Uber tweaks its driver app amid rising tensions over worker rights

Uber made several changes to its app Thursday to improve the experience for both novice and seasoned drivers. The update came as ride-hailing drivers rallied in support of legislation in California that would reclassify them as employees rather than contractors.

Uber is testing out several new features for drivers, including a scrolling feed of promotions and gamified “quests” that are viewable before drivers sign on to start driving. For new drivers, there will be a “simulated trip” to walk them through the virtual steps of their first ride before they commit to actually picking up a passenger.

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There will be additional notifications for longer-than-average trips, such as the amount of time it will take to reach the destination. When drivers need to cancel a trip, the app will now allow them to specify the reasons why. And a new feature automatically accepts the next trip, so drivers can more easily earn “consecutive trip” bonuses paid out by Uber.

In sum, these features are designed to make the app more responsive to driver needs. Uber says its research shows that drivers want information about ways to earn more money (duh), including promotions or upcoming events where there is greater

probability of a pickup correlated with high-activity foot traffic. Drivers have also told Uber they want more details about trips so they can better plan their days.

The new scrollable “top opportunities” feed is probably the most significant change to the app. While it won’t show crucial information like surge zones – the hexagonal grid areas are still found on the navigational map within the driver app – it will present an easy display of all the promotions, bonuses, and “quests” that can earn them more money. Critics dismiss these “gamified” features as psychological tricks meant to keep drivers on the road longer. Uber argues these features are popular with drivers because they often put more money in their pockets.

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Some driver experts are skeptical that this will change anything for drivers. “The problem is that Uber doesn’t put its money where its mouth is with these types of gamification features,” said Harry Campbell, who runs the website *The Rideshare Guy*. “They encourage drivers to go to certain places during certain times but there’s no guarantee that you’ll get a ride. As part of their new driver app last year, they released a feature called opportunities and I guess no one was using it so they re-branded it as top opportunities.”

He added, “Ultimately, there’s always going to be an inherent tension between drivers and Uber when it comes to features like this because drivers really want as few drivers nearby so they can capitalize on surge while Uber wants as many drivers nearby to meet demand and reduce surge.”

These new features come as the debate about Uber’s classification of drivers heats up. A bill passed by the California State Assembly, and now with the state senate, would classify gig economy workers (like Uber and Lyft drivers) as employees if they don’t perform work “outside the

usual course of the hiring entity’s business.” The federal Labor Department, though, maintains that gig workers should remain freelancers.

In May, ride-hail drivers in cities across the US went on strike to protest unfair pay, poor working conditions, and a lack of transparency from Uber. The strike was timed to coincide with Uber’s much-anticipated IPO. Both Uber and Lyft’s IPOs under-performed amid questions about the industry’s tendency to lose vast sums of cash.

The companies are scared, and are trying to rally drivers to oppose the California bill. Uber and Lyft sent notices to drivers urging them to sign in-app petitions to “protect” driver flexibility. And Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi and Lyft co-founders Logan Green and John Zimmer made the unusual decision to co-author an op-ed in the *San Francisco Chronicle* pushing back on the California Assembly’s bill and promising a renewed commitment to job security and work conditions for drivers.

https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/20/18692123/uber-driver-app-update-promotions-cancellation