

“We have been sold as nothing more than an algorithm”

An interview with Spangirl, from May 2014

Since when do you turk and why do you turk?

Spangirl: I started in November 2005 when it opened. I began Turking in order to buy things I couldn't afford through working in my spare time, but when my husband lost his job in 2010 we were hit by a variety of financial pitfalls. At that time I started working 17 hour days in order to support my family and pay off the debt we were accruing. Since then I have Turked as a full-time job to pay the bills.

Who are the other Turkers?

Spangirl: In my experience, Turkers can be broken down into three distinct categories: skilled workers with a good education or work experience who have some sort of life event that causes them to need to Turk OR are just bored and do it in their free time OR are replacing some sort of other hobby (online games, etc.), people who are down on their luck and struggle to find a good job in the real world due to the current negative economic conditions where they live OR disability, and people who are unable to work because of social limitations (mental illness or marginalization.) The first group tends to only do work they want to do, be it because it's fun or it pays really well, and they make out well on mTurk overall. The second group is desperate, they are some of the most vulnerable people in our society and are therefore easy to take advantage of. Since they know it's mTurk or bust, they will do anything to keep themselves afloat. These are the people who end up working for \$2 per hour as they don't realize that working for 12 hours at that rate will make them the same amount as working for 4 hours at \$6 per hour, which is more than possible to achieve. If they held out for better pay, even just \$6 per hour, they would have more time to spend with their family, getting an education or training, or looking for a "real life" job that pays them a guaranteed amount every two weeks. The third group contains people who can either be vulnerable or predator, but that's a story for another day. For people who are in the sexual offender database, have a felony on their record, or can't bring themselves to leave the house, mTurk is also a new opportunity to do something with their life. This is one use of mTurk we must embrace as it provides an opportunity for these lumpen-proletariat to adhere to social or criminal requirements upon then as well as giving them the ability to rebuild their lives and not have to live off government hand-outs. That said, we have to ensure that they are given the same opportunities to make what they deserve that those in better life circumstances are afforded.

How big are the three groups?

Spangirl: From my experience as community manager, I would guess that the percentages are around 20% educated, skilled workers who Turk full-time by choice; 30% educated, skilled workers who Turk only part-time for fun/extra money; 30% people who are unable to find a job due to a lack of experience, education or opportunity, or people who's family is lower class and Turk because they desperately need the money to get by (people who use Turking as a second job out of necessity, stay-at-home moms who Turk while caring for children, those who stay home to care for disabled relatives, etc.); and 20% are people who cannot work due to disability or social limitations.

Do you know other Turkers personally or have you ever met some of them offline?

Spamgirl: Being a part of Turker Nation, I've become close to many other workers. We talk when we're upset and share our joys, plus we help each other out when it comes to work itself. I have yet to meet any offline as I don't know any who live near me, but I do plan to meet some in the future at a conference we will be speaking at together. I think that most Turkers are either too busy, disabled, or too poor to meet up with others outside of their home, but since we have so many forums, everyone can at least socialize online!

What made you start doing community work on Turker Nation on top of the actual piecework? And how is the relation, time wise, that you spend on these two jobs?

Spamgirl: It's a bad habit I have. Whenever I do something, I like to do it to the nth degree, and part of that tends to be taking leadership roles in the community. It was just natural for me to first become a moderator on Turker Nation, then ascend to the administrator role. The owner had quit Turking for a long time by that point, so he gave me the password for the founder account and I took over. As to how much time I spend on the forum versus Turking, I spend a LOT more time working on the forum. It takes a great deal of administrative work, be it approving new accounts or mediating fights, to keep the forum going. On top of that I really should be marketing it in some way, but I don't have time. Just the regular, daily work on the site takes me 2-3 hours, and then additional work, such as talking to Requesters about setting up qualifications or teaching them how to use the forum, adds on another 2 hours. I also sit in chat to help moderate, answer questions, etc. which I'm doing whenever I'm home. There isn't an hour of the day which passes without me doing something on the forum or in chat. Working isn't something I am able to spend a lot of time on anymore. Between school and Turker Nation and volunteering and family life, I just can't sit down for any length of time and do anything. While I appreciate the flexibility of mTurk, the problem is that when I DO want to work, there hasn't been anything to do! Flexibility is both a curse and blessing, depending on the circumstances.

What happens on Turker Nation?

Spamgirl: We are pushing to educate Requesters on the fact that \$6 per hour is not only an absolute minimum pay rate, but scraping the bottom of the barrel. While the most simple work for a steadfastly reliable requester could pay that little, anything more complicated, more tedious or more tenuous would have to pay much more. Sadly, Requesters and academics alike tend to cite past studies and articles which quote \$2.25 as a high pay rate, so it's a tough battle to wage. That said, we get the point across by not doing the work and leaving it to the new influx of workers who don't have the same work ethics we have. If that drives a cheap Requester off mTurk, we won't be sad to see that sort go.

Do you cooperate with other mTurk forums like in order to improve your working conditions?

Spamgirl: When it comes to solidarity, there is little among Turkers. Within each group, specifically each forum, there are tight bonds and we work together to attempt to better our conditions, but the connection between forums is strained at best. We at Turker Nation are focused on working towards bettering the entire crowd work community. We desire to set

standards both for Workers and Requesters and to educate both groups on what they need to do to have a great working relationship. When we find a Requester who is behaving badly in some way, we work as a team to come up with strategies for getting the message across to them. From educating the Requesters to the fact that Masters is the default and they're paying three times as much to use it, to boycotting bad Requesters, we're doing our part to make crowd work on mTurk a safer, more lucrative career. It would be great to have the support of other workers, and we're working towards achieving this.

Which standards would you like to set?

Spamgirl: Fair pay, fair treatment, and a respect for communication. It would be nice if requesters treated us as they would like to be treated themselves. That means taking the time to reach out to us on forums to find out what our needs are and how the HITs can be formatted in a way which meets those needs. This benefits the worker and the Requester, ensuring their HITs are completed accurately, quickly and affordably.

Do you talk to mTurk or it's employees in order to improve working conditions on Mechanical Turk?

Spamgirl: Communication with mTurk is limited. I get the feeling they are horribly understaffed and totally overwhelmed with their duties. I'd love to have more frequent and reliable communication with them, but I understand that they have so much on their plate that my questions are on the back burner. They truly do their best to keep mTurk running smoothly, and they want what's best for the Turkers as much as anyone. Anything which benefits us also benefits Amazon - if Requesters have to pay more, Amazon gets more fees; if we better our work through efficiency strategies or improved communication with Requesters, more work will come through the system and Amazon gets more fees; if we bring in more Requesters due to a great reputation for high quality work, Amazon gets more fees; you can see where I'm going with this.

Is it true that foreign workers are paid in vouchers instead of money?

Spamgirl: Being paid in vouchers really doesn't mean much anymore as Amazon no longer accepts foreign workers. If you still have an account, you're lucky and you just have to be happy you have anything at all. As soon as you lose it, you're done. At the same time, no foreign workers have received Masters in over a year, so they are unable to do most of the work on mTurk. There isn't much reason to stick around if you're not an American.

Do you know why Amazon no longer accepts foreign workers?

Spamgirl: All I can give you is my guess, which is that requesters were complaining about the quality of work from foreign workers. This is likely due to both bias and an influx of bad workers before the change was made. Amazon must have found that cutting off international workers served two purposes - one, it placated the requesters, and two, it ended the problem of trying to figure out how to pay foreign workers in cash instead of gift certificates. In the end, I'm not sure if it actually helped increase the quality of work done, but it certainly eradicated the problem of international payments!

Do you get in contact with requesters?

Spamgirl: As far as the relationship between Requesters and Turkers, it's all on us now. We work hard to contact new requesters and communicate with those who appear on Turker Nation. Our goal is to make mTurk a great place for everyone to work - Requesters get their work done correctly, quickly and affordably, while Turkers can make an honest living by putting in a concerted effort and adhering to the typical workplace standards we all know to be common sense. We personally reach out to the Requesters through Amazon's contact system and then carry on conversations either on the forum or through email. Requesters are quite receptive to hear from us, sometimes only until we nudge them to increase their pay, though.

What workplace standards should be established for Mechanical Turk?

Spamgirl: I think that standards are in opposition to what mTurk represents. It is truly a free market - you can pay, submit and work on anything you choose. Once you start regulating it, the whole dynamic changes. Instead of creating standards, I think there should be an investment in education. Requesters need to be educated on the fact that we're human beings and need to be treated as such. You can use mTurk as you wish, but when you use it with empathy, you get better results in turn. More studies need to be completed on how pay affects quality and speed, how creating a positive relationship with workers also betters quality and speed, and how Turkers who have higher standards and more positive self-images about their work skills will also have higher pay. If each individual learns the benefits of treating each other and themselves with respect, I think that would go much farther and create more enduring, impactful changes than setting rules and driving off both workers and requesters to sites which don't have those rules.

What is the biggest barrier to a better workplace for Turkers?

Spamgirl: I think it is the current reputation around mTurk. We have been sold as nothing more than an algorithm, Requesters don't realize that there is a living, breathing human on the other end of the connection who needs to feed their children, pay medical bills or ensure their home doesn't go into foreclosure. No matter what you work on mTurk, you obviously don't have the resources to be doing something that pays better, but that is no excuse for paying unfairly. This ethos runs deeply throughout the code of mTurk, one example occurs in a Requester function called "blocks". Requesters are told in the mTurk documentation that blocking a user is a great way to ensure they don't do their HITs again, be it because they did a poor job the first time, or because the Requester needs new blood. The fact is that blocks also alert Amazon to the fact that the worker is considered to have done poor work, so in the case of blocking someone solely to bring in new workers to do the HITs, they get a red flag on their account unnecessarily. My belief is that Amazon doesn't rephrase their documentation to say something like, "Blocks leave a negative mark on the user's account unless you leave a comment with the block stating that it was only for diversification purposes" because it humanizes the worker. Requesters would realize that this is a human being whose livelihood is on the line based on my actions. This sort of empathetic response would jeopardize the reputation of mTurk as a place where you can pay only pennies without ever thinking twice about the person you are paying. I don't believe Amazon necessarily does this consciously, but the framework already built leads to adhering to the schema of worker

as computer program without heart or soul. The second biggest barrier also involves our reputation, but centers around pay. Due to a few unfortunately outdated and misguided studies, and some media articles based on conjecture and misconception, the word has gotten around that not only are we happy to work for \$2 per hour, or that \$6 per hour is super high pay, but that we're doing all this out of the goodness of our hearts. So many researchers have been shocked when we let them know that \$1.25 per hour is not acceptable pay. They quickly reply that they heard that we work for so little because we love to help researchers. They don't seem to clue in that we're workers, not university undergraduate students, and we're doing this to put bread on our table. When they do realize this, rarely do they raise the pay, but more often they just leave mTurk for other sites where the workers don't have a community to share their grievances, such as SocialSci.com. There are even sites like PsiTurk.com which completely remove the Requester-Worker communication channel by involving a third party company who has made no steps to get in contact with the workers at all. The less we as workers are able to educate researchers and business Requesters alike, the worse the conditions become for Turkers.

What is a fair average pay for good work on Mechanical Turk?

Spamgirl: Average pay must be at minimum \$6 per hour for the most basic, simple and quick to complete of tasks. Anything which is tedious, requires some skill or knowledge or training, or involves a great deal of concentration must pay far more than that. For example, writers expect at least \$10-15 per hour for creative work or that which doesn't need to be researched. If research is necessary, the hourly rate would be higher.

How would you build Mechanical Turk?

Spamgirl: I would love to see a platform run by the workers, but it would be just as exploitive as a platform run by Requesters. I think that having a third party like Amazon in the mix helps to keep a balance between the needs and desires of both sides. At the same time, I would love to see more investment in the system itself. Both the API and the Worker GUI are woefully outdated and lack functionality we've been asking for over the last 9 years. If I was to build a new mTurk, I would ensure that it was scalable. I would poll the workers and the Requesters and create a platform which met their needs for ease of use, efficiency and reliability. I would also invest in marketing, reaching out to academics, journalists, businesses and even potential skilled workers. On top of that, I would engage in outreach to those already using the platform. I would have obvious modes of communication both between Requesters and workers and Requesters/workers and Amazon. Communication, education and marketing are three areas which I think Amazon would love to take steps towards bettering, but they just don't have the resources to do so.

The interview was conducted by Vanessa Barth and Florian Alexander Schmidt in May 2014 for the German book: *Crowd Work: Zurück in die Zukunft*, by Christiane Benner (editor), Bund Verlag (publisher), 2014. <http://www.bund-verlag.de/shop/neuerscheinungen/crowdwork-zurueck-in-die-zukunft.html>