



HEALTH, SAFETY, WELL-BEING AND ECONOMIC SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF GIG WORK: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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We agree that worker health, safety, well-being and economic security are complicated issues, so how are we addressing them? Single-pronged solutions are most common: training programs, wellness programs, mobile apps, or coaches, for example. But have we moved the needle? To do better, we need interdisciplinary solutions that will integrate the best knowledge and practice in order to create work and work environments that ensure healthy and safe behavior, facilitate well-being, and promote economic security.

This is not easy to do. An interdisciplinary approach is not a $(1+1+1) = 3$ solution...essentially single solutions layered on top of each other. Alternatively, an interdisciplinary approach triggers interactions across disciplines where the weaknesses of one discipline are complemented by the strengths of another, building new knowledge and new insight: $(AxBxCxD) = 10$. If we cross-pollinate the right disciplines, each addressing the same issue but from different and complementary angles, we can achieve holistic, integrated solutions that solve health, safety, well-being and economic security problems more completely and sustainably. To engage in interdisciplinary problem-solving, one has to give up favorite go-to answers.

To highlight the need for interdisciplinary approaches to solve critical problems, I want to focus on a rising issue that needs our immediate attention. As economic uncertainties grow across countries, an increasing number of workers are voluntarily and involuntarily looking for ways to support themselves independent of traditional employment to mitigate job insecurity. In response, “gig work” is growing dramatically. This form of work has important implications for the general prosperity of society and perhaps more importantly for the health, safety, well-being and economic security of gig workers.

What is “gig work?” For our purposes, I mean “forms of contingent work arrangements that require digital platforms...” (JOEM, April, 2017, p. e63). Theoretically, gig work means work that is arranged between a company that wants a service performed and a person who is willing to perform that service, facilitated by an end-to-end, cloud-based, online platform or mobile app that enables peer-to-peer transactions. Important characteristics include: work that utilizes a user-based rating system, offers workers flexibility in determining their hours, and places responsibility on workers to provide whatever tools or assets are necessary to accomplish their work (US Department of Commerce).

How “good” is gig work? Princeton University estimates the hourly rate for Uber drivers to be \$17US to \$22US, whereas Uber claims the median hourly income of New York drivers is \$30US. Both estimates do not take into account expenses including gas, insurance, maintenance and taxes (JOEM, p. e64). Further, gig workers in the US pay their own payroll taxes (called self-employment tax) at a rate of 15.3% that no employees have to pay. With respect to worker rights, gig workers are not covered by any employment-related laws that provide benefits such as workers compensation, sick and family leave, overtime, health insurance, retirement, vacation, and health and safety rules. Basic civil rights protections regarding retaliation, wrongful termination, discrimination, and harassment are nonexistent. Gig workers cannot negotiate rates or work contracts, and they have no protection against wage theft.

On the positive side, gig workers often report that they enjoy the autonomy they have regarding when they work and how much they work. Gig drivers also report enjoyment from the social interactions they have with passengers and freedom from a boss and office setting (Tran, 2018). Gig workers can start work quickly with minimum paperwork and vetting. Job control, reduced hassles, payment by the “piece,” self-management, and seemingly unlimited autonomy are psychologically desirable attributes of gig work that maintain gig workers’ interest in such work.

There is a dark side, however. One, the algorithmic management system used in digital platforms forces the gig worker’s hand. The company controls who gets the gig and at what price. The worker is not given future gigs if customers’ ratings are low. Two, the expenses incurred performing as a gig worker can easily exceed revenue. Expenses include worker-supplied equipment and tools (e.g., vehicle), insurance, maintenance, and amenities for the customer (e.g., water), which sometimes cannot be recouped. Three, major job stressors are present in gig work: long work hours, adversarial relationships with platforms, dangerous work and working conditions, unpleasant customer interactions, and sleep deprivation. Four, when hurt or sick on the job, gig workers have full responsibility for their recovery and loss of work. It is the latter two aspects of gig work that I turn to.

What are the health, safety, well-being and economic security implications of gig work? Without the safety nets built for regular employees, gig workers and society in general are at great risk.

This work is stressful. We know from scientific studies that job insecurity, poor working conditions, toxic relationships, unemployment, long work hours, shift work, low wages, and poor management can lead to significant illness and needless death (Pfeffer, 2017). These elements can be present in gig work. Gig transportation and all other occupations that require significant lengths of time sitting and immobility carry all the dangers of prolonged sedentary behavior. Gig work involving lifting, carrying, moving, and pushing/heaving objects without proper safety equipment, tools and training sets up workers for injury and potential long-term disability. We need to view gig work the same way we view dangerous

work in traditional employment settings without the training, safety equipment, supervision, guidance, tools, and rules that protect regular employees.

Gig work will dominate global economies in the future. We should address the health and economic risks of gig work now.

An interdisciplinary approach could determine how gig workers’ basic needs could be met through changes in work design and the development of worker support systems such as employer-funded gig workers compensation, community policy and planning to facilitate gig work, legislation to provide basic protections for gig workers, and technical expertise for building better apps. By building a system that supports gig work economically, psychologically, physically, and socially, gig work could be a viable economic and fulfilling career path for workers regardless of race, gender, national origin, religion, disability status, and socio-economic status.