

At the mercy of algorithms: When the electrician and plumber were more than just dots on an app

Indian Express Dec 4, 2022.

<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/mercy-of-algorithms-when-the-electrician-and-plumber-were-more-than-just-dots-on-an-app-8303878/>

Prem Singh, the electrician who worked at my parent's place was, to put it bluntly, fairly incompetent. The wiring in the house was perpetually in a mess and there would be frequent electrical short circuits, some of them even leading to fires. And yet, his obvious shortcomings in the competence department notwithstanding, there was no question of my parents getting another electrician. Just like there was no question of getting another carpenter despite the fact that Bhagwan Das, our regular carpenter was drunk most of the time. Or of getting another plumber instead of Sees Ram who also was fond of his tipple.

The plumbers, the electricians, the carpenters and other workers developed a relationship with people of our parent's generation. There was of course a monetary component since the workers were recompensed for their labour. But it was not purely monetary. If any of them for instance needed a loan for a wedding in the family, or needed some strings to be pulled in a government office or even needed his son to be fixed up in a job in some company, my parents would not hesitate to help. It was as if it was expected that they would help when they could. The monetary exchange was there but equally critical was the give and take which formed a bond not easily describable in the language of pure economics.

Things changed somewhat in the nineties as the economy grew. People moved to new cities in search of opportunities and the demand for services grew. More crucially, the relationship between the customer and the service provider became a bit less personal.

If one needed a plumber urgently, one would get in touch with someone who knew one and the plumber, after much pleading would agree to come. He of course would never come at the agreed time. Typically, he would take his time and the customer would

need to put everything else on hold and wait. There were no mobile phones and so there was no question of getting a definite ETA. The plumber would finally come and demand an unreasonable sum. The customer would be forced to pay since he was essentially a supplicant in this whole transaction. From the plumber's point of view it was completely rational since there was a lot of demand for his services. The customer of course had no choice. Interestingly, even though the customer had far more economic power, in this transaction, the power equation was reversed.

Nevertheless, there developed a relationship since if at a later date one needed a plumber, one would typically call the same one- a known devil.... Over a period of time thus, some sort of familiarity and relationship would emerge which would not be purely monetary.

Things changed again in the second decade of this century. The rise of the gig economy meant that now the service provider was available through an aggregator company with a few taps on one's smartphone. As far as the customer was concerned, the transaction was totally transparent with the company having a fixed rate card for labour as well as for parts. The service providers or workmen would be offered the particular job and if they accepted, the company would share the customer details. Once the job was complete, one paid the company directly which shared the revenue with the workmen after keeping a certain percentage. The customer thinks she is getting a fair and honest deal. After all, an algorithm unlike a human being, wont cheat? The workman on the other hand was thankful for getting a job.

Except there is a catch in all this- the algorithm which the company uses to offer the job to the workmen is based on the rating received by the workmen for their previous jobs. Thus if you have a poor rating, your chances of getting another job decrease. This of course means that the customer who gives the rating is now the one in this transaction who holds the power. A bad rating could potentially be disastrous for the workman. And so you have the workman actually acting as a supplicant and requesting you to give a good review after the job is done. The presence of an impersonal machine learning algorithm has once again brought the power equation in sync with that actually existing in society.

What is more, the customer and the workman have no relationship - in most cases, the customer might not even recall the name of the worker since the next time any job is to

be done the algorithm might send someone else to do the work. Each of them have a relationship with the algorithm of the aggregator company rather than with each other.

Thus over the years, two transformations have happened in our relationship with the workmen. Firstly, the power balance has shifted from being a more equal one to one where the workmen had more power and now to one where the customer is king. Secondly, the relationship between us and the workers has evolved from being a very personal one to a more impersonal one to one which is now purely transactional. One can argue that these transformations increase efficiency and hence are positive developments. However, maybe it is time to ponder whether economic efficiency and rationality are the only things that should matter in a society of Homo sapiens and not one which is made up of Homo economicus.