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Just a Gig?

Sharing Economy Work and the Implications for Career Trajectory

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The gig economy promises short-term, flexible work. Indeed, the temporality of the work is integral to the concept; before the rise of app-based work, “gig” was most commonly used to describe the short-term work of a musician providing a live performance. Yet, as gig work platforms such as Uber, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit enter their second decade, and as “side hustles” are popularized in the media as a solution to stagnant salaries and student loan debt,¹ the question arises: Is gig work intended to be a short-term solution for workers, or an integral component of modern employment? Does gig employment affect a worker’s ability to transition into full-time work as an employee outside the gig economy?

Although informal work is hardly a new concept,² gig work is unique for its technological component and marketing emphasis on platform-based work as positive alternative to the daily nine-to-five grind. Whereas few would suggest that being a day laborer or house cleaner is an ideal occupation, gig platforms market similar work, done via their apps, as being a desirable and flexible option. Uber, for instance, advertises driving on its platform as offering “No shifts, no boss, no limits,” while TaskRabbit, the personal assistant service, has promised workers the opportunity to “Earn money your way,” and to “Find jobs you love, at rates you choose, [and to] make a schedule that fits your life.”

While individual gigs are rarely sufficient as a single source of income, workers may turn to a platform, or several, as a source of income. For instance, workers often speak holistically about working for TaskRabbit or Uber or another platform and

¹ T. J. McCue, “Looking For A Side Hustle Or Freelance Gig? Check Out These Sites.” *Forbes*, July 28, 2019, www.forbes.com/sites/tjmccue/2019/07/28/looking-for-a-side-hustle-or-freelance-gig-check-out-these-sites/#3676e76b56ad; Amanda Dixon, “Survey: Nearly 1 in 3 Side Hustlers Needs the Income to Stay Afloat.” *Bankrate.com*, June 5, 2019, www.bankrate.com/personal-finance/side-hustles-survey-june-2019/.

² Alejandro Portes, “The Informal Economy and Its Paradoxes.” In *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994; Kevin Hart, “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 11(1) 61–89, 1973, retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/159873; Kevin Hart, “The Informal Economy.” *Cambridge Anthropology*, 10(2), 54–58, 1985, retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/23816368.

then discuss particular gigs or tasks as aspects of working for said platform, much like an office worker identifies as working for a particular company.³ At the same time, services generally classify workers as independent contractors, which offers the platforms considerable cost savings over hiring workers as employees, even as it prevents workers from accessing generations of hard-won workplace rights and protections.⁴ This lack of protections, partnered with few opportunities for advancement and a lack of fringe benefits, leads gig work to closely resemble the “bad jobs” identified by Kalleberg.⁵

However, platform marketing makes gig work sound similar to a freelance job or consulting arrangement, whereby a worker can exert at least some control over activities and termination, and workplace flexibility is expected – components more commonly found in “good jobs.”⁶ While gig-based work is marketed by platforms as an attractive opportunity, little attention has been paid to the long-term experience of gig workers. As a result, through longitudinal interviews with eleven gig workers, this chapter seeks to answer the question, what is the impact of gig economy work on a worker’s future career trajectory and personal life? To paraphrase Kalleberg, is gig-based work a good or bad job?⁷ What distinguishes those workers who move out of gig work from those workers who remain engaged in gig work, whether by choice or circumstance? Do workers think that extensive time spent in gig work as a primary source of income negatively affects their ability to move to stable traditional employment?

In the following section, I connect gig work to the larger discussion of a growing worker reliance on additional sources of income and the impact of underemployment on wages and employment callbacks. I then discuss my research methodology and findings before discussing the implications of gig work in regards to inequality and inefficiency. I argue that the negative career implications of gig work, especially long-term gig work, suggest serious inequities in regards to worker opportunity or experience. These inequities should be cause for concern among labor and employment law scholars, and further support the importance of establishing a social safety net and workplace protections for gig workers.

5.1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The effects of the Great Recession were considerable: a large number of families saw the values of their homes decline; Americans were more pessimistic about their finances and more likely to identify with being in a lower class; and there were

³ Alexandrea J. Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*. Berkeley: California University Press, 2019.

⁴ Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig*.

⁵ Arne Kalleberg, *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011.

⁶ Kalleberg, *Good Jobs*.

⁷ Kalleberg, *Good Jobs*.

numerous negative consequences in terms of physical and mental health outcomes.⁸

Yet, as noted by Kalleberg and von Wachter, “the most unusual and unexpected feature of the Great Recession was the persistence of weak economic conditions in its aftermath.”⁹ While the number of involuntary part-time workers has dropped, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were still 1.4 million more involuntary part-time workers in June 2016 than in the months immediately before the beginning of the 2007–2009 recession. In many ways the Great Recession was a perfect storm as generations of technological advances such as the computer, smartphone, and contactless payment systems; the spread of neoliberal policies; the continued expansion of the service sector; the weakening of unions; and the rise of temporary employment were all brought to the forefront.¹⁰ While Kalleberg and von Wachter note that some of the changes began in the 1970s and were masked by the dot-com boom of the early 2000s and the prerecession housing bubble, a decline in market dynamism is thought to contribute to worker difficulties in finding stable employment.¹¹

There are two main solutions when one’s income doesn’t match spending: cut spending or increase income. The sharing economy, which can be described as both a precursor to the gig economy, and an umbrella term that includes on-demand work and the secondhand economy, has offered both solutions.¹² The sharing economy can be defined as a catch-all term for “‘peer-to-peer’ firms that connect people for the purposes of distributing, sharing, and reusing goods and

⁸ David B. Grusky, Bruce Western, Christopher Wimer, eds. *The Great Recession*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011; Michael Hout and Orestes P. Hastings. “The Social Recession: Americans’ Subjective Reactions to the Great Recession and Lagging Economy Since 2006.” Paper presented at annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco (August 16–19, 2014); Diana Frasilho, Margarida Gaspar Matos, Ferdinand Salonna, Diogo Guerreiro, Cláudia C. Storti, Tânia Gaspar, and José M. Caldas-de-Almeida, “Mental Health Outcomes in Times of Economic Recession: a Systematic Literature Review.” *BMC Public Health*, 16, 115, 2016; J. E. Brand, “The Far-Reaching Impact of Job Loss and Unemployment.” *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 359–375, 2015.

⁹ Arne Kalleberg and Till von Wachter, “The U.S. Labor Market During and After the Great Recession: Continuities and Transformations.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 3(3), 1–19, 2017.

¹⁰ Kalleberg and von Wachter, “The U.S. Labor Market”; Steven Greenhouse, *The Big Squeeze: Tough Times for the American Worker*. New York: Knopf, 2008; Steven Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE OF AMERICAN LABOR*. New York: Knopf, 2019; Katharine Mieszkowski, “Don’t Wanna Be Your (Temp) Slave.” *Fast Company*, August 31, 1998. Retrieved Aug 26, 2017 from www.fastcompany.com/35119/dont-wanna-be-your-temp-slave.

¹¹ Steven J. Davis and John Haltiwanger, “Labor Market Fluidity and Economic Performance.” NBER Working Paper No. 20479. Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research 2014; Jae Song and Till von Wachter. “Long-Term Nonemployment and Job Displacement.” *Evaluating Labor Market Dynamics*, Proceedings from the Jackson Hole Economic Policy Symposium Sponsored by the Federal Reserve Board of Kansas City, Jackson Hole, Wyo. (August 2014). www.kansascityfed.org/publicat/sympos/2014/2014vonWachter.pdf.

¹² Koen Frenken, Toon Meelen, Martijn Arets and Pieter van de Glind, “Smarter Regulation for the Sharing Economy”, *The Guardian*, May 20, 2015; Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig*.

services.”¹³ Supporters of the sharing economy have argued for its ability to reverse economic inequality, stop ecological destruction, counter materialistic tendencies, enhance worker rights, and empower the poor.¹⁴ While Schor and Fitzmaurice have suggested that the sharing economy is simply “an innovation that is capable of re-allocating wealth across the ‘value chain,’ specifically away from ‘middlemen’ and towards small producers and consumers,” critics have argued that the innovation is less about wealth reallocation and more about wealth concentration, evading regulations, and “sharewashing.”¹⁵ As services like Uber and Airbnb continue to grow into multibillion dollar valuations, effectively usurping free services such as Couchsurfing, the so-called sharing economy has become the on-demand or gig economy, garnering complaints of worker exploitation and worse.¹⁶

Even as incomes have begun to inch upwards after the Great Recession, income volatility, or a swing of more than 25 percent from year to year, remains high. Described as America’s “hidden inequality,” research by Pew Charitable Trusts found that more than a third of American households experienced large income changes from 2014 to 2015 – roughly five years after the Great Recession ended.¹⁷ While a changing income can be due to increases, such as from a bonus or inheritance, Pew found that the volatility tended to be dramatic, and that while the median household income gain was \$20,500, the median income loss was even larger at \$25,000.¹⁸ Additionally, families that experience income volatility report reduced financial well-being and lower levels of savings than those with stable income.¹⁹

¹³ Joe Mathews, “The Sharing Economy Boom is About to Bust.” *Time*, June 27, 214. <http://time.com/2924778/airbnb-uber-sharing-economy/>.

¹⁴ Mathews, “The Sharing Economy Boom”; Rachel Botsman and Roo Rodgers. *What’s Mine Is Yours: The Rise of Collaborative Consumption*. New York: Harper Collins, 2010.

¹⁵ Juliet Schor and Connor Fitzmaurice. “Collaborating and Connecting: The Emergence of a Sharing Economy.” In *Handbook on Research on Sustainable Consumption*, eds. Lucia Reisch and John Thøgersen. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2015, 4; Jon Evans, “Meet The New Serfs, Same As The Old Serfs.” *TechCrunch*, Oct. 5, 2013. <http://techcrunch.com/2013/10/05/meet-the-new-serfs-same-as-the-old-serfs/>; Dean Baker, “Don’t Buy the ‘Sharing Economy Hype: Airbnb and Uber are Facilitating Rip-Offs.” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2014. www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/may/27/airbnb-uber-taxes-regulation; Anthony Kalamar, “Sharewashing is the New Greenwashing.” *OpEdNews.com*, May 13, 2013. www.opednews.com/articles/Sharewashing-is-the-New-Gr-by-Antony-Kalamar-130513-834.html.

¹⁶ Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig*.

¹⁷ Jonathan Morduch and Rachel Schneider, *The Financial Diaries: How American Families Cope in a World of Uncertainty*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017; Pew Charitable Trusts. “How Income Volatility Interacts With American Families’ Financial Security: An Examination of Gains, Losses, and Household Economic Experiences.” March 9, 2017. www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/issue-briefs/2017/03/how-income-volatility-interacts-with-american-families-financial-security

¹⁸ Pew, “Income Volatility,” 6.

¹⁹ Pew, “Income Volatility.”

A 2019 report by the Federal Reserve found that one in ten adults struggled to pay bills in some months due to income volatility.²⁰ With incomes increasingly volatile, more and more workers are turning to the gig economy. In November 2016, Pew released a study reporting that 8 percent of Americans earned money in the last year by using digital platforms to take on a job or task and nearly a fifth (18 percent) earned money in the last year by selling something online. An additional one percent had rented out property on a home-sharing site. The report notes, “adding up everyone who has performed at least one of these three activities, some 24% of American adults have earned money in the ‘platform economy’ over the last year.”

While some workers are turning to the sharing or gig economy as a supplemental strategy, individuals with lower incomes may find that alternative work is their primary source of income. Work from the Chase Institute found that while workers with incomes in the highest quintile of \$84,900 and above had a low level of participation in labor platforms (0.3 percent), individuals with lower incomes (\$44,800 and below) had twice as high in such platforms (0.6 percent).²¹ A McKinsey Global Work Institute report also noted that lower-income households are more likely to participate in independent work out of a lack of better alternatives.²² The Federal Reserve further found that financial fragility, such as difficulty handling an emergency expense of \$400, was “slightly more common for those engaged in gig work, but markedly higher for those who do so as a main source of income.”²³

Examining deposits into 240,000 anonymized Chase bank accounts, Farrell and Greig found that in one in six sharing economy participants in any given month is new, and more than half of participants exit within twelve months.²⁴ The researchers found that labor-platform participants (e.g., Uber and TaskRabbit) with more stable mainstream employment and higher incomes, as well as younger participants (thirty-four and under), were more likely to exit within a year. But for those with lower incomes and “who experienced at least one month of non-employment over

²⁰ Federal Reserve Board. “Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2016.” May 2017. Retrieved on August 28, 2017, www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2016-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201705.pdf; Pew Research Center. “Shared, Collaborative and On Demand: The New Digital Economy.” May 2016.

²¹ Diana Farrell and Fiona E. Greig. “The Online Platform Economy: Has Growth Peaked?” (November 15, 2017). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2911194>.

²² McKinsey Global Work Institute. “Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy.” 2016. www.mckinsey.com/~/_/media/McKinsey/Global%20Themes/Employment%20and%20Growth/Independent%20work%20Choice%20necessity%20and%20the%20gig%20economy/Independent-Work-Choice-necessity-and-the-gig-economy-Full-report.ashx.

²³ Federal Reserve Board. “Report on the Economic Well-Being of U.S. Households in 2018.” May 2019. Retrieved on August 28, 2019 www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/2018-report-economic-well-being-us-households-201905.pdf.

²⁴ Diana Farrell and Fiona E. Greig, “Paychecks, Paydays, and the Online Platform Economy: Big Data on Income Volatility.” JPMorgan Chase & Co. Institute, February 2016. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2911293>.

this time frame, platforms provide a vital source of additional income.”²⁵ While the additional income provided through gig work may be important for paying the bills, little is known about the long-term implications of gig work for one’s career or future life chances.²⁶

Research on potentially comparable “bad” jobs, such as in temporary help services or other sectors, suggests that even less-than-ideal work can yield substantial benefits compared to no employment by providing a path to other industries that may offer higher pay or increased stability.²⁷ However, work by Autor and Houseman found that former welfare recipients who were placed in temporary agency jobs were more likely to remain working within the temporary help sector.²⁸ Additionally, the short-term nature of the work, combined with more frequent periods of unemployment, “may generate lower earnings and less employment stability over the long-term” compared to direct hire jobs.²⁹ Work by Ferber and Waldfogel found that having a nontraditional employment history, defined as time spent as a part-time, self-employed, or temporary worker, was associated with lower current wages and benefits for men and women, holding constant for current employment type.³⁰ For those workers who identified as previously self-employed and incorporated, and women who voluntarily worked part-time in the past, there were no significant effects; suggesting that the effects of long-term self-employment were more positive than a short period of unemployment.³¹ However, more recent work by Farber, Silverman, and von Wachter found that “taking an interim job significantly reduces the likelihood of receiving a call-back”³² while a similar study found that college graduates who were underemployed (i.e., working in retail jobs after completing college) have callback rates that are 30 percent lower than those of applicants who are adequately employed.³³

²⁵ Farrell and Greig, “Paychecks,” 10.

²⁶ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An outline of Interpretive Sociology*. trans Ephraim Fischoff et al. eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press, [1922] 1978.

²⁷ Carolyn Heinrich, Peter Mueser and Kenneth Troske, “Welfare to Temporary Work: Implications for Labor Market Outcomes.” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 87(1), 154–173, 2005.

²⁸ David H. Autor and Susan N. Houseman, “Temporary Agency Employment: A Way Out of Poverty?” in *Working and Poor: How Economic and Policy Changes Are Affecting Low-Wage Workers*, eds. Rebecca M. Blank, Sheldon H. Danziger, and Robert F. Schoeni. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2016, 312–337.

²⁹ Autor and Houseman, “Economic,” 327.

³⁰ Marianne A. Ferber and Jane Waldfogel, “The Long-Term Consequences of Nontraditional Employment.” Columbia University Academic Commons, <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8794FDK..> *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 650(1), 78–97, 1998.

³¹ Ferber and Waldfogel, “Consequences,” 6.

³² Henry S. Farber, Dan Silverman, Till von Wachter, “Factors Determining Callbacks to Job Applications by the Unemployed: An Audit Study.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 3(3), 2017.

³³ John M. Nunley, Adam Pugh, Nicholas Romero, and Richard Alan Seals, Jr., “Unemployment, Underemployment, and Employment Opportunities: Results from a Correspondence Audit Study of the Labor Market for College Graduates.” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 70(3), 642–669, 2016.

The gig economy, which has been widely hailed as disrupting established occupations and ways of working, has also been described as allowing for highly educated workers to engage in manual labor for pay. To paraphrase Juliet Schor, the gig economy allows workers with graduate degrees to be hired for housecleaning tasks and manual labor work.³⁴ Schor has argued that technological novelty, platform branding and the overwhelmingly young, white, and well-educated demographic composition of early adopters, meant that platforms were able to destigmatize certain tasks and present gig work as “technologically advanced, [and] a new, cool thing.”³⁵ As a result, the question arises, is gig economy work simply app-enabled interim work that will reduce the likelihood of gainful stable employment in the future? Or does the technological component of working via an online platform override any sense of it as low-skilled or interim?

5.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on longitudinal interviews with eleven gig workers for TaskRabbit, a personal assistant gig platform. The eleven workers were among a group of twenty-three TaskRabbit workers who were first interviewed in 2015 while they were actively working via TaskRabbit. In the 2015 interviews, participants were hired for gig work through the services between March and November, and then told about the research project in a face-to-face conversation after rapport had been developed. E-mail and phone numbers were solicited and interviews were scheduled at a later time. Recruiting participants through the platform, over a period of several months, meant relying on the platforms’ algorithms to show prospective workers, which ensured that workers were active on the platform and also increased the potential for sample randomness. Three Taskrabbit participants were recruited through snowball sampling, which served to further expand the sample size by providing access to several workers with high hourly rates, and one was recruited through contacts at local colleges.

Participation in the follow-up interviews in 2019 was conducted between February and October 2019, and was limited to workers who were interviewed previously, but no additional selection criteria were employed. As a result, the 2019 interviews include workers who remained active on TaskRabbit; those who had transitioned to a different service (e.g., moving from TaskRabbit to DoorDash delivery service); and those who had left app-based employment entirely, at least temporarily. Efforts were made to follow-up with all twenty-three TaskRabbit workers through a series of e-mail messages and connections via social media networks. Of the twenty-three workers interviewed in 2015, twelve agreed to be interviewed, but only eleven

³⁴ Juliet B. Schor, “Does the Sharing Economy Increase Inequality within the Eighty Percent?: Findings from a Qualitative Study of Platform Providers.” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 10(2), 263–279, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjres/tsw047>.

³⁵ Schor, “Does the Sharing Economy Increase Inequality,” 275.

completed interviews by the time this chapter went to print. It is unclear what, if anything, differentiates those workers who responded to follow-up interview requests and those who did not respond.

In both 2015 and 2019, the research procedures remained the same: participants completed a short demographic survey and participated in a qualitative interview. The survey included questions regarding the worker's age, income, education level, number of hours worked each week, an assessment of their financial situations, and three words describing what attracted them to the sharing economy. The one-on-one interviews focused on open-ended questions: how workers got involved with the gig economy; how involved they remain with the gig economy; reasons for leaving/remaining; experiences finding work in the mainstream economy after/while working in the gig economy; and perceived impact on their life chances and career decisions. While all of the preliminary interviews (except for one) in 2015 were conducted in person, in 2019, three workers had moved out of the area and were interviewed via phone. In the 2019 follow-up interviews, TaskRabbit workers were offered a \$25 cash incentive, and those who were interviewed in person were also offered a free meal or snack during the session.

All interviews were recorded before being transcribed, and coded into thematic fields. Survey information was entered into a spreadsheet and analyzed. Broader themes in the data, such as worker views on gig work and experiences after the gig economy, were sorted into topical categories, coded inductively, and analyzed by seeking commonalities. To allow for worker anonymity, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms and potentially identifying details in the narratives were omitted.

Information on the characteristics of the full sample interviewed in 2015 is available in Ravenelle (2019). For those workers who participated in the 2019 follow-up interviews, seven were white, two were Hispanic, one was black/African-American, and one described himself as racially mixed. Workers ranged from 29 to 64 years old, with a median age of 41 and a mean age of 43.5. In 2019, three workers described their incomes as less than \$24,999, three earned between \$25,000–34,999, two earned between \$35,000–49,999, and one worker each fell into the \$50,000–74,999 and \$75,000–100,000 ranges. The subset of workers who were interviewed in 2019 was roughly as educated as those originally involved in the study: one had an Associates degree, three had a BA and four had graduate degrees, including one with a doctorate. The remainder had some college.

The 2019 follow-up interviews unearthed two surprising findings. Contrary to the marketing messages of gig platforms, gig work remains highly stigmatized and garners a negative emotional response, even long after workers have left the platforms. And, perhaps even more concerning, many workers who turned to gig work as a stopgap measure remain “stuck” in gig work, which has implications for their personal relationships and career trajectories. In the following section I will provide

an overview of these two findings before discussing the larger implications for scholars of work and employment law.

5.3 GIG WORK REMAINS STIGMATIZED WORK

While the platforms market themselves as offering flexibility and the opportunity to be one's own boss, workers rarely identified themselves as small business owners.³⁶ In the 2015 interview, many workers, especially those on TaskRabbit, laughed outright at the idea that they were entrepreneurs, and instead described themselves as part-time workers or employees without benefits.³⁷ In addition, many reported that they felt stigmatized by the work, identifying it as a source of embarrassment for themselves or their loved ones. For instance, Richard, a middle-age white male TaskRabbit, began his 2015 interview by sharing that his girlfriend of two years had broken up with him owing to embarrassment over his TaskRabbit work.

Even workers who were ambivalent about gig work, or who couched it in terms of paying higher wages than basic office work in their hometowns still discussed the sense that the work was demeaning in some way. For instance, in 2015, Michael, former college professor, noted,

I do feel somewhat, not embarrassed . . . borderline embarrassed. I do feel peculiar. I mean there is a disconnect between having a PhD and having been a college professor and a famous author. And then suddenly I'm picking up somebody's laundry or whatever. I do wrestle with a feeling that this is somewhat demeaning and I should be embarrassed by this and maybe I am a little bit . . .

Likewise, in 2015, Rebecca, a thirty-four-year-old TaskRabbit with an advanced degree, confessed that she often lied to family and friends about her daily work, telling them she was “temping in an office, not tasking in people’s homes.”³⁸ Even years after leaving platform-based gig work, participants reported that their sense of gig work as stigmatized remained strong.

It's like I have a graduate degree. Okay? I'm not an idiot. I can do a lot of things. I choose to do this because it enables me – or should, as I'm told – enable me to pursue creative performance . . . And now, I just feel sucky about myself. That sucks, and I don't want to do that anymore . . . [The reaction from clients was] “Why are you doing this? Are you really failing your life now? Is this what you have to do?” You have to do, okay. Well, just, you know I get it and it so demeaning. – Will, 41, former TaskRabbit

I guess I was 31 to 35 when I was doing it and that to me just felt so – just desperate, unacceptable, this is not what you should be doing at this point in your life but yet

³⁶ Alexandra J. Ravenelle. “Sharing Economy Workers: Selling, Not Sharing.” *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 10(2), 281–295, 2017; Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig*.

³⁷ Ravenelle, “Selling, Not Sharing”; Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig*.

³⁸ Ravenelle, *Hustle and Gig*, 161.

here you are, so yeah, it's just not something that I – and people kind of laugh about it, I feel like there's been jokes about it on SNL, it's like – feels like this stupid hipster thing to do, like a rite of passage that everyone has to do like eating a Tide Pod or it's like shameful. – Rebecca, 38, former TaskRabbit

Even though Rebecca calls gig work “a rite of passage that everyone has to do,” she also identifies it as “desperate,” “unacceptable,” and even “stupid.” Rebecca's comparison between TaskRabbit work and eating a Tide Pod, a coated capsule of laundry detergent, is especially noteworthy. The accidental ingestion of the concentrated laundry pods, which resemble gummy candies, but are poisonous and occasionally even lethal, was previously linked to toddlers, but in 2017, the rise of the Tide Pod Challenge led to an increased number of teens and young adults posting viral videos of themselves eating the poisonous packets much to the bafflement of adults.³⁹

The idea that gig work has an acceptability timeframe – perhaps during one's early-twenties or before one has a fully developed frontal lobe, as opposed to after one completes a graduate degree – was also mentioned by other gig workers. Will, forty-one, began doing TaskRabbit work when he was in his mid-thirties and stopped when he was in his late-thirties in part due to what he described as a “weird situation in ageism.”

It was so bizarre to me and it got to the point where people were upset by the fact that I was older than them. They didn't want. I mean I'm 41 now. At the time I was you know 37. Yeah. Late 30s and these were like 20-year-old kids that were working for whatever . . . and they're like “Oh yeah. Yeah.” And they were kind of sending, it was like a tone in the way they handled me. And in some days, it was like “Oh. Yeah. Take it easy man.” I was like “I'm not going to have a heart attack.” It's just like, “Come on it's going to be all right.” But also, conversely, there were people that were like, “This is embarrassing . . .”

One potential explanation for the negativity associated with gig work by respondents is that many of the TaskRabbit workers who disparaged gig work in 2015 used it as a primary source of income. Research conducted by Juliet Schor found limited stigma associated with gig work, with one notable exception being a law school graduate who was cleaning houses.⁴⁰ In her research on TaskRabbit gig workers, Schor found about half of her respondents were in lucrative professions and roughly a quarter had part-time jobs where gig work was simply part of their repertoire. Even for those who had no other employment, TaskRabbit “seemed to be transitional,” due to a recent job loss.⁴¹ But for the workers in my sample, gig work was often viewed as an occupation of last resort.

³⁹ Niraj Chokshi, “Yes, People Really Are Eating Tide Pods. No, It's Not Safe.” *The New York Times*, Jan. 20, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/01/20/us/tide-pod-challenge.html.

⁴⁰ Schor, “Does the Sharing Economy Increase Inequality.”

⁴¹ Schor, “Does the Sharing Economy Increase Inequality,” 271.

5.4 A LONGER-TERM LIFESTYLE FOR OLDER WORKERS

Early articles about TaskRabbit and other gig economy services often discussed the opportunity to build a business or create a lucrative career, and profiled gig entrepreneurs who made thousands of dollars each month. Yet, increases in platform commission rates and in the number of workers competing for gigs, partnered with a low unemployment rate, has contributed to the promotion of gig work as a so-called side hustle or supplement to other income sources. The eleven workers who participated in follow-up interviews in 2019 fell into three main categories: four were still active on TaskRabbit or other platforms; four were still involved in gig-based work, although not working via platforms; and three had full-time jobs, but had returned to gig work at times, or were in the process of returning to gig work as an income supplement.

The question arises, what differentiates the workers who transitioned off gig platforms as a primary source of income, compared to those who remain on gig platforms? For one, the three workers who left gig work were young, ranging from twenty-nine to thirty-four years, and tended to have little work experience; for these workers, gig work was transitory, and often recommended by family or friends. For instance, for Emma, thirty, TaskRabbit was seen as a flexible source of income that she turned to between trips overseas to visit her fiancé; once he moved to the US she searched for and accepted a full-time job. In the case of Sarah, thirty-four, a successful dog-walking gig was parlayed into a full-time pet-sitter/personal assistant opportunity. While these workers continued to use gig platforms on occasion, it was seen as supplementary or as a stopgap measure during periods of unemployment. As Jamal, twenty-nine, a former TaskRabbit explained after his second stint on the platform after a period of unemployment, “I’d rather have a real job . . . with a salary and health benefits.”

By comparison, the four male workers who remained active on TaskRabbit and other platforms four years after the preliminary interviews were among the older respondents, ranging from thirty-eight to fifty-nine with a mean age of fifty-one in 2019. Unlike the younger workers, who did gig work early in their careers, the older workers turned to gig work after particularly negative experiences in more traditional employment, or when they were desperate after failing to find more stable employment.

Donald, fifty-five, turned to gig work after a traumatic layoff and unsuccessful job search. As Donald explained in 2015, “I got eliminated. I was ambushed after 10, almost 11 years with the company,” he said in 2015. “I went up to HR for a meeting and I was out the door. I never even got to go downstairs to say goodbye to my coworkers and that was in late 2007 and 2008.”

Unable to find another stable full-time job, Donald worked a series of short-term jobs including six to nine-month stints at a bank, educational nonprofit, insurance company, and even for an interior decorator, before turning to gig work selling items

for people on eBay. He spent a month on TaskRabbit before being unceremoniously “deactivated” after a negative interaction with the platform’s call center staff. In 2015, Donald was quick to explain that the work was an occupation of last resort. “I do think about that, that I have a college degree and I’m cleaning apartments but it’s like I can’t get a job in my field anymore. I don’t know if I’ve been out too long, I don’t know if it’s my . . . It’s partly my age,” he said in 2015. “You know, I’ve got to make money. I don’t really care anymore. I need to get some income coming in.”

After leaving TaskRabbit in 2015, Donald moved through a series of gig platforms, including Postmates and Caviar, food delivery services. For a period of time, he worked full-time for a nonprofit before getting laid off, but due to the low wages of the nonprofit position, he continued to do deliveries during lunch and after hours. In 2019, he was piecing together an income from doing deliveries on Shipt, a grocery delivery service, and Caviar, a food delivery service, after a stint doing deliveries via Postmates.

Likewise, Richard, fifty-three, also turned to TaskRabbit in a moment of desperation, in his case after a business venture fell apart and he was unable to find a new job. “I was so destitute . . . running out of money, not getting hired in the beginning of the year that I actually – I’d already had a conversation with my sister who’s single and lives [outside New York] to prepare to move in with her. And I didn’t care about pride, that’s how bad it was. I was out of money,” he said, with a laugh.

Likewise, Marcus, thirty-eight, was working via the TaskRabbit app, and doing deliveries for UberEats when we met in 2015. He also turned to gig work as an occupation of last resort after an unpaid internship and seasonal work, explaining,

I had a very long stretch of unemployment after the Great Recession hit, so at the time I was doing a seasonal temp job. I was working in a shipping office scanning FedEx packages. That began in November and I believe ran through January of 2013. And before that I’d done some kind of an unpaid internship or slave labor over the summer for some kind of a start-up that builds local web pages.

In addition to providing a source of income, app work also served as a respite from active job seeking. As Richard explained, “[my] brother insisted like ‘you are not even looking for work’; I said, ‘that’s right, I’m not.’ And in my mind I’m thinking I will when I’m ready – I don’t want to tell you I will in two months or I will next week or I will in six months; I don’t know.”

In the 2015 interviews, gig work was often described as a temporary measure or as a way to make money while determining next steps. For Michael, fifty-three, a former college professor, gig work was also seen as a short-term solution during a period of transition after moving to New York in order to be closer to his significant other. Disenchanted with teaching, and the need to move from place to place as a visiting professor, Michael had hoped to use the platform to find tasks in writing and research, but was mostly hired for errand-running.

“I see this as a temporary thing as I’m moving and I’m still sort of looking around and trying to figure out what I want to do. I am a procrastinator and that’s certainly part of this. It’s not all high-minded . . . I’m thinking through all of my possibilities and I don’t want to rush into things,” he said.

Part of it is just plain procrastination, but I see this as probably a temporary thing while I figure out what I want to do next and as soon as I’m doing the next thing I’m going to stop tasking, but who knows? I mean it’s possible that I’ll do something else and supplement it with a few tasks here and there. I still envision at some point getting tasks that are more in line with my talents.

The lack of benefits, combined with the general instability of the work, reduced its desirability. For Marcus, considering a return to graduate school, the seasonality of the income was especially problematic. He said:

I think what motivates me to leave the sharing economy more is a lack of stability, because what I’m seeing is it’s pretty slow right now in the summer with deliveries and with events and then it picks up again in the fall and it’s steady through the winter. And I would much rather have a steady job that at least has work and is going to pay me the same whether it’s July or January, . . . I’d like to go to grad school, but I’m not 100 percent sure how to make that work with the work that I do and even [paying for] things like the GRE or study materials, I think that’s out of reach at the moment.

But while gig work was painted as a temporary measure in 2015, except for short stints that Donald and Richard had working off-platform, all four men continued to use gig platforms as their primary source of work and income in 2019. Additionally, all four expected to remain working via app for the foreseeable future. Given their original stance that gig work was temporary, why have these short-term gigs become their primary source of work? The responses from the men point to two primary explanations: the perceived flexibility and variety of gig work; and the difficulties of transitioning from gig-based work to more stable employment.

5.4.1 *Perceived Flexibility and Variety*

One benefit of gig work is the perceived flexibility of the work. For Richard, gig work allows him to spend time with a partner who works in retail management and has a varied schedule. A self-identified member of the “hustle and gig economy,” Richard obtains work through roughly half a dozen sources that he prioritizes by income potential.

“I’ve got TaskRabbit, I’ve got, you know, word of mouth turned TaskRabbit clients or other people through Yelp and through private clients. I’ve got Amazon Flex, I’ve got Door Dash, UberEATS and all the food delivery services,” Richard said. “So, my hierarchy is I love to just get private clients without TaskRabbit; secondly,

TaskRabbit; third, Amazon Flex to deliver packages; and fourth – now that I have a truck – I don't want to do food delivery, it's just so much gasoline.”

While the income sources are varied, the work itself is fairly static, and generally includes running errands and assembling furniture, or making deliveries. Although he has the flexibility to set his daily schedule, time away from work has a distinct opportunity cost. He explains,

[It's a] you eat what you kill mentality. And I make a contest, I make a goal, a daily goal, and monthly goal where I need to average X amount of dollars. I'll give you an example. \$200 a day, if I can take in \$200 a day, let's say a 30-day month is \$6,000 a month. So, I take days off, but I'm marking my calendar every day.

Assuming work is forthcoming, Richard has some flexibility to pick his daily source of income and daily schedule, but he doesn't have as much freedom in terms of taking time off. His basic back-of-the-envelope calculation for making \$6,000 is to work seven days a week. He can set his daily schedule, but time off comes with the high cost of not making any money.

For Michael, the former professor, the perceived flexibility of the work is addictive. “This is gambling, where I actually have no [risk of] losing, I only win. I mean it doesn't pay very much. But in some ways I prefer it, to something where I would be doing the same thing every day. So it's hard for me to leave with the flexibility and freedom . . .,” he said. “I'm sure there are jobs where I could get a real salary, but then I picture myself doing it and I'm like ‘huh.’ So I think addicted is sort of the right word; I sort of feel it would be hard for me to give this up unless I find a job that I really love.”

5.4.2 *Difficulties in Transitioning from Gig Work to Stable Employment*

In addition to the difficulty of finding a job that offered the same perceived level of flexibility, the men noted that it was difficult to transition out of gig work. While Richard says that flexibility is key, he also freely admits that he was looking for full-time employment when he returned to gig work. “I wanted to get back into the industry I used to be in, which was financial markets and selling [data management] software solutions. I didn't get that, but I took the next offer.” Unfortunately, Richard's “next offer” was essentially a cold-calling sales job with especially high turnover, a far step down from his days working for a prestigious financial services firm, and he soon left, returning to gig work.

Transitioning to stable employment is also difficult due to the need for a cohesive narrative to tell potential employers. Marcus has worked in gig platform food delivery for more than five years, but would like to get a job in copywriting where he could use his college degree in English, however, he feels he can't compete with newer graduates or those with more experience. Noting that he had started working with a career coach on how to structure his resume and look for work, he explained,

It's hard to explain to an employer no matter what but I would rather say, "hey I'm delivering on my bike and I acquired these skills yadda, yadda, yadda over the last however many years" than have to say, "well, I've been doing so and so but I didn't think I should put it on my resume blah, blah, blah."

In many ways, Marcus' situation isn't that different from the challenges experienced by other workers who try to transition from long-term unemployment or underemployment back into more stable work. Yet, whereas in the past workers may have taken a job in retail or in a temp firm, gig work has been marketed by platforms as an opportunity for economic freedom and entrepreneurship. The possibility that gig work may actually prevent workers from moving forward in their careers, or that it might mire them in short-term, benefit-less work is concerning and at odds with the promise of limitless freedom and income marketed by gig platforms.

Interestingly, rather than viewed as cutting edge, the app-driven component of gig work was also seen as a potential liability. Even when the work was very similar, workers still mentioned experiences where their platform-based work was seen in a negative light. Jose, sixty-four, a former building handyman, turned to TaskRabbit after being laid-off. Dismayed about TaskRabbit's commission rate and problems he had with being reimbursed for expenses, he eventually started doing handyman work on his own, collecting business through word-of-mouth. He later applied for a full-time job with a handyman service that contracted out to local buildings, but paid workers as employees, a service that Jose described as a "glorified TaskRabbit." It was also one of the few times that he mentioned TaskRabbit to a full-time employer, and it didn't go over well.

I did mention TaskRabbit to those guys with the handyman service and they were like "yeah, well, this isn't TaskRabbit." There's a weird conception about TaskRabbit . . . A lot of people think that it's a scam and a lot of people think that it's . . . that you're not getting what you should. In other words like these guys they were like "we're professionals and TaskRabbit is a bunch of amateurs trying to make money because they don't know what they're doing." There's a level of professionalism involved where people think well if I want someone who really knows what they're doing I'm not going to call TaskRabbit. But if I need someone to put together a cabinet – an IKEA thing – TaskRabbit is okay. But they're not going to look into TaskRabbit if they want to replace the kitchen sink . . .

Although Jose thought the interview went well, and he "really" wanted to work for the handyman service, as of a year later, he hadn't received a call back. Contrary to the premise that platform-based work might be considered technologically advanced and even appealing, Jose found that the online aspect of TaskRabbit was a negative.

"I don't know what the misconception is [about TaskRabbit]. I guess it seems sort of not unprofessional but I guess I would say . . . I don't know how to describe it. It's like it's not . . ." he said. "You don't have a lot of recourse. Like if you hire

a contractor and this person has a reputation to uphold and they have an office and a place. TaskRabbit is this nebulous thing that exists online and a lot of people don't trust that."

5.5 LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES OF GIG WORK SUPPORT NEED FOR ADDITIONAL PROTECTIONS

While lots of attention has been paid to the lack of workplace protections and potential for worker exploitation in gig work, little attention has been paid to the implications for worker careers. While platforms argue that the perk of gig work flexibility is so great that it should override the need for standard workplace protections, such as unemployment, workers compensation, and social security contributions, long-term gig work may create path dependencies whereby future options are limited by past decisions. While gig work was seen as a temporary option by all of the workers interviewed in 2015, all eleven of the workers interviewed in 2019 were still working via gig platforms; still using them as supplementary or as transitional options; or were still involved, albeit off-platform, with gig-based work. Even though the unemployment rate was under 4 percent in 2019, none of the workers interviewed in 2015 had permanently transitioned into stable, full-time employment that sufficiently met their financial needs.

While an individual gig may be short-term, the dynamics of engaging in such work, especially for long periods of time, may damage workers' ability to emerge from a transitory gig-based period in their professional lives and secure careers that are more lucrative and satisfying. Although the app-based platforms experience a high level of turnover in terms of workers, this preliminary research suggests that there may be less turnover within gig work as a whole, or from gig work to non-gig work. To date, large-scale quantitative studies have not addressed the movement of gig workers from gig to gig (platform-based or otherwise) versus their movement from gig work into more traditional employment. Although a direct causal relationship between long-term involvement in gig work and a lack of return to stable, full-time employment may be complicated by additional factors such as age, education, and the type of gig work, this study supports the importance of additional research to examine the career outcomes of long-term gig workers, especially older workers who believe – or hope – that their gig work will be short-term.

The lack of movement by long-term gig workers into more stable work also suggests serious inequities in regards to worker opportunity or experience and points to the possibility of a growing precarity among gig workers. Standing has written extensively on the rise of the precariat, workers who have insecure jobs or move uneasily between short-term jobs and spells of unemployment, and who lack any sense of occupational identity or narrative.⁴² Such a loss of occupational identity and

⁴² Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

cohesive narrative to one's career may further contribute to the challenges of returning traditional employment. As the experience of Marcus illustrates, several years spent working as a food courier is not a traditional trajectory to the use of one's English degree as a copywriter.

The high level of education among the workers who remain in gig work, whether platform-based or not, should also trouble scholars of labor and employment. The majority of gig workers interviewed for this study have a college education and 36 percent also have at least one graduate degree. While there's nothing inherently wrong with personal assistant work or errand running, these workers are very much underemployed in regards to their education levels, previous work experience and – in many cases – their career aspirations. Even those workers who speak about the positive aspects of gig work, such as the flexibility, relatively fast payment or ease-of-finding work, remained highly ambivalent about the work as a whole, and spoke about continuing to look for stable work or wanting to do something else more in line with their interests and talents.

Finally, this research further supports the importance of establishing a social safety net and workplace protections for gig workers. None of the workers who are engaged in long-term gig work, platform-based or otherwise, are actively saving for retirement. This situation is particularly concerning in the case of the older men (Michael, Donald, and Richard) who are entirely engaged in platform-based gig work. Indeed, both Donald and Richard noted in the 2015 interviews that they had burned through a large portion of their retirement savings by liquidating 401ks and IRAs, and owed extensive tax penalties as a result. While gig workers do contribute to social security – and indeed, are also responsible for the employer's portion of the contribution – they do not receive access to company retirement accounts or contributions. Furthermore, spending months or years at a time with platform-based gig work as one's sole source of income, especially given the lack of matching contributions from gig platforms, further decreases a worker's ability to accrue sufficient retirement savings.

Although workers would be best served by being classified as employees, complete with all of the related workplace benefits and protections, at the very least, workers should have access to a portable benefits program that requires contributions by all gig economy platforms and does not have any waiting periods or vesting limitations. Such a program, which would provide for retirement funds, unemployment, and health insurance, would help to address the movement by gig workers between various platforms. Additional attention should also be paid to removing the multi-year vesting requirement that many 401ks require before workers receive the full company match to their contribution. While vesting policies may be intended to encourage worker longevity and loyalty, they can also hurt workers who move in and out of jobs by reducing their retirement savings. Older workers, who are closer to retirement and have less time available for making contributions, are especially likely to be hurt by draconian vesting requirements.

Much has been made of the gig economy as a source of short-term and flexible work. But as these preliminary findings show, for some workers – especially those who are older – the allegedly short-term promise of gig work may have long-term implications for their career trajectories and ability to return to stable employment, even when the unemployment rate is at record lows. Given the lack of workplace protections or benefits in gig work, the extensive variety of risks experienced by workers, the best advice for gig workers who sell their labor on platforms may be *caveat venditor*: seller beware.

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