

Getting Ghosted by Deliveroo

'Hope you enjoy your food!' I shout, after a woman, who, having snatched her Five Guys order out of my hands, promptly slams her door in my face. My sin? Taking twenty minutes to deliver her food, rather than ten. I genuinely don't blame her.

It's all part of the gig economy; that means maximum flexibility and minimum waiting times, both for riders, and for customers. The ease with which Deliveroo facilitates the ordering process means that customers increasingly expect as little time as possible to elapse between the pushing of the 'order' button, and the ring of their own doorbell. It's a modern miracle of operations management, connecting over 45,000 daily UK orders with restaurants, and ensuring reliable cooking, conveyance and customer contentment. Their secret? Effectively outsourcing most of the fixed costs, risks and processes associated with the operation onto their riders.

Now don't get me wrong; in some ways I loved working for Deliveroo (emphasis on the past tense): as a university student, it gave me the flexibility to work zero-hour contracts alongside my degree. Longer shifts didn't bother me, because I felt like the process was paying for itself twice over: once in the exercise and once in the payment itself. The app is intuitive: you simply log in when you feel like it, click 'online', and it will then work to find you order contracts to fulfil. I even didn't mind the occasional grouchy customer – after all, speed and efficiency are what we've all come to expect, and maybe I did cycle a little slower for *that* one order – it can be tiring work after all.

My experience, however, with Deliveroo HQ, I found much less forgivable.

Here's a fact: Deliveroo is wholly geared towards their customers. Their number one company value on their website is being 'customer obsessed'. That's actually a fair claim; they seem to have an easily-accessible hotline if orders go wrong. But the same does not apply to their riders, who have no such hotline (apart from in on-shift emergencies). Any longer-term complaints have to go through a long, drawn out process of fee queries, and chat-bots, without access to any human operator.

My own issue was simple: having (by my own mistake), erroneously entered my bank details on my Deliveroo profile, I had not received money for any of my shifts, until one day I suddenly realised the extent of my blunder. A quick call to my bank confirmed that the erroneous account number I had entered did not exist, and that any money sent to it by Deliveroo would have bounced straight back to them. Panic over, I allowed myself to breathe a sigh of relief. My own stupidity (I freely admit) had nearly cost me dearly, but luckily modern banking precautions established precisely for idiots such as myself had saved me! Surely, Deliveroo would happily pay out, on the basis that the money had never actually left their account? Alas, so began a several month-long ordeal, with what I can only describe as the most frustrating and unintuitive complaints service to which I have ever had the pleasure of subjecting myself.

First to contact me after I filled in the fee query form was the extremely verbose 'John'¹, who sent me a short reply explaining that I needed to clarify my complaint further, before never replying to me again. Three more fee query forms later, I was hoping for another bite at the complaints cherry, but apparently, I had used up my one opportunity in speaking to Mr John. The closest I ever got to a genuine response was an automated reply explaining Deliveroo was delivering with a high volume of complaints (!). Next, I took to calling up their customer service line (in absence of a rider complaint line), only to be told in no uncertain terms that that line was reserved for ordering customers only,

¹ All names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of Deliveroo support staff

and that riders should complain using the fee query form. My expression that I already had done so, was met with only the very mildest sympathy.

In desperation, I took to tweeting at Deliveroo, in the hope that the possibility of public shaming might elicit some form of emotional response from them. Alas; Deliveroo are bombarded by such a heavy volume of complaints each day that I might as well have sent my complaint via magic owl; the tweet was quickly lost among 1000s of others.

It might seem like much ado about nothing, but for me, Deliveroo's treatment of rider complaints is symptomatic of a wider issue: the expendability of their riders.

Without these riders – all 60,000 of them as of 2020 - their business model would fall apart. That's what makes it so surprising that it's those same riders who suffer because of Deliveroo's system. For example, there is minimal socialising between riders, who are essentially 'in competition': order contracts are more likely to go to riders who are closer to the restaurant where an order is placed, meaning it becomes a race to get there. This strips the process of any sense of community or work culture between 'employees' of the same company. There is also no 'shared space' or network for socialising, meaning that cycling for Deliveroo could be an isolating and isolated job, even before the advent of Coronavirus. And finally, these employees are treated as if they are disposable, as evinced by their rider complaints mechanism.

Deliveroo's main target is keeping its consumers (all 45,000 of them, daily, as of 2018) satisfied and regularly engaging with its service. Clearly, they know the value of each customer, not just according to their monetary worth, but also according to their potential to harm their reputation through negative feedback. But an angry rider? Those are more easily replaced. The digital onboarding process costs Deliveroo virtually nothing and there are no recruitment costs or payroll; all of this makes the individual rider fairly disposable. Riders are also classed as being entirely 'self-employed' (meaning no entitlement to workers' right or pensions contributions); a heavy price to pay for rider flexibility, making them even more disposable.

It's clichéd, but this avoidable attitude furthers each rider's sense of being an unimportant cog in a much larger machine. Having exhausted virtually every complaint address that the Deliveroo website kindly provided (but clearly failed to monitor) I came to the frustrated conclusion that getting ghosted by Deliveroo was less of an oversight, and more of a deliberate ploy on their part. Poor customer service can be a staple of a number of relatively new businesses, on the basis that pushing the price point onto the complaineer by making *them* put in the effort helps an organization to significantly reduce its redress payouts. It's less of a shortcoming, and more of a strategy, and it means that Deliveroo can afford to alienate riders to cut costs. But solving complaints is important, not least for the redress it provides to the complaineer. Deliveroo have successfully implemented a streamlined and efficient business model, but such progress comes at a cost. Improvement is essential, and for once it is them, not their riders, who *must* deliver.