Guest editorial

Expanding perspectives on gig work and gig workers

The term "gig economy" was coined during the height of the great recession as a way to describe the increasing numbers of people, including the well-educated, who held multiple part-time jobs, were employed by temporary agencies or freelanced (Brown, 2009). These sorts of contingent work arrangements have long been studied by organizational researchers (Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Connelly and Gallagher, 2004). In the past several years, however, operational definitions of gig work have begun to converge on a more novel type of contingent labor: electronically mediated employment arrangements in which individuals find short-term tasks or projects via websites or mobile apps that connect them to clients and process payment. A variety of labor platforms now provide individuals the ability to choose when and whether to work, either remotely or in-person.

In this special issue we examine this form of gig labor: people who find work via digital labor platforms such as Upwork, Uber, Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and TaskRabbit. These and other labor platforms vary substantially in terms of their target markets and configurations, but all serve as intermediaries between consumers/clients and individuals who provide services (note this excludes platforms where tangible goods are sold or rented, such as Etsy and Airbnb). Some people work full-time hours via one of these platforms for years while others use them as an occasional source of extra income. Technically speaking, they are considered self-employed even though the design and policies of many platforms can lead some workers to perceive themselves as employees of the platform (Smith, 2016). While most of the research to date on this phenomenon has been conducted by scholars in information systems, strategic management, sociology and economics (e.g. Chen and Horton, 2016; Friedman, 2014; Lehdonvirta, 2018; Lin *et al.*, 2016; Pallais, 2014; Stewart and Stanford, 2017), electronically mediated gig employment poses provocative theoretical as well as important practical questions for organizational psychology and human resource management (HRM) (Aguinis and Lawal, 2013; Ashford *et al.*, 2018; Kuhn, 2016). In this introductory editorial, we present an overview of gig economy work and highlight key issues from the perspective of managerial psychology; we also situate the papers included in the Special Issue relative to this overarching framework to help readers understand underlying distinctions.

The nature and size of the gig economy

In the broader public discourse, gig work is often synonymous with the apps that provide on-demand in-person consumer services, such as ride hailing, food delivery, and home repair and errands. Many of these platforms determine compensation rates and actively manage worker behavior via algorithmic management techniques (Rosenblat, 2018), while still maintaining that the workers are independent partner-providers or even entrepreneurs. Other platforms allow workers some leeway to set their own rates or to offer differentiated services (Kuhn and Maleki, 2017).

For work that can be performed remotely, businesses ranging from the very small to the Fortune 500 now use online labor platforms to find and pay gig workers from around the world for tasks that previously would have been done by employees or contracted to traditional outsourcing firms and staffing agencies. The first online freelancing platform, Elance, was launched in 1999, Odesk was started in 2003 and the firm resulting from their merger, Upwork, reports over 12m registered freelancers as of 2018. These and similar freelance platforms originally operated as virtual open marketplaces where coders, graphic

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designers and other skilled professionals could compete for project-based work. Some platforms now vet freelance talent, advertising curated talent pools in professions such as editing, law and accounting (Reader, 2017).

Online labor platforms where a largely undifferentiated crowd of anonymous workers perform microtasks are more often described as piecework (Lehndonvirta, 2019) or crowdwork platforms rather than as freelance markets. The most well-known of these, MTurk, was launched in 2005 to provide business clients a cheap way to hire remote workers for "human intelligence tasks" such as photo tagging, and has also proven to be a popular source of data for researchers in the social sciences (Buhrmester *et al.*, 2018). MTurk is perhaps the most frequently researched gig economy platform, with numerous studies that have tested its efficiency as a labor market (e.g. Pallais, 2014) and the design of analytical quality management tools for clients of the site (e.g. Ipeirotis *et al.*, 2010).

Because of their relatively low rates of pay and the repetitive nature of the tasks offered, MTurk and its competitors have been characterized as "digital sweatshops" (Cushing, 2013). But over the past few years MTurk has begun to make distinctions among workers, certifying some as "prime" with an associated higher commission fee. Some Mturk workers have reported they find tasks (such as training machine learning algorithms) to be complex and intellectually stimulating (see Katz, 2017). Conversely, some established freelance platforms like Upwork now offer clients virtual monitoring tools to facilitate paying workers on an hourly basis, sometimes for relatively mundane tasks, as well as services to help recruit and manage workers. Thus the distinctions between freelance and piecework labor platforms are becoming less marked. In sum, worker selection and management practices, as well as the nature of the work performed, can vary substantially within an online labor platform as well as across different platforms.

While the rise of gig labor platforms has attracted significant attention, debate continues as to their impact on the labor market and role in the broader economy, with some recent media reports characterizing the gig economy as "overblown" (Morath, 2018). Attempts to calculate the size of the gig economy, however, have been complicated by the lack of a universally accepted definition of gig work and by methodological challenges. Researchers still sometimes broadly define gig work as all non-standard employment and sometimes more narrowly (as we do) as flexible work mediated by online labor platforms. In the USA, household survey data have shown little evidence of recent growth in self-employment that should be associated with a surging gig-based economy, but administrative data do indicate such growth (Abraham *et al.*, 2018).

It is increasingly clear that traditional household survey questions and techniques are inadequate to the task of assessing gig work (Abraham *et al.*, 2018; Jarmin, 2019). For example, a survey that asks only about the respondent's main job over the past week will necessarily fail to capture much of the gig economy, because many people do gig work as a side hustle to supplement a waged job or perform gig-based work only sporadically (Hall and Krueger, 2018). Some people work full-time hours via multiple labor platforms. In 2017 the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) added new survey questions specifically targeted toward electronically mediated gig work, but admitted the questions "did not work as intended." Writing questions so that respondents would clearly identify when they had used apps or websites to access gig work, rather than to find a regular job or as a consumer, was a significant challenge, particularly since platforms names such as Uber were intentionally not used as examples (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Abraham *et al.* (2018) also find that traditional survey methods likely miscoded many independent workers as employees.

In general, economists studying the USA workforce find that structural changes over the past few years have boosted platform-mediated gig work, especially in transportation services, even if non-standard employment overall has not shown continued growth (Abraham *et al.*, 2018; Bracha and Burke, 2018). An annual US survey of skilled professionals who work independently finds rising percentages using or planning to

use online platforms to find clients, even though offline sources still predominate (MBO Partners, 2018), Data on gig economy employment in other countries are limited, but available reports also indicate small but significant proportions. Surveys in the UK (Balaram, 2017) and Australia (Stewart and Stanford, 2017) estimate between one and three percent of the adult population to have earned money from gig labor platforms. At the global level, Kässi and Lehdonvirta (2018) calculate the worldwide demand for remote online-based gig work to be rising by roughly twenty percent a year.

Challenges and controversies

Public policy experts, politicians and the general public have all evinced concerns over the gig economy's implications for individual and societal well-being (Friedman, 2014; Smith, 2016; Warner, 2015). Because labor platforms are not officially employers of gig workers, they do not provide benefits as such as paid time off or health and workers compensation insurance (De Stefano, 2015). Workers can easily be deactivated from a platform without the risk of wrongful termination claims, and there is often little recourse for a worker who feels he or she has been treated unfairly by either a platform or a client. Many American employees in both standard and contingent arrangements also lack benefits and have at-will status, but they still enjoy protection under major employment legislation governing compensation and workplace safety that (nominally) self-employed gig workers do not. And in contrast to traditional independent contractors, gig workers often lack power to negotiate their contracts or even, on many platforms, their compensation rates.

Classifying gig workers as independent contractors saves platforms considerable labor costs but shifts risk to individuals; their legal classification in many developed countries has accordingly been contentious for the past several years. In April 2019 the USA Department of Labor issued an opinion letter signaling wide leeway to continue classifying platform workers as independent contractors, in marked contrast to earlier guidance issued under the previous presidential administration. In the same month the European Union moved in the opposite direction, passing laws granting gig workers legal protections, including the right to refuse assignments outside of normal working hours and compensation for canceled work (Boland, 2019).

From the perspective of many management scholars, the precarious nature of gig work not only contravenes established organizational theory that views a stable workforce and strong culture as sources of competitive advantage, but also threatens worker satisfaction and well-being. According to Pfeffer (2015), "people are better off, covered by employment protections, offered benefits, and, most importantly, having both greater income security and the benefit of being affiliated with an organization and fellow employees who can provide social support."

Other observers, however, take a more optimistic view of gig work, arguing that increased flexibility benefits workers as well as for firms. Based on their study of Uber drivers, Hall and Krueger (2018) argued that the low barriers to entry and considerable autonomy afforded by gig work offer opportunities for income smoothing and supplemental wages to meet immediate needs, although their methodology and conclusions have been criticized (Berg and Johnston, 2019). The same technological advances that fostered the rise of labor platforms can also provide workers opportunities to connect with one another and derive social support from their peers, even though those workers are also their direct competitors (Kuhn and Maleki, 2017).

Moreover, gig workers located in emerging-economy countries may reap significant financial benefits by being able to access clients from wealthy countries. Online labor platforms for remote work introduce a pool of comparatively high-wage jobs that would otherwise not be available to them. For projects requiring specialized skills, clients demonstrate a bias for selecting freelance gig workers from the developed world, but standardizing the worker history and quality information displayed on platforms disproportionately benefits those located in emerging economies, counteracting this bias

(Agrawal *et al.*, 2016). Piecework labor platforms may also benefit workers in emerging economies relative to traditional outsourcing contract firms (Lehdonvirta *et al.*, 2019), although the algorithmic management techniques that offer these workers more flexibility and autonomy can also lead to social isolation, overwork and exhaustion (Wood *et al.*, 2019).

While all forms of gig platform-based work share some commonalities, such as reputation feedback mechanisms, the degree of variation across platforms and across workers necessitates care in translating behavioral theories of work and workers to the "gig economy." Ashford *et al.* (2018) integrate a number of work psychology constructs to propose a model describing factors likely to shape individual thriving in the gig economy; they focus on skilled workers who choose to work full-time in this manner and who have a reasonable degree of control over their work, however, which does not necessarily describe the majority of gig workers.

Papers in the special issue

The papers in this special issue focus on different aspects of gig work to help advance our knowledge of this employment arrangement. They represent a broad range of approaches and research questions that, as a set, illuminate some of the complexities of the gig economy and its implications for understanding the nature of work in the twenty-first century. They include conceptual pieces and empirical papers using quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Jabagi, Croteau, Audebrand and Marsan present a conceptual paper solidly grounded in work motivation theory that highlights the role of technology in gig work. While previous research has focused on the negative effects of algorithmic management for gig workers (e.g. Rosenblat, 2018), this paper develops an argument for the role of enterprise social media as a motivational tool, proposing a bridge between information technology and HRM functions that could benefit both workers and platform firms. This paper also illustrates how examination of gig work can advance research paradigms in well-established psychological theories.

In the second conceptual piece of the special issue, Meijerink and Keegan develop a "big picture" theoretical framework of HRM in the gig economy by examining labor platforms as ecosystems. While previous studies of consulting firms and staffing agencies have addressed triadic work relationships, this paper considers the multilateral exchanges among gig workers, platform firms and requesters/clients from a novel perspective appropriate to the distinct challenges of the gig economy. They argue that these actors are active participants as well as recipients of classic HRM functions such as training and performance management, and their analysis provides useful theoretical guidance for future HRM research within this context.

Duhaime and Woessner provide an in-depth empirical examination of one source of HRM-related tension among gig workers, clients and platforms: tipping for on-demand personal services such as transportation. Through a series of experiments and studies, they show that perceptions of the appropriateness of tipping are affected by whether workers are "independent" or employees. Their results illustrate the importance of considering changing social norms in this new work context, as well as how these norms are shaped by a platform's design choices.

Bellesia, Mattarelli, Bertolotti and Sobrero's paper presents an exploratory study of IT developers, graphic designers and translators located in many different countries who find remote work via one of the largest freelance labor platforms. They rely on interviews as well as other rich data sources to generate thought-provoking insights into the interplay between platform design and work identity construction. Intriguingly, they show how this process can foster a more entrepreneurial identity, and thereby highlight why interdisciplinary perspectives may be especially fruitful when studying the gig economy. This work also offers practical implications for how freelance labor platforms can better accommodate the diversity among freelancers.

Ravenelle's paper also uses a qualitative approach, but compares and contrasts the experiences of workers on two different platforms that both offer location-based personal services. Her paper shows how underlying assumptions about workers, as enacted in the design and implementation of each platform's management practices, affect gig workers.

MTurk is the most widely studied gig economy platform, and two papers in this issue utilize surveys of MTurk workers. But they ask distinctly different questions than those addressed in previous research. Keith, Harms, and Tay survey over one thousand Turkers and compare those who rely on this work for primary income to those who do not, and associated differences in worker attitudes and behavior. They also show that MTurk workers who view this work as a "job" are more likely to behave accordingly than those who do not. Bucher, Fieseler and Lutz surveyed MTurk Prime workers in two waves a year apart in order to develop a measure that assesses the extent to which these digital workers perceive that their work matters, and the implications of different dimensions of mattering for work engagement. They also demonstrate why platforms and their clients should care about crowdworkers' perceptions.

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Further reading

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