Rider training: a great start, but challenges lie ahead

When it comes to road safety, training needs to be not just on the app, but on the job as well.

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For The Straits Times

Food delivery platform GrabFood announced early this month an important move requiring all new riders to undergo a two-day training programme starting next month.

Current riders are also encouraged to take the training. All riders, including those from other platforms, can receive SkillsFuture credits, which fund between 70 per cent and 90 per cent of the fees, while GrabFood riders, Grab will cover the remainder.

In addition to general road safety training and knowledge of updated traffic rules, there will be specific skills for riders to learn about protective riding, food package handling and how to balance with a delivery load.

Naturally, the training will be tailored for different types of vehicle deliveries, including bicycles and motorcycles, as well as personal mobility devices (PMDs). One PMD user was wearing a blame for a traffic offender in Woodlands that killed a 20-year-old rider.

Training of delivery riders has so far been highly insufficient. Accidents to food delivery, skills training, in fact, declined in recent years, making it a matter of urgency that requires addressing.

GrabFood’s training initiative is therefore a welcome move to boost delivery rider safety.

Looking at the bigger picture, this is a great start to make working conditions sustainable for the labour force, which will benefit not only the gig economy but also Singapore society.

However, some challenges lie ahead on the road to achieving this desirable destination.

Three challenges

Effective training

The challenges are, first, for Grab and its technology partners to develop and deliver solid on-the-job training that will keep riders safe while providing high-standard services. It’s common to hear riders complaining that they feel frightened and unprepared. A good training initiative will make them feel differently.

A couple of years ago, my research team studied Bong Kyoung’s "skaters" — those who do multiple freelance jobs simultaneously. For instance, delivering food while being a waiter and cleaner.

Some young and eager to make quick money, "These skaters" are known to work hard without adequate supervision. They worked so hard that exhaustion would hit their health and endanger their safety. Increasingly, they depend on app-based platforms for their gigs, while the platforms provide minimum training and treat them like disposable parts.

Insufficient training is also an issue in Singapore. Since early last month, my National University of Singapore students at the Department of Communications and New Media have been watching live video recording of local private-hire vehicle drivers as well as riders delivering food and goods.

Funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, this is in part a project called Fairwork that studies the working conditions worldwide.

GrabFood’s initiative is also in line with the National Trades Union Congress, who has completed more than 60 interviews with Singaporean drivers and riders. They work for Grab including GrabFood, Gojek, Foodpanda, Ryde, Deliveroo, Tada and Lalamove.

From these interviews, we found that overall, platforms in Singapore provide little training. Some require riders and drivers to watch videos on their apps. Others are vague or not really on-the-job training, especially when it comes to critical issues like road safety.

Some say digital platforms are technology companies and they should not be responsible for training beyond app use. This is wrong. According to one 40-year-old food delivery rider, when he started in 2017, his company training programme included having new riders go on attachment with a more senior one, but such on-the-job training no longer exists now.

Training costs: getting all on board

Another challenge is how better Grab can ensure all riders without proper training — not just new ones — to undergo the programme.

Merely encouraging those who are already working for Grab to join the programme is not good enough because the new programme is aligned with the requirements of the mandatory online test for riders of electric bicycles, which applies to all riders, old or new.

On this, it could be argued that the Government, rather than Grab, should shoulder the cost, because change has come from the regulars. Alternatively, there can be a co-payment arrangement between the Government and the platform.

So long as riders do not need to pay out of their own pockets, they will make use of the learning and appreciate the care.

GrabFood or the Government do not fully absorb the expenses, one may wonder. Are the training costs simply passed on to consumers, who may be unwilling to pay more? Or is it consumers who shift to other providers who provide lower rates not paying for training?

The results will be an uneven landscape for training across the platforms, if only some riders are required to join the new training initiative, and if they have to bear part of the training costs.

The key for the riders is to actually learn how to balance their vehicle with a delivery load and the 60c and don’ts while on the road. For this, in-person training for all riders would be indispensable.

Some may think in-person training is too costly and may be difficult to conduct due to current Covid-19 restrictions. Such a view is also incorrect.

There is a very good reason to make the training as affordable as possible for all riders.

Medical claims for injured delivery riders and others injured in traffic accidents can be huge, as shown in the recent case of young GrabFood delivery rider, who was badly injured after a serious accident in April. His family is seeking damages to pay the hefty medical bills of over $300,000.

Indeed, such incidents may involve long-term care and legal expenses, in the cases of serious injuries and fatalities.

This is not just a strain on the injured and their families, but on the public health system.

Most of the injured riders do have some degree coverage under basic third-party insurance unless they purchase additional policy themselves. Ultimately, the social and economic costs have to be home by someone.

Minor injuries, which happen more frequently, can also slow down the process of delivery work.

When riders have to stay home to recuperate, the platforms end up with a smaller labour pool. Minor injuries are therefore also costly.

Due to the pandemic and Covid-19 curbs, the demand for delivery services has grown in leaps and bounds, while retrenched and underemployed workers rush to join the gig economy. As a tally by The Sunday Times last December showed, a significant increase in the number of accidents involving food delivery riders — a trend that seems to have continued in the first months of this year.

Will other platforms step up?

The third challenge: Other delivery platforms need to embrace training, too.

Grab’s latest move to enhance training for riders is likely to create positive cascading effects throughout the app-based delivery sector. From our study, we learnt that it is common for riders to use several apps at the same time.

Someone working for Platform A during lunch hour may switch to Platform B during dinner time.

Currently, the training available is extremely patchy. For example, a Gojek driver told us in his training, he came from Grab while a Grab rider said his came from a Gojek programme. Clearly, a uniform and higher-quality training programme is needed across all platforms.

It wouldn’t be great if other platforms move not just to catch up, but to even outnumber Grab’s new initiative. Otherwise, they will risk losing some of their best service providers, while continuing to carry the human and financial costs of accidents as well as reputational damage.

Occupational training and safety are, after all, essential to all forms of modern work. Every company, including every platform, must do more to keep its workforce out of harm’s way. This is a minimal expectation from the public at the very least.

All these moves by the platforms should be met with more than corporate social responsibility gestures. Drivers and riders can tell us what genuine care looks like.