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Building the Driver Advisory Council

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Authors

Aapti is a public research institute that works on the intersection of technology and society. It examines the ways in which people interact and negotiate with technology, both offline and online.

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The Need for a Driver Advisory Council (DAC)

1. The Need for a Driver Advisory Council (DAC)

Aapti is delighted to mark the first-year anniversary of our flagship initiative - the Driver Advisory Council (DAC), launched in March 2022. Recognising the value inherent to mechanisms for platform-gig worker dialogue, Aapti Institute, in collaboration with Uber India, launched the DAC. Over the last year Uber implemented a range of changes to improve drivers' experience while using the platform, after consultation with the drivers through the DAC and with Aapti's suggestions as the Independent Review Board (IRB). In its capacity as the IRB, Aapti spearheaded the process of formulating principles and processes for running the DAC, imparting autonomy to the Council.

The DAC represents a unique, first-of-its-kind effort in India's platform gig economy aimed at promoting the involvement of gig workers in platform governance through gig workers' participation in an independent third-party mediated forum. Organised and run on the principles of neutrality and autonomy, the DAC introduces an alternative framework for governance of platform work. It is a means for gig workers (drivers) to connect with Uber, and with peers from across six participating cities in India - Bengaluru, Chennai, Delhi-NCR, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Mumbai.

Since the inception of the DAC, Aapti has convened 3 in-person sessions (one per quarter) and two online sessions between March 2022 - March 2023. Based on these sessions, Uber implemented changes to its payments cycle, with an option for drivers to receive earnings on a daily basis as opposed to weekly. Acknowledging driver demands for transparency, Uber India introduced upfront display of destination (and fare, in most cities) to drivers when they receive trip requests on the Uber app. Uber India now provides a phone button on the home page added to the driver-partner's Uber app to call for support and displays the customer's chosen payment method for a trip.

Consequently, the DAC has evolved into a focal point for dialogue between

Uber and the larger driver community to channelise concerns within a safe space. Lastly, the DAC has become a valuable touchstone for the wider platform economy to enhance the participation of core stakeholders in governance and better design of platforms.

The DAC can be instrumental in unlocking benefits for the driver community. Besides implementing immediate changes in the platform that can enhance the ride experience, we believe efforts such as the DAC have far-ranging societal benefits as well. Participative dialogue can help generate data on issues faced by drivers, to enable potential positive changes to regulations, as well as Uber policies and products. The DAC also marks a significant milestone for India's mobility sector, broadening the scope for truly participatory decision-making in the platform economy.

The purpose of the DAC was to provide an open and safe environment for the driver community to voice their shared concerns and build solutions. Herein lies DAC's transformative potential - it heralds the promise of a better future for gig workers, promoting and treasuring drivers well-being as the guiding imperative of all the activities undertaken by Uber.

Given the DAC's value as a powerful precedent, this model of engagement with gig workers is scalable and poised for implementation across the ecosystem of platforms that have come to constitute the gig economy. The DAC and similar models represent an important conduit in bridging the gap between the lived experience of gig workers and forthcoming regulations for the gig economy. To this end, regulators are growing alive to alternative models for platform governance and promotion of gig worker welfare, championing models such as DAC as plausible pathways for governance of the platforms of tomorrow. The success of a DAC-like mechanism for better engagement of gig workers in ride-hail work displays that a sustainable model can be executed through a neutral, third-party entity, to promote much needed participatory governance in the platform economy.

A. Significance of the Driver Advisory Council

Even at a broader level, besides implementing immediate changes in the platform to enhance the ride experience, efforts such as the DAC have far-ranging positive externalities. Values that DAC unlocks for Uber and partners at the business, societal and policy level:

Policy

Creates a pipeline for a regulatory sandbox	Produces a body of evidence to enable well-planned policy changes	Demonstrates self governance through practice

Society

Supports conversation on safe environments for workers and riders	Focused environment for sensitive discussions on discrimination, health and safety

Business

Participatory forum for a closer connect with gig workers	An opportunity to gather feedback, enabling responsive strategy development	Enable increase in driver satisfaction leading to stronger trust

Significance of the DAC

B. Genesis of the Driver Advisory Council

The need for a DAC-like mechanism finds its roots in the regulatory vacuum around platform-gig work, calling on stakeholders to reimagine the current paradigm of labour engagement. Elsewhere, platforms have contemplated and experimented with similar independent, third-party mediated mechanisms to connect with their community of gig workers, suggesting an uptake for proactive engagement with gig workers amongst platforms. For instance, the US-based ride-hailing company, Lyft, experimented with a similar setup to facilitate a direct line of communication between Lyft HQ and the company's ever-expanding driver base. Later, the Lyft council was expanded (Lyft Driver Blog, 2020) from a unified national-level entity to 40 localised units across the country, enabling 200 influential Lyft drivers across USA and Canada to participate within these units. It is claimed that 7000 pieces of feedback were collected through localised councils and deliberated upon, bringing drivers to play an active role in product, marketing, and policy practices of the platform, through virtual and in-person programming (Maveal, 2020)[1].

The United States of America, Australia and New Zealand set the precedent for the DAC as a mechanism in Uber. The DAC constitutes a valuable precedent that helps to derive themes for discussion during Uber India's DAC sessions. Potential topics include but are not limited to driver earnings, how Uber shows they value drivers, driver ratings, deactivations, app performance and features, rider behaviour and respect, deals and rewards available through Uber's partnerships, Uber safety features and policies, education and skill building for drivers.

02

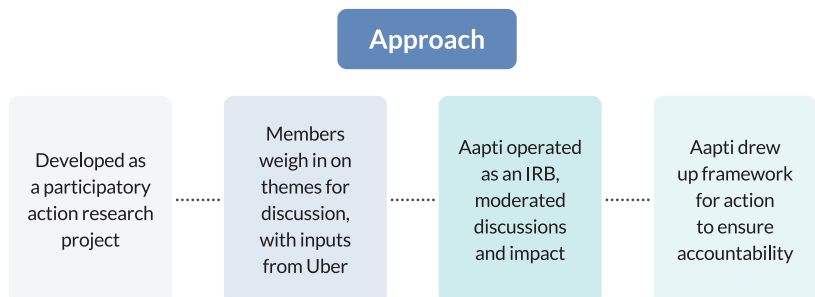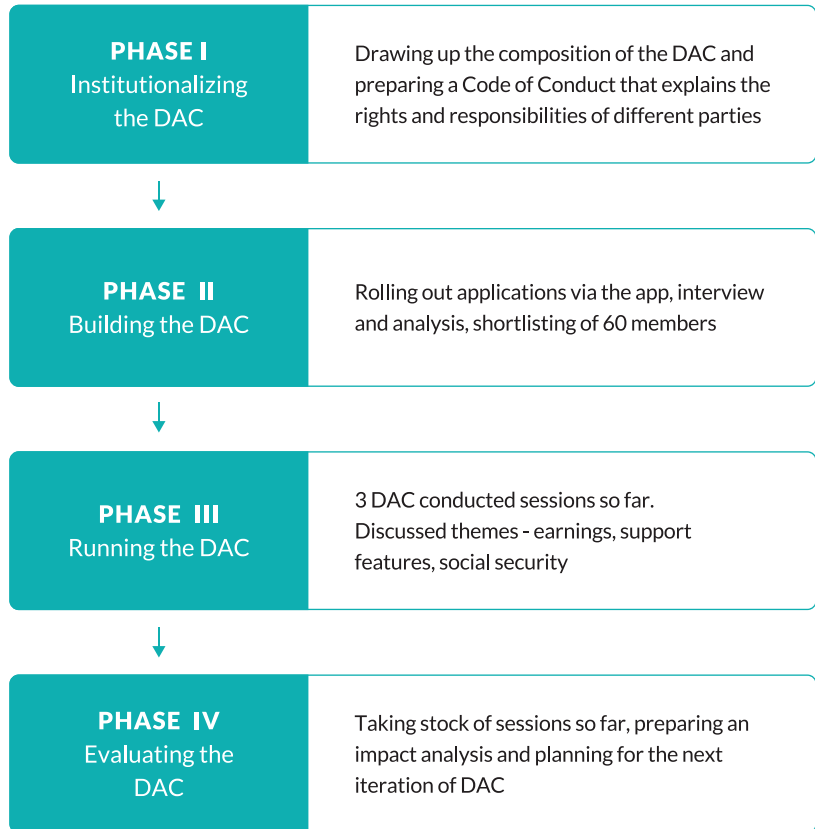Designing Institutions for the DAC

2. Designing Institutions for the DAC

As a unique and experimental initiative in India's platform gig economy, the design and institutionalisation of the DAC required considered deliberation on the goals and governance of the entity. The DAC is instituted with a vision of engaging with and responding to the platform economy's deep seated fissures by facilitating discussions around workers' earnings and income to welfare and social security. In the process, the DAC is an emerging avenue to contemplate newer models for platform governance that are grounded in gig workers' experiences and voices, amidst a policy milieu defined by ambiguity.

A. Envisioning a new form of governance through a DAC

Aapti's research has demonstrated that a DAC mechanism presents multifarious gains at the business, social and policy levels, with the constitution of the Council that facilitates a two-way discussion between Uber and their drivers as a significant first step in realising this. In this primary stage, it was important to outline the role of each stakeholder within the DAC, and create a framework for action to enable each player within the Council to act in the collective interest of all participating stakeholders.

Built across four phases, the DAC was run as a participatory research project with Aapti playing the role of the IRB

PHASE I Institutionalizing the DAC	Drawing up the composition of the DAC and preparing a Code of Conduct that explains the rights and responsibilities of different parties
PHASE II Building the DAC	Rolling out applications via the app, interview and analysis, shortlisting of 60 members
PHASE III Running the DAC	3 DAC conducted sessions so far. Discussed themes - earnings, support features, social security
PHASE IV Evaluating the DAC	Taking stock of sessions so far, preparing an impact analysis and planning for the next iteration of DAC

Approach

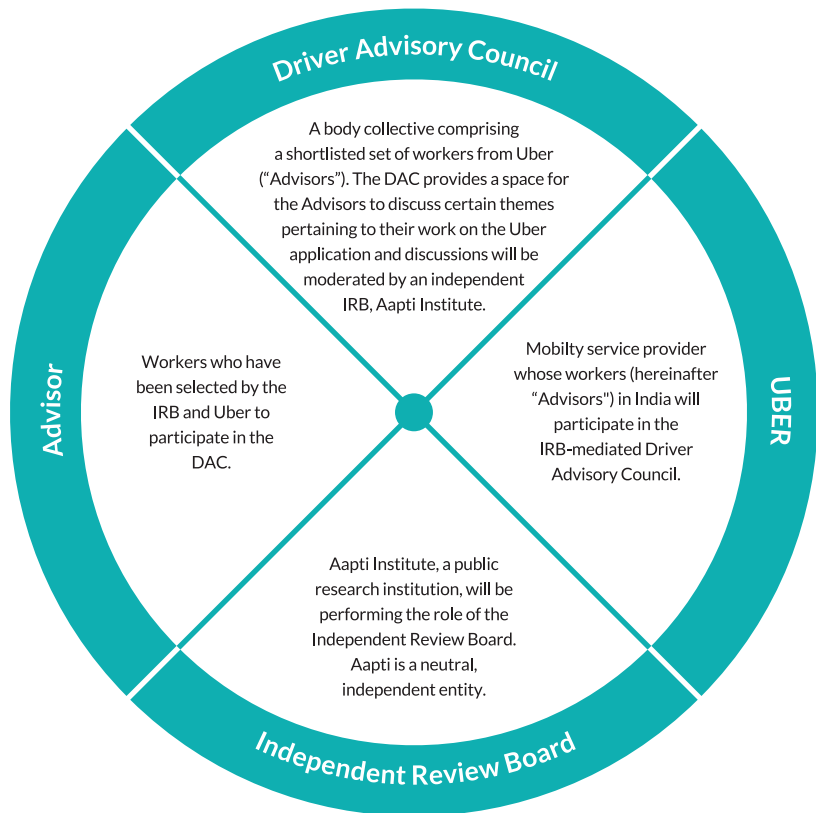|			
Developed as a participatory action research project	Members weigh in on themes for discussion, with inputs from Uber	Aapti operated as an IRB, moderated discussions and impact	Aapti drew up framework for action to ensure accountability

To impart much needed autonomy, a crucial element in the design of the Council is the role played by Aapti Institute as an intermediary between Uber and the community. Aapti maintains independence from Uber in running the DAC sessions, providing a safe avenue for drivers to express their views during the meetings and collaborate in the governance of the platform. With Aapti as an IRB, a neutral, third-party entity is present to lead, monitor and structure all the sessions of the Council based on the requirements of the driver-partner community and Uber. Moving forward, Aapti laid out the practices and principles for the governance of the Council, and set up the selection process for drivers to join the DAC. Once that was completed, Aapti anchored the DAC sessions between March 2022 - March 2023 and drew out actionable insights from discussions with the driver-partner community to implement suitable planned changes to the Uber platform.

B. Drafting the code of conduct and role of stakeholders in the DAC

The purpose of the DAC was to provide an open and safe environment for the driver community to voice their shared concerns and build solutions. Accordingly, a set of guidelines were developed to ensure that the DAC was respectful of differing viewpoints, safe for all participating members and fostered positive engagement. The first section of the Code of Conduct for the DAC clearly stated the roles of each entity within the Council.

Definitions of Entities

Driver Advisory Council

A body collective comprising a shortlisted set of workers from Uber ("Advisors"). The DAC provides a space for the Advisors to discuss certain themes pertaining to their work on the Uber application and discussions will be moderated by an independent IRB, Aapti Institute.

Advisor

Workers who have been selected by the IRB and Uber to participate in the DAC.

UBER

Mobilty service provider whose workers (hereinafter "Advisors") in India will participate in the IRB-mediated Driver Advisory Council.

Independent Review Board

Aapti Institute, a public research institution, will be performing the role of the Independent Review Board. Aapti is a neutral, independent entity.

In building the Council, Aapti sought to ensure diverse representation of drivers across geographies and product categories. As a result, drivers plying different kinds of vehicles on multiple platforms, not limited to Uber alone, were short-listed via interviews to participate as Advisors in the DAC. The following sections provide more details on the selection process followed by Aapti in interviewing and selecting Advisors, the terms of their engagement within the DAC, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the 3 stakeholders - Aapti/IRB, Uber and the Advisors.

C. Selection process for Advisors

Advisors for the DAC were chosen after a ***three-part selection process*** that was undertaken by Aapti:

- Communications were sent out through the platform introducing the DAC. Through these communications interested drivers were asked to fill a form via SurveyMonkey. This form asked drivers to submit details such as their name, the city they drive in, the language they communicate in, number of lifetime trips completed, etc.

- Furthermore, drivers were asked to submit a video/voice recording detailing their understanding of the DAC.

- The applications were assessed along three main categories - fluency of language, willingness to engage and the driver's sphere of influence. Finally, a round of interviews was conducted to evaluate shortlisted applicants.

Aapti reviewed over 3000 applications from eligible members across the six participating cities and across product categories to shortlist 60 members to participate in the first instalment of the Council. In turn, drivers were evaluated along three axes:

Fluency of language

This was the primary consideration to ensure that Advisors can participate fully and meaningfully through the DAC process, are able to connect with other Advisors who are a part of the meetings and gain from each other's experience. Therefore, it was imperative that an Advisor is reasonably fluent in Hindi and/or English to participate in the Council meetings.

Interview Guide:
A snapshot of questions used to shortlist Advisors

- Whats the primary language of communication in your professional interactions?
- How comfortable are you with either English or Hindi?
- Will you be able to read in either of these languages? If yes, which one?
- Do you read news articles or watch videos in English or Hindi?

Willingness to engage

Enthusiasm to learn and work in a team towards a common goal was a significant criterion for selecting Advisors. The metric helped gauge interest in engaging with other drivers and the Uber leadership to resolve common issues, while exhibiting a proactive problem-solving mindset. Thus, this was an intermediary, albeit useful criterion to consider while selecting Advisors.

Interview Guide:
A snapshot of questions used to shortlist Advisors

- Can you walk us through your application video and speak a little more about yourself?
- Why are you interested in being a part of the DAC? What would make you a good Advisor?
- Please state three problems which you wish to engage as an Advisor.
- Have you been part of such councils/discussions earlier not pertaining only to your professional life, but also your personal life too? If yes, what have you learnt from them?

Sphere of influence

An Advisor must be embedded in the driver community to act as a catalyst and channel their voices through the DAC mechanism. As a result, it becomes essential to shortlist those applicants who enjoy close and warm relationships with other drivers such that the drivers can trust the applicant to represent their views in a fair and just manner.

Interview Guide:
A snapshot of questions used to shortlist Advisors

- Are you part of any driver groups/associations in your city?
- Have you had any leadership position in such groups?
- Are you part of WhatsApp groups (or any other social media groups) pertaining to drivers?
- What is the goal of forming such groups? Has being a part of the group benefited you or other driver-partners? If yes, how so?

D. Institutionalising the Driver Advisory Council

The first DAC meeting was conducted in March 2022, as an in-person event in Gurgaon. Earnings and support were chosen as the themes for discussion. (A list of themes are given as choices to drivers. Drivers are free to add issues of their choice. In each DAC, one or two issues are discussed. The processes are iterated based on feedback and as the DAC evolves.) On the basis of DAC members' feedback and recommendations from the IRB (re: Aapti), Uber implemented changes to its payments cycle. It introduced an option for drivers to receive earnings on a daily basis as opposed to weekly. Uber also enhanced geolocation optimisation on the application, and introduced

transparency through upfront display of destination (and fare, in most cities) for drivers when they receive trip requests on the Uber app.

The second DAC was held in two parts in July 2022 — with one meeting in Gurgaon for the Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai members and another in Bangalore for members from Hyderabad, Chennai and those within the city. The decision to split the sessions was made in conjunction with DAC members while attempting to account for linguistic differences within the community of drivers across the two regions. Key themes that were examined during these sessions were earnings, application-level changes to messaging on the Uber app, and customer relationship management. A range of new features was introduced by Uber after these sessions. These included a home phone button that was made accessible to the driver-partner's Uber app to call for support, and displaying the customer's chosen payment method for a trip.

The penultimate DAC session was held in November 2022 with a meeting in Bangalore and another in Gurgaon. The sessions covered a range of issues relating to gig workers' social security, specifically the measures of protection afforded to gig workers in the organised and unorganised sector by the Code on Social Security 2020 and the call from drivers for its implementation.[1] The sessions also covered drivers' access to and enrolment in welfare schemes like Ayushman Bharat Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana[2], Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana[3] & Pradhan Mantri Jeevan Jyoti Bima Yojana[4] and the Atal Pension Yojana[5], and to surface welfare needs that are not covered by these schemes. In addition, Advisors were provided with best practices to maximise their engagement with the DAC. In response to drivers' bid for insurance, Uber and other platforms are in the process of considering instantiating co-pay systems for insurance.

E. Procedure for the DAC sessions

- Each theme was discussed for at least two hours. We provided some buffer time to ensure that the participants were comfortable with the technical interface, and to provide an adequate explanation of what the DAC is.

- Three sessions were held vertical-wise, amounting to nine sessions over the course of a year, between February 2022 and February 2023. The number of sessions and frequency are revised as per feedback from the sessions.

- Uber representatives participate in the DAC as observers while members of the Aapti team moderate the discussion for the whole duration of the session. Additional resource persons, if necessary, are brought on during specific discussions.

- Online feedback sessions are hosted over Zoom / similar platforms and recorded after obtaining consent from participants.

F. Documentation of sessions

- Post-session debriefs are held internally by the Aapti team as well as in conjunction with the Uber Single Point of Contact and larger team.

- Session reports (minutes of meetings) are compiled by the Aapti team. The reports cover issues/concerns/questions raised by the participants and surface insights that guide forthcoming DAC sessions.

03

Policy and Governance Implications of the DAC

3. Policy and Governance Implications of the DAC

The rapid expansion of India's platform gig economy highlights the urgent need to protect gig workers' right to flexible work, and welfare such as social security. While legislation such as the Code on Social Security, 2020 *(Ministry of Law and Justice, 2020)* has been passed by the parliament to introduce social security benefits for gig workers in the platform economy, ambiguity around its implementation has left many gig workers hanging. Additionally, regulatory action is often erratic (Kashyap, 2023)[3] and passed without prior consultation (Sanzgiri, 2022)[4], producing adverse implications for workers' income and physical security. In a promising move, the state government of Rajasthan is contemplating Gig Workers Welfare Act (Thathoo, 2023)[5] for much-needed proactive governance in the sector by planning to set aside a budgetary allocation to guarantee social security for gig workers.

A mechanism such as the DAC emerged from the need for urgent regulation in the sector, amidst reports (Scroll, 2022)[6] of poor treatment of gig workers and the need for gig worker representation in addressing these concerns. The policy vacuum is compounded by calls for the formulation of self-regulatory guidelines in technology domains such as mobility (Mathi, 2022)[7], e-commerce (Bhalla, 2020)[8] and social media (Reuters, 2022)[9], although little progress has been made towards this. By shifting the accountability of workers welfare towards platforms in this manner, the Indian regulators are pushing platforms to find and establish mechanisms for engaging with workers and their grievances.
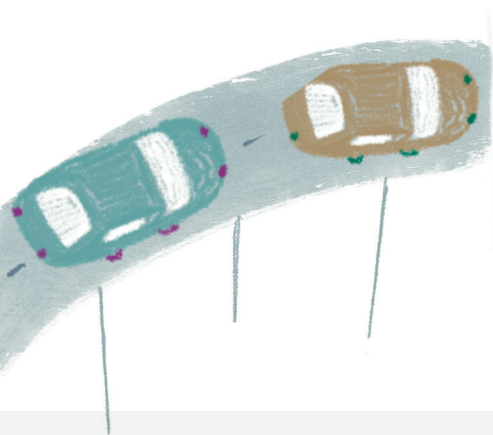
A. Self-regulatory approaches within digital platforms

Self-regulation (Cusumano, M et. al, 2021)[10] typically transfers control over how to regulate a market from the regulator to the players involved within the ecosystem. This can be useful for platforms as they possess higher awareness and knowledge of their own operations and the industry they are operating within. Additionally, the platforms may regard their own regulations as being more reasonable than those imposed by other groups, boosting the possibility of compliance and paving a path for eventual governmental intervention that is informed by the codes developed by the industry association. In India, the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), is one such industry association set up as a not-for-profit organisation to represent the larger interests of the online and mobile value-added service industry. The core objective of the IAMAI is to bolster the digital economy by advocating free and fair competition among players, pushing for progressive laws in the sector and building a safe and secure internet for users. The internet industry body represents startups such as Ola, Uber, Rapido, Zomato, Swiggy and global tech giants such as Apple and Google, making it a prominent coalition-based formulation for self-governance of digital platforms operating within the country.

Coalition-based formulations for platform governance could serve as the primary point of contact for market players within the industry, promoting communication within the sector, as well as with external-facing actors. The association would assume responsibility to consolidate the industry's perspective, serve as a liaison between industry and regulators, and facilitate an organised, representative, and open discussion. However, a significant threat arising from a self-regulatory framework like this is the absence of checks and balances to mitigate the power dynamics that affect those at the bottom of the power hierarchy. As a result, industry associations could potentially fail to act as effective mediums to facilitate gig workers' representation and are more suited to look after the regulatory interests of the platforms operating within the industry.
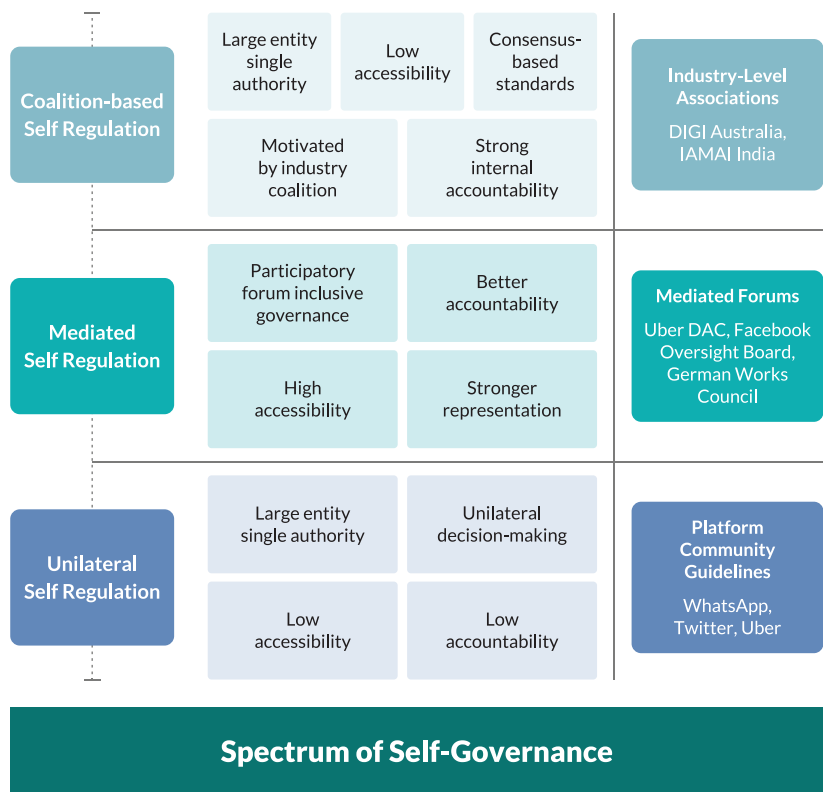
While coalition-based formulations are a proactive mode of self-governance, on the other end of the spectrum there is the case of unilateral intervention

— regulatory intermediation arrangements aimed at enhancing self-regulation without backing from industry-wide arrangements or other industry partners. For instance, social media platforms have adopted different mechanisms over the years to enact content moderation, but they have been at the receiving end (Wong, 2021)[11] of severe criticism for the prevalence of hate speech, discriminatory posts remaining unflagged and instances of partisan practices. To overcome this, Facebook instituted an independent oversight board (Medzini, 2021)[12] in May 2020 to manage content on the platform, with a plan to bring in a diverse group of 60 experts committed to promoting free expression on the platform. To ensure its accountability and independence, the board instituted a code of conduct and had an overseeing independent trust with a fiduciary duty.

Self-regulatory governance, where mediation is carried out by an independent board with the platform being liable to maintain transparency, is effective in allowing stakeholders involved with the platform gig economy to directly engage with its problematic practices. This marks a departure from coalition-based industry-wide formulations that remain inaccessible and do not have an element of participatory governance embedded within them, making them ineffective in addressing platform-specific workers' concerns.

To this end, the governance of the platform gig economy presents an additional challenge that arises due to the involvement of gig workers as offline intermediaries associated with a digital platform. Setting up a self-regulatory model in this milieu required the creation of avenues that placed gig workers' voices at the forefront of participatory governance.

Coalition-based Self Regulation	Large entity single authority	Low accessibility	Consensus-based standards
	Motivated by industry coalition		Strong internal accountability
			Industry-Level Associations DIGI Australia, IAMAI India
Mediated Self Regulation	Participatory forum inclusive governance		Better accountability
	High accessibility		Stronger representation
			Mediated Forums Uber DAC, Facebook Oversight Board, German Works Council
Unilateral Self Regulation	Large entity single authority		Unilateral decision-making
	Low accessibility		Low accountability
			Platform Community Guidelines WhatsApp, Twitter, Uber

Spectrum of Self-Governance

B. Self-regulation in the platform economy

PAM Transport, a trucking and logistics company based in Arkansas, USA operates a fleet of over 3,000 trucks and 8,000 trailers, providing full truckload transportation services to clients across multiple sectors. Over the last few years, PAM Transport has built a positive reputation for its ability to retain drivers in an industry which has been subject to high attrition rates (Moore, 2022)[13] since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from long working hours to overcome below-par wage rates, truck drivers cited (ibid.) loneliness, loss of family life, health-related issues, lack of respect, government regulations and various work-related inefficiencies as factors which make truck driving highly stressful. By recognising the existence of such concerns early on, PAM Transport set up their Driver Advisory Council in January 2021 (PAM Driving Jobs, 2021)[14], with the aim of discovering

first-hand, what was working, what needed change, and how they can improve the lives of their drivers by resolving issues upfront. Twenty trusted and experienced drivers were asked to be a part of the inaugural council, as representatives of PAM Transport's 2000-member driver workforce. Similarly, in 2016, US-based ride-hail platform Lyft (Lyft Driver Blog, 2020)[15] experimented with a council to facilitate a direct line of communication between Lyft HQ and the company's ever-expanding driver base. Later, in 2019, the Lyft council was expanded from a unified national-level entity to 40 localised units across the country, enabling 200 influential Lyft workers across USA and Canada to participate within these units.

Both these instances set the precedent for how representative councils in mobility platforms must be designed with the objective of giving drivers a seat at the table to influence policy decisions. Uber, having a significant driver base operating across 71 countries in the world, has set up DACs in Australia, USA, and India (Uber ESG Report, 2022)[16]. Open forums for discussion and direct consultation with drivers helped in establishing a two-way communication process designed to produce solutions to identified problems such as establishing an industry-wide safety net for drivers in collaboration with other stakeholders like trade unions and the government.

In setting up the DAC for Uber India, Aapti's role as an independent, third-party review board to institutionalise the forum and conduct sessions was necessary to establish trust and transparency in the Council. By providing a safe space for drivers to voice their concerns, mediation that happened through Aapti enabled drivers to provide feedback and participate in platform-level policy decisions. It also established a constructive feedback mechanism that would relay the concerns of the driver community to Uber, and give the platform an opportunity to directly address emerging on-ground concerns.

DAC and similar institutions focalise gig workers' voices and welfare in a milieu where their interests are seldom directly represented by the gig workers themselves. The DAC helps overcome paternalistic instincts to impose unilateral bans (Stefano et al., 2021)[17] on platform-mediated work by foregrounding gig workers' experience as the guiding imperative for policy action. The low-investment, high-effectiveness attribute of the DAC model of engagement between platforms and the gig workers is poised for scaling and replication across a variety of sectors, beyond the ride-hail industry.

04

On-ground Impact of the DAC

4. On-ground Impact of the DAC

DACs as a medium through which drivers can engage with the digital platforms they are associated with is not a new concept. Globally, Uber has consistently attempted to introduce a culture where drivers can represent their peers through a council that directly interacts with the platform to bring about policy and product-level changes. This called for an alternative mechanism that would cater to the needs of the driver and the platform.

In March 2022, when Uber India launched its DAC, it institutionalised a mechanism that paved the way for a self-regulated, participatory governance model in the gig economy. Through the DAC, Uber India created a platform for drivers to have a seat at the table with Uber (Panda, 2021)[20]. As an independent, third-party mediator, Aapti was able to establish a feedback mechanism in the council that allowed Uber to understand and act on drivers' concerns. In a self-regulatory setup such as the DAC, voluntary engagement from the platform to address drivers' concerns becomes a crucial aspect in creating a positive impact. Over the last year, through multiple third-party mediated council meetings with driver representatives, Uber implemented a range of changes to improve drivers' experience while using the platform, after consultation with the drivers and Aapti's suggestions as the IRB.

A. Decline in Driver Ride Cancellation

Driver Ride Cancellations

Problem: Drivers did not have upfront visibility of the destination or mode of payment prior to accepting a trip request, causing drivers to cancel rides.

Worker insights are a strong indicator on the potential of the DAC to bring positive changes towards external-facing issues through collaborative solutioning.
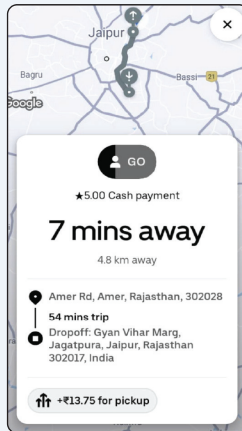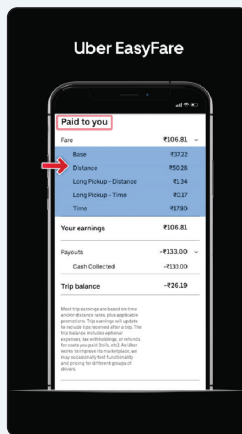

Drop-off Location

Drop-off location visibility prior to ride acceptance

Mode of Payment

Upfront indication of mode of payment chosen by the rider

Uber EasyFare

EasyFare to indicate unit costs and margins on earnings

Last year, a research agency called LocalCircles conducted a survey (LocalCircles, 2021)21 among 65,000 ride-sharing app users residing in 324 districts of India. According to the survey, 79% of these ride-hail app users were subject to the drivers cancelling the ride after the user revealed their drop-off location or mentioned they were using a non-cash mode of payment. Through discussions around earnings and in-app experience during the DAC

sessions, we understood that a large factor contributing to these last-minute cancellations was that drivers were not informed upfront on the Uber app about the drop-off location or the mode of payment when accepting rides. Considering there are daily, erratic operational expenses such as refuelling, toll charges, servicing, maintenance and emission testing, drivers preferred having cash in hand. Receiving payments from the customers upfront was the only option through which drivers were guaranteed to meet these operational expenses. As a result, from a practical point of view, it did not make sense for them to accept other non-cash modes of payment and wait to receive the earnings at a later stage by Uber.

Similarly, not having drop-off location visibility put them at a disadvantage as they did not know which area of the city they would be driving to prior to accepting a trip request. This is important in certain cases: when motorbike drivers or women drivers would not prefer riding in areas they consider unsafe at night, or for drivers who would like to ride in areas that are in close proximity to their homes. Other issues arise when drivers suspect that getting customers from the drop-off location they are headed towards is a challenge, or when drivers have a good understanding of the traffic conditions on a certain route and they would prefer earning for taking alternative routes they are aware of.

After deliberation on how to resolve these challenges, Uber decided it would be better for drivers to have complete, upfront information about drop-off location on each ride. Drop-off location visibility on the offer card and displaying the chosen mode of payment were implemented by Uber, thereby enabling drivers to make an informed decision before accepting any ride. To support this change Uber brought in EasyFar, to ensure that trip fares reflect the actual distance that is travelled — including detours or diversions.

To get a better understanding of whether these changes actually made a difference on-ground, Uber surveyed approximately 80000 drivers. 92% of the respondents indicated that these changes have made a positive impact on their driving experience with the platform. Broadly, these changes also helped to tackle the issue of high cancellations from drivers, making riding on the app a smoother experience for customers.

B. Daily Payments, Fare Hikes and Cashless at Airports

Earnings

Problem: Rise in fuel prices reduced platform-based earnings for workers, and there was an increase in daily cash requirements to meet operational costs.
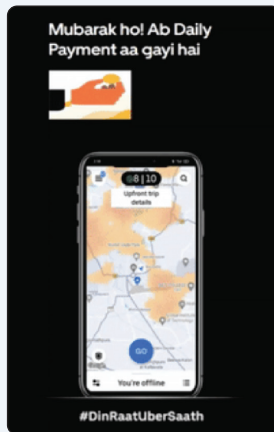
> Uber took action to hike fares on the platform which led to higher earnings for driver partners. They reduced daily cash dependence with other complementary measures.

Daily Payments

Option to withdraw earnings now available daily

Fare Hikes

Fare hikes of 12% announced across operating cities

Cashless at Airports

Worked with airport authorities to provide cashless parking

In 2018, fuel prices in India (Singh, 2018)[22] shot up due to a global surge and a free-falling Indian rupee. At the beginning of the year diesel was priced at just above 60 rupees a litre but rose to 80 rupees a litre in the last quarter. It was reported that in 2018, the New Delhi transport department fixed 16 rupees (21 cents) per kilometre as the base fare for air-conditioned taxis. On the other hand, several Ola and Uber drivers who spoke to reporters at Rest of World in New Delhi mentioned receiving 10 rupees and 12 rupees (13–16 cents) per kilometre for the rides. Reports also mentioned that the commissions paid by app-based cab services steadily dropped and incentives that initially lured more drivers to sign up with ride-hailing companies were significantly reduced.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about further difficulties and this was followed by crude oil becoming expensive due to the Russia-Ukraine war, exacerbating the already high fuel prices to then touch close to 100 rupees a litre. After initial discussions with the DAC, Uber recognised there was a dire need for fare hikes, as the burden on drivers to bear these costs was significant, and a 12-15% increase in prices was announced to counter this. However, this was still proving to be a major pain point for drivers who highlighted (Bhat et al., 2022)[23] that a 12-15% hike in prices would not effectively address the losses incurred.

The DAC mentioned the dire need for better earnings - to the tune of 12-15% in most cities - for sustained engagement and well-being. Indeed, this theme came up repeatedly in the DAC meetings. Fares in many cities such as Bangalore and Kolkata are capped by the State government; Uber's algorithm that matches riders with drivers operates within this framework. Where fares are not capped, surge fares linked to demand and supply variations may apply. The DAC played a critical role in providing insight about earnings to Uber. With this articulated need, Uber has been able to perform optimisation within the pricing frameworks. This is through measures such as reduction in long distance pickups and provision of upfront destination information. The latter measure provided agency to drivers in accepting rides.

As an additional measure, Uber introduced an option to receive payments on a daily basis as opposed to weekly to give drivers the flexibility to cash out their earnings on a per-day basis. Earlier, due to the remittance of payments being set at once a week, drivers were uncertain about meeting their daily operational cash requirements for fuel. To complement higher earnings

received through the 12-15% price hikes, introducing a flexible cash-out option was a solution that drivers agreed would help them to handle their daily expenses more effectively.

Similarly, a slew of other measures were brought in to address the need for higher earnings due to the increase in fuel prices:

- Rate hikes were announced for the 1-hour rental package, and a waiting time fee was added to rentals if the rider was not at the pickup point at the scheduled time.

- Reservation charges for intercity rides were increased.

- A push notification is sent to nudge customers and specify that waiting time charges could be avoided only if they reach the pickup point 5 minutes within the drivers arrival at the location.

- Earlier, when drivers parked their vehicles at the airport taxi areas, they would have to pay parking charges. To reduce cash dependence and transactional friction in these scenarios, Uber is working with airport authorities across cities to avail of cashless parking facilities. As of today, this has been implemented in 5 airports — Mumbai, Jaipur, Ahmedabad, Lucknow and Guwahati, and efforts are being made to scale this.

# C. Easy Login, In-App Support and Call Connectivity

In-App Architecture

Problem: Drivers raised issues about persistent bugs with prolonged escalation mechanisms, and bot-based mediation of grievances.

DAC opened new channels to bring driver participation and decision-making at different levels, including improving UI/UX.
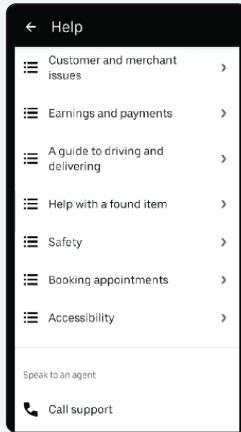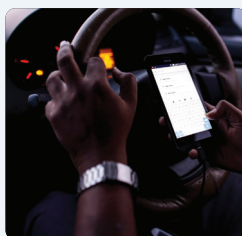

2-Tap Call Support

2-tap feature to access call support
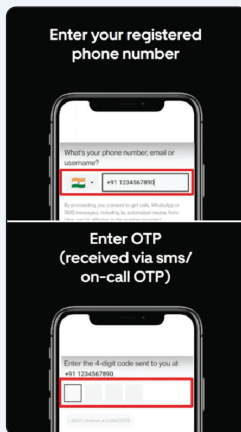
USL Stack

Unified Sign-Up and Login (USL) Stack to enable login via OTP

Grievance Support

Reduced turnaround time on grievance resolution

An additional advantage that a forum such as the DAC provides is the opportunity for deeper engagement to resolve issues that drivers are facing at the micro-level. The in-app level experience of drivers is an important business aspect that would make operating on the platform more convenient. Drivers highlighted some of the bugs and missing features they would like to be addressed, and Uber has worked on bringing these changes to form.

Unified Sign-Up and Login (USL) Stack

A common complaint we received across cities and categories of drivers was the lack of a convenient login interface to access their Uber account. Drivers highlighted that they were restricted to logging in through email and password, and it became challenging for them to remember these credentials as they were accessing their accounts on multiple platforms on a regular basis. As a solution, Uber has now enabled easy login through a phone number and OTP, as this has taken precedence across digital platforms and drivers are comfortable with this method. From Uber's internal survey of approximately 80000 drivers, 95% of the respondents indicated that enabling easy login through mobile number and OTP led to a better user experience.

In-App Support

Feedback from the drivers indicated that the Uber app's user interface made it challenging for them to locate the support function that was available to them to register grievance redressal. This was resolved immediately by adding a home phone button on the app menu that can be accessed with two taps.

Call Connectivity

Drivers reported multiple instances of call-dropping when accessed through the application even when network connectivity was not an issue. This issue is currently in the process of being fixed, and as of now, the rate of call connectivity for anonymized calls between a rider and driver-partner has improved.

Over the last year, through a consultative process with drivers and Aapti as the IRB, Uber has been able to bring in multiple changes at different levels of operations. As per the internal survey, 85% of the drivers were satisfied with the impact created through the DAC. While challenges exist for Uber when it comes to bringing changes to the platform and its policies, 93% of the survey respondents indicated they would like the DAC to continue — signalling their belief in the DAC forum to focalise their concerns and participate in the changes being brought about to the platform. However, engagement on the broader ecosystem is still lacking — there is less clarity on whether other digital platforms, trade unions and regulators can be involved within the consultative process that the DAC has to offer and we hope to chart this out in the coming iterations of the DAC.
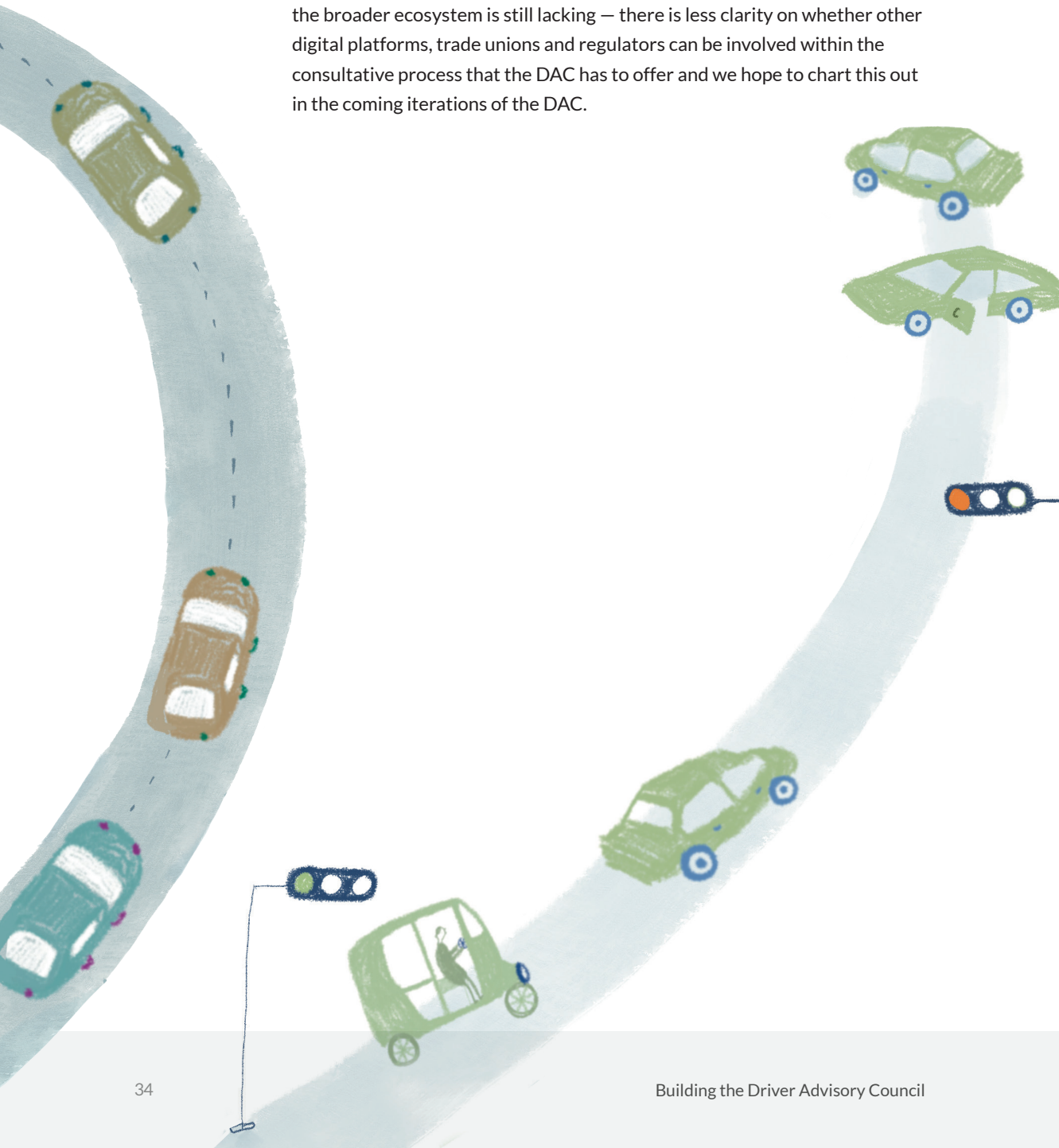
05

Limitations of a DAC-like Mechanism

5. Limitations of a DAC-like Mechanism

The DAC represents an important conduit in bridging the gap between the lived experience of gig workers and forthcoming regulations for the gig economy. An institutional mechanism such as the DAC is particularly salient given that in the past, this sector has been characterised by a lack of action from platforms when it comes to creating spaces for consulting with gig workers and giving them a seat at the table to enable participatory governance. However, there are some limitations in bringing such a model to fruition as it hinges on voluntary action from the platforms to set up a council and take necessary action based on the feedback received. Below, we highlight these challenges in further detail and chart out some of the methods through which these can be overcome.

A. Reliance on voluntary corporate action

The biggest challenge in institutionalising a forum to introduce fair representation practices for gig workers lies in understanding the incidence of such an institution. The council can be coalition-based, and formed by an industry body such as the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), as they can choose to collectively represent these digital platforms, or they can be formed by the platform as a single entity as is the case with Uber's DAC. On the other hand, when workers come together to form such an organisation, it would resemble the collective bargaining process that has been characteristic of trade unions. However, since platforms have refused to engage with trade unions in India, they have not been a successful medium for bringing changes that workers seek.

Since Uber India's DAC is not a coalition-based formulation and the responsibility of implementing changes based on drivers' feedback lies with

the platform, the momentum for resolving key issues is variable. Given that platforms are only now beginning to understand the micro-challenges on the ground through conversations with gig workers, their responses to the issues are often limited by their global priorities. Specifically, in the case of Uber, they are often constrained by the need to balance twin business imperatives: retaining uniformity in platform processes and operation across geographies, while attempting to account for localised driver concerns. Additionally, platforms also contend with global supply chain challenges that disrupt timelines to implement planned changes to their applications, and their centralised decision-making process exacerbates this further.

Having an independent, third-party organisation to mediate a forum that facilitates interactions between a platform and its gig workers helps to bring in that much-needed balance to hold the platforms accountable. By helping gig workers establish a feedback loop with the platform, an IRB can push the platform to take action to tackle gig workers' concerns. By recognising this as a crucial factor for designing a level-playing council, Uber has maintained transparency by allowing Aapti to act as the IRB. While this does not eradicate the limitation of a self-regulatory model such as the DAC relying on voluntary corporate action, it is still an effective measure to enable better representation of gig workers to ensure that there is a timely response from the platforms.

B. Absence of enabling policy mechanisms

In this scenario, where self-regulation is dependent on corporate voluntary action and having an independent, neutral third party mediator is just partially addressing this problem, the role of the state in bringing a regulatory enforcement that requires platforms to establish a council for the facilitation of participatory governance can be deliberated. In Germany, the Betriebsrat24 or German Works Council (Works Constitution Act, 1972, Germany), is one such example of a statutory requirement where a group of elected employees collaborate with management on behalf of the company's workforce. A works council advocates for the employees' best interests through established dialogue with management. Both the works council and the employer agree on the contractual provisions for working conditions

binding to all employees. This largely resembles the model that Uber tried to establish through the DAC in India, but it is bolstered by enforcement from state governing authorities.

However, interest from government agencies to generate support for worker welfare initiatives is still nascent in India; consequently, this demands a deeper engagement with the state of affairs in the platform economy and the need to establish a dialogue among a wider variety of aggregators, gig workers and regulators. It is imperative that mechanisms such as the DAC are driven by sound design principles and processes that emphasise the importance of cross-industry collaboration and the ability to delineate uniform standards for platform governance through deliberation. These design principles will ultimately establish a framework for future value creation and innovation within the gig ecosystem.

C. Management of DAC members' expectations

Taking into consideration that a self-regulatory mechanism such as the DAC has not been introduced in India before, managing DAC members' expectations, in the context of the fractured trust relationship that exists between platforms and the gig workers is a slow, deliberative exercise. The inherent mistrust is further exacerbated by the unwillingness of platforms to engage with their workers and address persistent issues borne by unilateral platform policies. Building awareness amongst drivers about why an entity such as the DAC is not a parallel to a trade union, but instead a third-party mediated forum to facilitate a two-way conversation has proven to be a challenging aspect of running such a forum. Localised mediums such as the DAC will prove to be effective models for focused interactions around specific issues related to the platform that a gig worker is associated with.

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Driver Advisory Council Member Testimonials

6. Driver Advisory Council Member Testimonials

" Since the DAC has been instituted, we have got access to a platform through which we can raise our concerns, and from that perspective, 100% of our expectations have been met. There is definitely a need for a forum like this, where partners can bring up issues they are facing in terms of earnings, social security and app experience. However, the DAC is still at a nascent stage, and we need to interact more frequently with Uber to ensure they get a complete understanding of the problems we face on a daily basis. Implementation of suggested changes from Uber's side has been a gradual process, and there needs to be further discussion on how these can be fast tracked.

Anand
Bangalore | 6 years at Uber | 17,000+ trips

" I have been driving with multiple ride-hail platforms over the last few years, and based on my experience, the per kilometre pay rates offered on Uber have fluctuated widely. The DAC provided me with an opportunity to raise such concerns directly with Uber, and that is important as a medium such as this one did not exist before. Further, I think the speed of resolution of action points could be improved. I believe that the DAC should continue over the years and grow in power.

Loordhu
Chennai | 6 years at Uber

" The DAC must continue. It has helped resolve our issues, but it has been around for only a year. It is impossible to have addressed all partner problems within such a short span of time. New issues keep coming up on an everyday basis and the DAC is the right platform for us to address them as it provides a direct line of communication with the platform.

Arif

Hyderabad | 5 years at Uber | 3,000 trips

" Through the DAC, we finally have a forum where we can directly connect with Uber to discuss our problems and this has led to significant changes. It must continue as the forum has tremendous potential to bring about a positive impact for workers on the platform, and help them feel like they are being engaged with. Since we have been through just the first iteration, there are definitely some improvements to be made in how it functions. For example, even though we have seen a rise in fares being implemented after discussions in the DAC sessions, there are still some issues related to earnings that we wish to iron out. It might also be helpful to conduct bi-weekly meetings as opposed to only the quarterly in-person sessions that we saw in the first iteration as this will help us address urgent issues that crop up on an everyday basis.

Sarathi

Kolkata | 4 years at Uber | 11,000 trips

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