required to show tips in advance), DoorDash hides that figure from drivers, even though most customers set the tip when they place their order.

Para also lets drivers set parameters to juggle multiple apps, automatically decline low-paying gigs and flag rude customers and undesirable locations, such as confusing apartment complexes and restaurants with long waits.

The app offers a tiny form of resistance against the dominance of the large companies that dispatch millions of drivers to deliver pizza, groceries, prescriptions or marijuana at the tap of a button. The drivers work as independent contractors, or freelancers, and get paid by the job, not the hour. DoorDash, Uber, Instacart, Grubhub, Lyft, Caviar, Eaze, Postmates, Amazon Flex, Walmart Spark and Shipt all use this model.

Para is growing in popularity as on-demand delivery services are under fire from all

sides: They are largely unprofitable, and investors are pressuring them to cut costs. Restaurants, which relied on delivery as a lifeline during the pandemic, are fed up with the fees they charge.

Drivers, many of whom started working for multiple apps in recent years, have expressed frustration over their pay, particularly as gas prices fluctuate. The Federal Trade Commission said this month that it would crack down on unfair and deceptive practices around wages by the on-demand delivery apps.

Para hasn't exactly been welcomed by the gig companies. DoorDash sent a cease-and-desist letter last summer, shortly after the app had started, saying that it was illegal for drivers to use their DoorDash credentials on Para and that data traffic from Para was so high it had "destabilized" DoorDash's platform more than once. Mr. Pickerell responded by offering to have a conversation, and he never heard back.

In July, DoorDash tightened the security controlling how drivers log into its app, cutting off Para from it. Each time Para created a workaround, DoorDash quashed it with a new update within hours, Mr. Pickerell said. After a few weeks of cat-and-mouse, Para gave up, ending workers' ability to use the app with DoorDash.

"Getting in a daily engineering war was not sustainable," Mr. Pickerell said.

DoorDash does not show full tip amounts for "orders that contain larger tips" in advance "to ensure all Dashers have an equal chance at receiving high-value orders," said Rachel Bradford, a spokeswoman. When drivers take only orders with big tips, it "harms the experience" for customers and merchants, she continued. Further, third-party apps that require drivers to share login credentials are "a concerning safety and security risk."

Last week, Uber also sent Para a cease-and-desist letter. Uber declined to comment.

Harry Campbell, the founder of "The Rideshare Guy," a blog and podcast for gig workers, said there was "inherent tension" between the ride-hailing platforms and their workers. Drivers want fewer drivers on the road, giving them less competition for the best-paying orders and more bonuses. But the platforms want the opposite — slightly more drivers than orders, to keep the service reliable and consistent.

"That inherent tension always leads to issues," Mr. Campbell said.

DoorDash came under fire for using tips to subsidize driver payments, a practice it stopped after an outcry, and lawsuits, in 2019. In 2020, Uber gave its drivers more flexibility to turn down lower-paying rides in its push for a California ballot measure that would keep drivers as independent contractors. A year later, after the measure had passed, drivers accused Uber of taking away that flexibility. The company made changes to address the complaints in recent weeks.

Other apps have offered drivers various tools over the years, but none have directly undermined the delivery apps as Para did with its hidden-tip feature. The company claims that its app has more users — 100,000 logging on each week and more than 400,000 downloads — than any others trying to give drivers more information about their take-home pay.

Para began as a pandemic project. When Covid-19 first began to spread, it was not clear whether gig workers qualified for government assistance. Mr. Pickerell, 31, built a website, Autonomy.jobs, which scraped government sites and told people how to get money on various timelines.

That idea — making useful information more accessible — formed the philosophy of Para. Mr. Pickerell noticed that more gig workers were driving for several apps at a time, so he built an earnings tracker that allowed them to calculate their income in one place. He persuaded drivers to try it by promoting it in online forums, in Facebook groups and on YouTube, and he quickly discovered that the drivers who made the most money were the ones who juggled apps and chose the best-paying gigs.
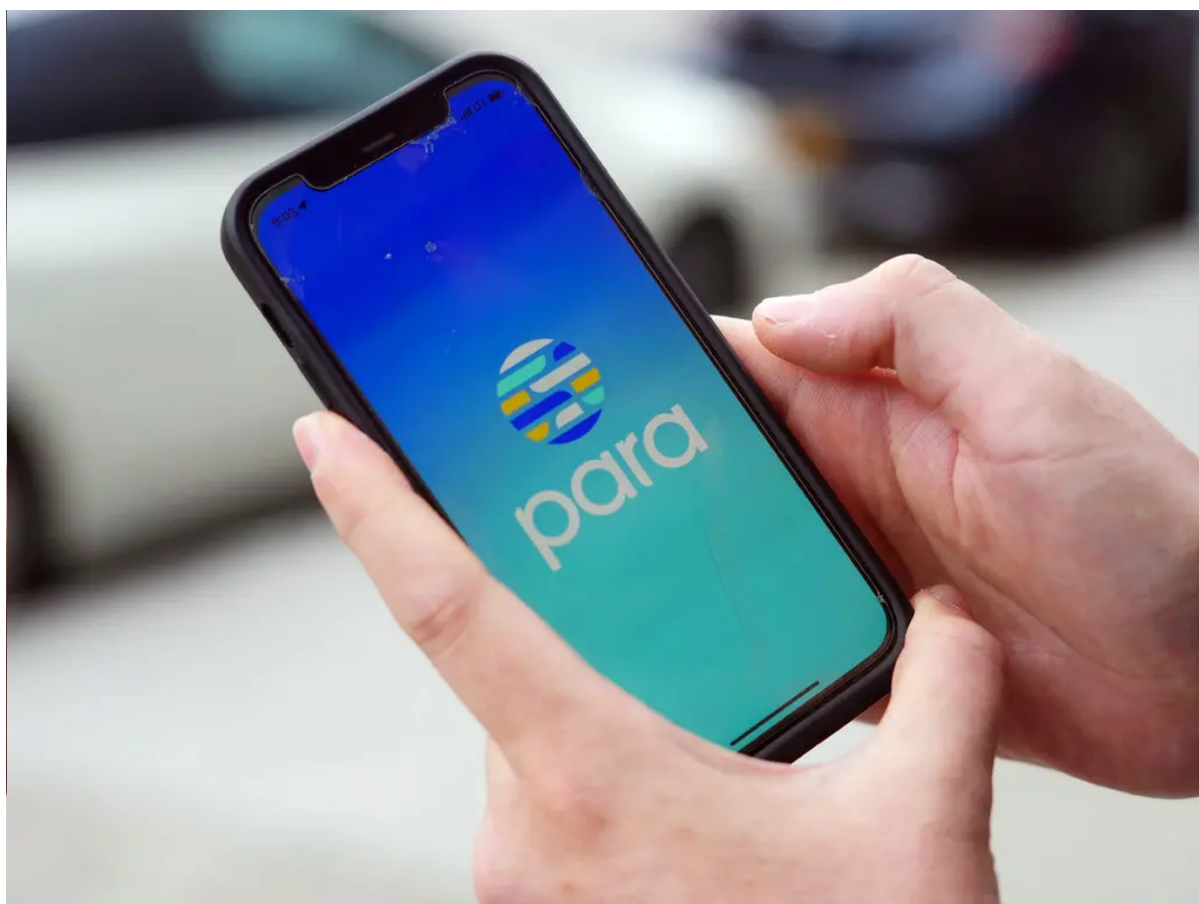
Para says its app has been downloaded more than 400,000 times. Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Doing that required savvy decision-making — calculating the time, mileage and gas required for a job while driving amid app pings.

"We basically said, 'What can we do to help people do this safer and get more competition for their time?'" Mr. Pickerell said.

Para does not yet have a business model. But it recently raised $11 million in funding from investors including Brand Foundry and GGV Capital. Some of the company's backers previously invested in the delivery apps that Para is needling, such as GSR Ventures, which backed Didi, the Uber of China.

Yuechen Zhao, an investor at GSR Ventures who also worked at Uber, said Mr. Pickerell's pitch to give drivers more power resonated with him. The platforms are huge and wield their control like market makers, often leaving drivers in the lurch.

"They don't know what the platforms are going to do next," he said. "There is a lot of mistrust between workers and these platforms."

The app took off last May, when Para began offering its tip-transparency feature. Luke Brewer, a driver in Rocky Mount, N.C., heard about it through YouTube.

"I thought it was, like, the best thing in the world," he said. He aims to make from $50 to $75 a night, which means turning down a lot of gigs. A no-tip order from Red Lobster could mean less than $3 for 30 minutes of work during a peak time, he said.

"They're relying on tips too much to make up the difference," he said of the apps.

Similar apps have battled with the platform companies. The app Mystro, released in 2017, let drivers switch easily between Uber and Lyft. Lyft blocked it in 2019, though Mystro has since found a workaround and plans to expand to DoorDash soon, according to Douglas Feigelson, the chief executive. The app has thousands of drivers, who each pay $18 a month to use it, Mr. Feigelson said. Lyft declined to comment.

Other services that aim to help drivers include Muver, which charges drivers from $2 to $6 a week to help them manage multiple apps at once; Solo, which gives gig workers working across multiple apps a guaranteed daily rate; and Gridwise, which tracks drivers' earnings and mileage.

In some cases, the delivery companies have made Para's features irrelevant. Soon after Para began showing Grubhub drivers how many miles each trip required, Grubhub began showing that information to its drivers, too.

In September, Uber announced a slate of changes for drivers, including sharing a trip's destination and its pay in advance, and sending them several trips to choose from.

Stephanie Vigil, a driver who works for multiple apps in Colorado Springs, Colo., started using Para last year. "It ends up increasing your earnings because you're not wasting your time on anything," she said. "I'm not going to take anything that's not a solid offer because I don't have to."

The hidden-tip feature was crucial before it was cut off, she said, because cash tips disappeared in the pandemic with contactless delivery. If the customer doesn't tip in advance, one probably isn't coming.

"You don't think about people you don't see in person," Ms. Vigil said.