

Labor or Leisure: Towards a New Psychological Contract with Gig Workers on YouTube

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The gig economy has been gaining the attention of both academia and practice due to its rapid upskilling environment and technology enablement. Gigging has changed the traditional employment conditions and the traditional psychological contract. In this paper, we shall go through extant literature on the gig economy and gig workers. We will also define some propositions to create a sustainable psychological contract with the gig workforce. Using the Self-determination Theory, we will try to identify the salient features of a sound psychological contract that can be built with a digital worker who delivers most of his services on the Internet. Our focus will be mainly on those gig workers who are involved with social production through a digital platform.

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Introduction

Many people who use the content as a source of their service on a digital platform to earn money from the platform are independent content owners. Many who post their content through videos on YouTube continue to do this to spread knowledge or to do an activity they enjoy. A few people do this full-time, and several others do this part-time, like gigs, to generate more income. Apart from beauty, YouTube content creators share almost everything under the sun; health, lifestyle, home décor, comedy, gardening, medicine, and education, among a plethora of options. Videos of ‘how to’ of even the most trivial to the most complex processes, including installing software, opening a shampoo bottle, changing a bulb, and anything that one needs to know is available on the platform.

The term gig has more or less been associated with professionals/semi-professionals or non-professionals who do not associate with a long-term contract and defined workers employed on a need basis. ‘Gig’ became a general term due

to the changing workforce structure and changing nature of work (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017) as a significant portion of the labor force moved away from traditional employment contracts. Gig workers have more freedom to walk out of contracts at a lower opportunity cost, have control over the time they want to devote to the work, and also get to establish the terms of their agreement, including compensation. By designing the means of delivering their services with varying degrees of freedom and formalization, gig workers have to bear the cost of several benefits that employees of an organization may have (DeStefano, 2015).

‘Gig’ was often used by contingent labor or by the likes of singers, dancers, cleaners, plumbers, electricians, performers, or similar skill-based labor that required some form of semi-skilled problem-solving qualifications that required varying degrees of professional skills. It is neither a shadow nor a subset of the contract labor force. As the domain of contingent labor expands, we observe more and more services falling under the definition of the contingent labor market or the modern workforce. As defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, contingent workers do not expect their jobs to last beyond a year on average. Before using the term ‘gig’ and ‘contingent’ interchangeably, it is crucial to understand some terms clearly before we segregate the components of the gig economy. We can identify the gig workforce as flexible employment, with personal training and development incentives, intrinsic motivation, low barriers to entry into the

market, a steep learning curve, and entrepreneurial skill development, among others (Kossek & Michael, 2011). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018 defines ‘gig work’ as ‘task-based and ‘electronically mediated.’ Due to unpredictable work, income, and time devoted, gig workers have to factor in the cost of unexpected contingencies, unplanned work schedules, and multiple gigs (Arenas et al., 2018).

With the rise of the gig economy, companies reduce short-term involvement costs and long-term costs of succession planning and off-boarding. Gig workers are still latent in India but can create up to 90 million jobs with more than \$250 billion in volume. An estimated 35 million jobs will rely on skilled and semi-skilled gig workers. There have been proposals to include gig workers under social security laws in the Budget of 2020 to ensure timely payments along with health and insurance benefits. During the Pandemic itself, there has been a significant boost to the gig economy in India (Economic Survey, 2021). With the advent of technology 4G internet services, and low barriers to entry, many individuals can find employment through the gig economy. The Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (Assocham) has predicted that the Indian gig economy will grow at a compounded annual rate of 17 percent and a targeted revenue of 455 billion US dollars by the year 2023. India’s gig economy will grow three times in size in the coming millennium, creating up to 24 million jobs and contributing up to 1.25 percent to India’s Gross Domestic Prod-

uct. During the Pandemic itself, we saw how dependent we were on the gig economy for daily supplies of essentials. Uber drivers were given up to 14 days of paid sick leave assistance from March 2020 onwards (Kerr, 2020). Other financial benefits were extended to their drivers in California (Rosenblat, 2020). Though these policies are not flawless, the Pandemic gave recognition to our dependence on the gig economy worldwide.

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Due to the informal nature of the job in the gig economy, there is not much legislation protecting gig workers from exploitation. Gig workers come from entrepreneurs who identify themselves by their brand, compared to the mass ‘labor services’ purchased from the market without heavy screening. From the perspective of an organization, it is yet again essential to identify the kind of contract employees have with various types of gig workers. Since firms do not spend much time with gig workers, interacting with them, or spending on their well-being and motivation, there is much disconnect between them. There is a lot of controversy and legal confusion governing their employment status, wage levels, a threat to exploitation, among several others.

This paper aims to understand why people join the gig economy and continue to stay in the gig economy through the

lens of a psychological construct. We will be using the Self-determination Theory to understand the underlying reasons that motivate gig workers to join, survive, and thrive in such a dynamic market. By breaking down a few critical components of gig worker expectations, we can avoid conflict and even determine the future of gig workers eventually. We left out Social Exchange Theory as our theoretical foundation because the theory excludes several aspects of time from the reasons for the Psychological Contracts breach (Rousseau et al., 2018). We also left out the Conservation of Resources Theory, the Resource-Based View Framework, and the Job Demand Resources Model to avoid repetitive work.

Literature Review

A term extensively used today is ‘digital labor.’ Digital labor may be paid or unpaid, and the worth they do can exist in or out of employment relations (Huws, 2014). The gig economy consists of services provided in a particular geographical location or remotely but moderated through a digital platform (Wood et al., 2009). First coined during the Great Recession, gig work referred to the kind of job market that existed during such a time when the employer could not employ anybody full-time, and one job was not enough to fulfill the needs of one worker (Brown, 2009). With the advent of the internet in the 1990s, technology became a core of business service or product delivery. The pioneering forms of gig work can be traced back to ‘outsourcing,’ of IT services, where many of them were sent offshore to re-

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gions with relatively cheaper labor. It was also visible in direct selling gigs in older companies such as Avon, Oriflame, Tupperware, babysitters, etc. (Watson et al., 2021). Gigs are generally mediated on an online platform that enables employers looking for short-term contingent labor to deliver particular kinds of services in exchange for money. Many of these platforms determine compensation rates and actively control gig worker behavior via algorithmic management techniques (Rosenblat, 2018). Other platforms provide gig workers the freedom to set their rates in exchange for their services (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017). A lot of gig work exists because of advancements in technology, and digital employment is a means of digital delivery of services.

Gig & Gig Workers

Gig work is not a stable lifestyle, and since the gig economy in itself is an unstable industry, stability or security is not guaranteed. These digital nomads in a radical and dynamic space seek their inspiration from a space of entrepreneurship and a labor revolution. For a long time, gig work was not separated from numerous online services, used synonymously with piecework (Lehndonvirta, 2019). Due to the nature of work deployment, pay, and control, gig workers are growing every day, and this form of the

labor market also referred to as digital workshops, has grown way out of proportion (Morath, 2018). The gig economy that operates remotely is increasing at an annual rate of 25% (Kassi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). It is not easy to assess what percentage of the total workforce has moved out of the realm of traditional employment to gig employment, and simple survey techniques cannot measure this (Abraham et al., 2018; Jarmin, 2019). A lot of it has to do with the fact that the gig work people engage in is not a permanent source of income, and many do not associate gig work with a source of income. Individuals involved with gig work may have a full-time profession that they consider their sole source of income. Those sections of the gig economy may consider it a side gig and not even mention it as the individual may think the same insignificant (Hall & Krueger, Abraham et al., 2018).

Even though several organizations operate contingent labor through an online platform according to their discretion and may portray that these employees are not disposable at the whims and calls of employers, this section of employees is 'self-employed' (Smith, 2016). Contingent laborers, who are paid regular wages, even on the non-completion of a project, are not gig workers (Chen, Yeh, & Madson, 2019). Entrepreneurs who believe that they are in a long-term career of being employed by themselves are also not gig workers (Prottas & Thompson, 2006).

So who are these gig workers? A few types of gig workers fall under the realm

of the informal economy in both developed and emerging economies. The first category of gig workers are professionals with expert technical skills in their domain who deliver their professional services through a digital platform (Vallas & Schor, 2020). This type includes architects, journalists, researchers, and designers, among others. The second category of gig workers provides services physically in a geographical location and delivered to the customer via a digital platform. This type includes cab services, food delivery agents, beauty grooming agents, and incorporating education services like tutors, coaches, and instructors, among many others (Rosenblat, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Another type of gig work is the kind of work that cannot be delegated to computers or executed with the help of Artificial Intelligence. This type of service requires human intervention and rationale, including visualizing content audio or visual to find cues, transcribing interviews, observing underlying emotions, identifying bias, etc. (Wood et al. 2018). The last type of gig work identified by Duffy (2017) talks about aspirational labor, which is gaining attention lately in literature. They generally pursue this out of a passion for doing what they love to gain attention and be recognized.

The gig economies run the risk of being exploited as they are almost nameless faces for the company and create a very chaotic space for litigation, individuals, and society's well-being (Friedman, 2014; Warner, 2015; Smith, 2016). Though gig workers can choose their work schedules, employers, and jobs (Kuek et al., 2015),

they are exploited when the pool of choices for the employer is big enough (Kalleberg, 2009; Brawley & Pury, 2016; Calo & Rosenblat, 2017). The relationship is significantly affected by the power relations between the two (Wood et al., 2016). Gig workers get their project-based earnings, which are temporary and have flexible working hours, unstable nature of the job, expectations of employment, and even place of delivery (Kossek & Michael, 2011). Crowdsourcing is work outsourced to anonymous people on the web for anybody to apply. Outsourcing on a digital platform contributes to being a part of the gig work that operates on the internet. Both employer and employee may not interact much (Schulte, Schlicher, & Maier (2020). A massive section of the gig economy runs with the flexibility of operating from their own homes, coffee houses, satellite offices, or wherever the person feels like working from (Barsness, Diekmann, & Seidel, 2005). New-age workers are also moving towards this space or career paths that are boundary-less and do not confine them to a line of profession or specialization, allowing them to move intra-industry and across domains (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994). However, studies in sociology that try to deconstruct 'labor commodification' (Greer, 2016) have suggested that all forms of labor markets go through institutionalism, professional or non-professional, that have some economic or non-economic impact.

YouTube as a Platform

YouTube was launched in 2005 and acquired by Google Inc. in 2006. By

2009, YouTube had reached the milestone of one billion views per day. YouTube is the second most visited site globally and has billions of users who post and consume content every day. In 2020, YouTube generated around 19.7 billion US dollars, with an updated user count of nearly 2.3 billion per month.

Amateur video bloggers post their creative content on YouTube through small channels. YouTube is a free platform where amateur vloggers post their content, and product companies use this data to sell their products. In April 2011, YouTube entered the live broadcasting business and allowed sites to stream games, concerts, events, and the Olympics. In 2011, YouTube started partnering with established channels to create original content for viewers. In March 2013, YouTube reached one billion monthly users. In May 2019, T-Series, a Bollywood music label from India, famous for all kinds of music production and distribution in India, crossed a hundred million subscribers. In December 2019, YouTube reviewed its harassment policy against racism, gender discrimination, and sexual orientation.

Psychological Contracts

The law does not bind psychological contracts (PCs), and neither are they based on a concept of mutuality. That being said, a PC is very binding as it is a promise. The psychological contract is rooted in the Social Exchange Theory by Blau (1964).

Psychological contracts are individual beliefs regarding a dyadic relationship, generally paternalistic, expected by the employee from their employer (Rousseau (1989;1995;1996). A PC can be relational, transactional, or ideological (Rousseau, 1995). PC is a construct very similar to concepts of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and leadership. Rousseau (1997) suggests that psychological contracts also define individual behavior that he displays at the workplace depending on whether or not his expectations are met. Though a psychological contract may not be mutual and synonymous to both parties, having them does facilitate the transaction. Psychological contracts are neither universal nor general. Therefore, by deriving the boundaries of what is and what is not a psychological contract, we can define what forms the psychological contract between an employer and a gig worker (Taylor & Tetrick, 2004). The conditions of a PC evolve as both parties accumulate their experiences with each other during the exchange (Rosenblat et al., 2018). PCs also determine the expectations beyond terms of employment (Rousseau, 1989) which demands that these expectations only be 'fair' (Rousseau, 2018).

Every gig worker will have a different set of expectations from the company. It will depend on the individual, personality, personal experiences, group, and the information he can get, or industry norms, among many others (Rousseau, 1995). Since gig workers have minimum to no standardization of performance metrics, it is challenging to establish a general arrangement of performance delivery

between the two. We may observe many discrepancies or subjectivity in their selection and compensation, apart from performance metrics. This paper shall discuss the conditions of the psychological contract established with gig workers and its sustainability.

DISCUSSION

The gig economy is here to stay and is rooted in the general desire of individuals to break free from the bondage of traditional employment. Commands are not synonymous with duty, and terms of work cannot be unidimensional. People want more than rewards and recognition from employers, and they want to get involved with the institution that pays them and demands transparency. However, the gig economy is a byproduct of recession and a slow-moving economy. With the business cycles going up and down with recession and boom, the gig economy may not survive the changing times when the economy will be doing well.

Does a dyadic relationship between an employer and a gig worker exist? This is the most crucial question before defining what kind of PC exists between them. Since PC is a construct, we can operationalize it differently to describe the PC between a gig worker and the audience they serve. Defining gig workers will also separate them from contract labor, contingent labor, freelance workers, and other forms of undefined short-term labor. This paper attempts to form some conceptual clarity on how gig work is defined—establishing the kind of employment contract that the two share will

also lay a foundation for the type of psychological contract the two may have. A PC can exist even if the formal terms of the same are unclear. Psychological contracts indicate the kind of workplace behavior employees display and form antecedents of possible psychological contract breaches (T. Guest, 2018). However, when a considerable chunk of gig services are delivered digitally, we need to dissect the kind of expectations parties can have even without frequent interaction and minimal to zero physical interaction.

The Self-determination theory identifies three individual psychological needs, competence, autonomy and, relatedness (Deci et al., 2017). According to the theory, intrinsic motivation and internalization are both factors for efficiency and are fuelled by satisfying the three psychological needs (Gagne and Deci, 2005). Gagne et al., 2010 suggest that autonomously motivated individuals have a brighter outlook towards life and that attitude leads to better work performance, job satisfaction, good health, and well-being.

The gig economy also gives the labor force the freedom to break away from the taboo of working in a working class. We also have an opportunity to define new-age workers. The gig labor market runs the risk of being nobody's child and no-strings-attached labor. The millions and billions of users of the content on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest, who post their content on these platforms do not have a clear employer.

Proposition 1: Autonomy and Volition go hand in hand when defining a psychological contract with a gig worker.

Bosses, shifts, income groups, and politics, among many others, have made many shifts to the gig economy. The Self-determination Theory suggests that autonomy is a crucial part of an employee's well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2008). A failure to keep autonomy in a job may result in a violation of the psychological contract. As more and more concepts revolving around the gig economy are surfacing, practices aimed at controlling gig behavior are exposed to public scrutiny. Organizations may induce several harmful mechanisms to worker efficiency and motivation (Deci et al., 2017).

The gig economy gives service providers in developing countries a chance to serve in developed markets and be a part of the global supply chain of the workforce (Graham et al., 2017). Graham (2017) also states that this motivates individuals to keep upskilling voluntarily. Autonomous forms of motivation lead to positive outputs, like job performance and psychological well-being (Baard et al., 2004) and work engagement (Deci et al., 2001). Intrinsic forms of motivation are considered autonomous motivation as an individual has the free will to decide whether or not he is willing to invest in that activity. However, extrinsic motivation is more or less associated with a particular outcome (Deci et al., 2002). The onus of upskilling and the personal development of the YouTuber is a personal choice. But when we try to mandate any activity above and beyond the

job description, feelings of obligation may arise (Bidee et al, 2012). Taking away such crucial work conditions that define gig work may lead to a violation of the psychological contract.

Individual workers who have high autonomy over their work schedules control how and when they complete the task to increase their work's meaningfulness (Hachman & Oldham, 1976, McKinsey & Co., 2016). In a study conducted on volunteerism, attitudes and behavior can be positively influenced by need satisfaction (Gagne & Deci, 2005). The study revealed that volunteers' performance could be improved by valuing and considering individuals, offering space and choices to make decisions, taking initiatives, and providing constructive feedback (Vantilborgh, et al, & Hofmans, 2012).

Proposition 2: Psychological Contract depends on the gig workers' age and tenure of service.

An employee's tenure is directly proportional to the rate at which his psychological contract can be breached (Woodrow & Guest, 2020). It is relatively tougher to go through a PC breach early on as this is a formation stage of the PC. Without a precursor to a similar violation, an employee may or may not perceive an early act of breach as a PC breach. It is also noteworthy that the youngest and oldest members of the workforce experience the highest job insecurity (Burchell et al., 1999). Individuals at a younger age are affected more by extrinsic motivation and respond to autonomy differently than older

members of the gig workforce (Bidee et al, 2012).

Proposition 3: Money is not the only currency that gig workers are expecting.

A lot of gig work is free labor in hopes of getting future employment that is more stable. Though looking for future jobs, individuals involved in curating services for online digital production do gain 'recognition' and 'intrinsic pleasures' (Arvidsson, 2008). Social production gives the individuals scope to identify themselves by allowing them to develop a particular skill that reinforces personal motivation (Arvidsson, 2008). The SDT suggests that people work either through extrinsic or intrinsic motivation. The number of videos and the quality of videos one puts up is solely an inherent quality, directed towards intrinsic motivation. If integrated into the individual, the activity will give him the freedom of choice and psychological freedom (Deci & Ryan, 1985). But if a vlogger continues to work on the quality and content of their videos based exclusively on their followers' count, it could be because of extrinsic motivation. While understanding how a gig worker wants to be managed, we must keep in mind that the currency of exchange is mutually discussed and clear, failing which could violate the psychological contract.

Aspirational laborers understand that they must invest in their branding to remain in the limelight and/or be employable. Individuals in this kind of gigs such as photographers, stand-up comedians, poets, and actors, are not looking for

money and may not be looking for only currency as exchange. Other concepts such as venture labor (Neff, 2012), which captures individuals' time and resources, and hope labor (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) which captures the hopes associated with work, indicate new forms of labor currency. A breach in any of these could also lead to a violation of psychological contracts.

Proposition 4: Individuals who want to thrive in the gig economy are aware and agile. Gig workers' motivation makes them competent.

Individuals who continuously feel satisfaction in the three tenets of the SDT, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, have greater well-being in their daily lives (Gagne, Ryan & Bargmann, 2003). We forget while trying to standardize and make routines that to keep an individual up and running, one needs to fuel him with motivation. Due to their time and routines' high degree of autonomy, gig workers need to establish their discipline without supervisors (Ashford, 2018). Gigging requires a lot of agility for an individual to thrive as continuous efforts to maintain a personal standard of service require self-discipline.

When there is minimum scope for interpersonal relationships in a digital economy, individuals find it challenging to extract information. Coworkers are critical sources of information (Fisher, 1990). Through these sources, employees form their initial psychological contract and base their perceptions of 'trust' and 'fairness' (Shore & Tetrick, 1994).

Gig workers feel a lack of 'relatedness' at their jobs the most (Schmidt, 2015) among the Self-determination Theory's three tenets due to isolation (Graham et al., 2018). Youtube gives individuals a community to share their common interests and a sense of belongingness. People may be loners but come together for brands, trends, and fan culture (Putnam, 2000).

Conclusion

The gig economy is enormous, and we attempt to bring semi-knowledge workers into the picture. With minimum regulation and millions of employees of this new workforce built around technology and continuously adapting, researchers must understand the future of the knowledge economy. Even though with very minimum professionalization, skills like driving a car, hosting events, maintaining a lodge, and trivial tasks, it is assisting some customers out there.

The gig workforce and their services have boosted the digital economy. The silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic is how it highlighted the dependence of an emerging economy like India on the gig economy. This paper helps build a foundation for the future of the conditions governing psychological contracts with the new-age workforce. Using the Self-determination Theory, we have added a few concepts like aspirational labor and the social production of labor, a section of the economy that has been neglected, even in the gig economy literature. Though the research papers on Mturk, Uber, Airbnb, among others, have

given us insights into gigging, we tend to leave the semi-knowledge workers on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and several others. They add their value to the economy by assisting millions of customers. We propose that the three tenets of Self-determination Theory, competence, autonomy, and relatedness if satisfied, make a gig worker join the gigging business. By keeping those needs satisfied, one will continue to remain in the gig economy, and by continuously working towards each of them, one can thrive in this economy. Intrinsic motivation is essential for any individual to join and sustain in the gig economy. To further the concepts in this paper, there can be studies defining the individual personality of gig workers, their attitudes and beliefs, different types of gigs, etc.

Future Research

The gig economy gives scope for lots of future research in conceptualizing the gig economy, legislation in the gig economy, unionizing in the gig economy, how gender roles may be more prevalent in the gig economy, and identity in the gig economy, among several others. Qualitative studies through the lens of a gig worker in food and beverages in contrast to someone in the beauty industry could be a starting point for developing fundamental cliches and contradictions of gig workers' experiences. Gig work in the cultural industries, strategic involvement of gig workers in the workforce, engagement of gig workers, and the span of control over gig workers, among others, are several areas of further discovery. The outbreak of platforms like

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Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, Snapchat, Tumblr is a sign of a revolution of opportunities. The workforce is trying to break free from the iron cage of institutionalization. Still, unless we are cognizant of the metamorphosis of the gig economy, we may be gearing towards a digital cage.

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