

Where Rookies Prevail: Digital Habitus and Age-based Earnings Differentials in Online Legal Services

Abstract

In this lecture, Professor Liu investigates how and why the field of digital professional work can generate unconventional age-based earnings differentials that advantage younger workers. Analyzing a service archive dataset from a major online legal service platform in China, it is found that, contrary to the patterns of income inequality in traditional legal fields, younger lawyers earn more than older lawyers in the digital legal field. Further analyses of the platform work content and interviews with lawyers working on this platform suggests that the platform's mechanism for distributing work opportunities makes mature lawyers' social capital and symbolic capital of seniority less useful. Elementary work content and client preference for straightforward answers also minimize older lawyers' advantage from their accumulated human capital and professional habitus. Meanwhile, the digital legal field places added value on younger lawyers' digital habitus and turns it into a new form of cultural capital. This cultural capital is manifested in younger lawyers' proficiency and effectiveness in digital communication, which help them outperform older lawyers in online platform-based services. By examining habitus and capital in the emerging digital legal field, this lecture deepens the understanding of the impact of digital technologies on knowledge-intensive occupations.