

# 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

**Jack Qiu**

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 this training. All trainees, including those from other platforms, can use SkillsFuture credits, which fund between 70 per cent and 90 per cent of the fees, while for 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.

Notably, the training will be tailored for different types of vehicles including bicycles and motorcycles, as well as personal mobility devices (PMDs). One PMD was to blame for a tragic fire earlier this month in Woodlands that killed a 20-year-old rider.

Training for delivery riders has so far been highly insufficient. Across all major platforms, skills training has, 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 big 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 institutional 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 they feel ignored and uncared for. A good training initiative will make them feel differently.

A couple of years ago, my research team studied Hong Kong's young "slashers" – those who do multiple freelance jobs simultaneously, for instance, delivering food while being a waiter and cleaner.

Being young and eager to make quick money, these "slashers" sometimes put in 100-hour work weeks consecutively. They worked so hard that exhaustion would hurt 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 interviewing local private-hire vehicle drivers as well as riders who deliver food and parcels.

Funded by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, this is part of a project called Fairwork that assesses gig work conditions worldwide.

Working with our partners in the National Trades Union Congress, we have 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.

But on-the-app training is not really on-the-job training, especially when it comes to critical issues like road safety.

Some may 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, the company's training programme



GrabFood's training initiative, requiring all new riders to undergo a two-day training programme, is a welcome move to boost delivery rider safety. Other delivery platforms need to embrace training, too, says the writer. Occupational training and safety are, after all, essential to all forms of modern work. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

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: It would be better if Grab can require all its 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 theory 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 cover the cost, because change first came from the regulators. Alternatively, there can be a co-payment arrangement between the Government and the platform. So long as riders do not need to pay from their own pockets, they will make use of the learning and appreciate the care.

If Grab and/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 will consumers shift to other providers who undercut their rates by 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 is for riders to actually learn how to balance their vehicle with a delivery load and the do's 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 costs for injured deliverers – and for others injured in traffic accidents – can be huge, as shown in the recent case of young GrabFood delivery rider Mohammed Ali. He was badly injured after a serious accident in April and his family is seeking donations to pay for the hefty medical bills of over \$100,000.

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

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

Most of the injured riders do not have adequate coverage beyond basic third-party insurance unless they purchase an additional policy themselves. Ultimately, the social and economic costs have to be

borne 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. 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 at dinner time.

Currently, the training available is extremely patchy. For example, a Gojek driver told us his training came from Grab while a Ryde deliverer said his came from a Gojek programme. Clearly, a more uniform and higher-quality

training programme is needed across all platforms.

It would be great if other platforms move not just to catch up, but to even outperform 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 its best to keep its workforce out of harm's way. That is a minimum expectation from the public at the very least.

All these moves by the platforms should be much more than corporate social responsibility gestures. Drivers and riders can tell lip service from genuine policy.

At the end of the day, the measures of training effectiveness must include a notable decrease in work injuries and traffic accidents involving riders on the streets of Singapore. For this, there should be a central agency to count the accidents, medical expenses and costs of other damage, to ensure the new training initiative will benefit riders in the long run.

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