

COMMENTARY

What's the gig deal? Examining contemporary work issues in the gig economy

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Gig work (i.e., short-term, contractual jobs; Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017) is becoming increasingly prevalent in the contemporary workplace, as indexed by its place on Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's (SIOP's) 2019 list of top workplace trends (Rebar, 2019). In the focal article, Mumby (2019) describes how the experience of work has evolved over time, highlighting several contemporary work issues relevant to both traditional and gig work contexts. Because of the importance of this topic, we provide further analysis of Mumby's ideas related to (a) work meaning, (b) work climate, and (c) work–life balance among gig workers.

Entrepreneurialism may be a source of work meaning in the gig economy

An individual's work and the meaning ascribed to it can play an integral role in the formation of one's sense of identity (Wrzesniewski, LoBuglio, Dutton, & Berg, 2013). The neoliberal era has seen greater emphasis on the derivation of meaning from one's work than was previously the case, with the responsibility for meaning creation falling on the shoulders of individual employees (Mumby, 2019). Yet, as gig work has been characterized as being potentially exploitative for employees (Weil, 2014), and as some forms of gig work require unskilled laborers to complete tasks that may not be particularly meaningful (Webster, 2016¹), one may question whether work meaning can be gleaned from within the gig economy. However, as highlighted by Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010), there is a distinction between meaning (i.e., a sense-making process in which an individual determines the role that work plays in one's self-identity; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) and meaningfulness (i.e., the degree to which work is perceived as purposeful or important; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). As such, regardless of the perceived importance of work tasks, gig workers may derive meaning from their work. We argue that one such source of meaning may be the sense of entrepreneurialism that gig work provides.

In the venture labor context, entrepreneurial acts have been demonstrated to be a potential source of perceived life meaning (Cardon, Gregoire, Stevens, & Patel, 2013), and centrality of entrepreneurship to one's identity has been positively linked to entrepreneurial behaviors, such as pursuing new business opportunities (Bao, Zhou, & Chen, 2017). As gig work is entrepreneurial (see, e.g., Ravenelle, 2019) in the sense that gig workers identify their own work opportunities, invoke personal risk via work precarity, and often have limited administrative supervision, gig workers may find meaning in their work via the sense of freedom and entrepreneurship it provides. Particularly in the current economy, in which there is a general sense of distrust in big

¹In contrast, others have demonstrated that individuals can perceive even simple gig work tasks (e.g., taking surveys) to be purposeful (Deng & Joshi, 2016).

business (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2019), perhaps due in part to the large number of corporate ethics scandals in recent years (see, e.g., Mukherjee, 2016; Wolff-Mann, 2018), engaging in venture labor may be a source of pride and meaning among some gig work employees. Notably, like Mumby (2019), Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski (2019) highlighted how gig work shifts the responsibility for identity management from organizations to individuals, but also that some gig workers may flounder in navigating this process. As such, our point is not to make a definitive statement that all employees find meaning in gig work via entrepreneurial passion but, rather, to highlight that among gig workers in the neoliberal era, one source of work identity may be the act of engaging in venture labor activities. Thus, we encourage future research examining entrepreneurial work identity among gig employees.

Work climate is more likely than organizational culture to be outsourced in gig work

Another important point raised by Mumby (2019) was that the physical location in which work is completed likely has an impact on an individual's identification with their work and workplace culture. He extended this concept to gig work by identifying locations and platforms by which workers can develop microstructures of identification and encouragement among similar workers, such as WeWork, Airbnb, and Uber. Coworking spaces (e.g., WeWork), in which workers can rent a physical work environment, have rapidly risen in popularity in recent years (Johns & Gratton, 2013), with over 13,000 coworking facilities operating worldwide (DeskMag, 2017). Mumby argued that coworking spaces provide an opportunity for organizational culture to be outsourced; however, this argument is problematic in that Mumby's statement seemingly refers to an outsourcing of work climate (i.e., perceived work norms and expectations; Ostroff, Kinicki, & Muhammad, 2013) rather than culture (i.e., shared views of organizational values and beliefs; Schein, 2010). Namely, it seems unlikely that the experience of working in a coworking space with individuals employed by diverse organizations would produce a shift in perceptions of the fundamental values of each worker's employer. Rather, coworking spaces may allow for outsourced work climate, as they present an opportunity for gig workers (or workers in other nontraditional work arrangements) to develop shared norms and experiences that may be unique to the coworking location (e.g., the extent to which employees complain about their work). As such, we argue that coworking spaces are more likely to result in an outsourcing of environmentally derived, employer-nonspecific work norms (i.e., work climate) rather than employer-specific values (i.e., organizational culture).

Additionally, Mumby (2019) stated that gig work platforms such as Airbnb and Uber provide an opportunity for workers to connect and develop a network of social support. Notably, however, such platforms often provide limited opportunities for coworkers to connect (see, e.g., Lehdonvirta, 2018; Rosenblat & Hwang, 2016). A variety of gig work online forums, such as TurkOpticon for eLancers (i.e., workers who complete freelancing tasks online; Aguinis & Lawal, 2013) or RideSharing Forum for rideshare drivers, have emerged to facilitate peer-to-peer interactions; however, workers must intentionally seek out such resources, and individuals likely differ in the extent to which they do so. Willingness to seek out an online community could be dependent upon a number of factors, such as personality (e.g., need for affiliation and proactive personality have been linked to support-seeking desires and behaviors; Wong & Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Yang, Gong, & Huo, 2011) and technical skills (e.g., discrepancies in information and communication technology [ICT] skills across employees have been demonstrated; de Koning & Gelderblom, 2006). Taken together, individual differences may impact a gig worker's desire or ability to seek out coworking spaces or online communities, which is likely to impact the extent to which supportive social networks are developed among gig workers. As such, there may be individual-level variation in the extent to which work climate is effectively outsourced, thereby resulting in work environment-derived norms for some and self-normed perceptions of climate among those not affiliated with a coworker community.

Boundary management is a skill that may be particularly important for gig workers

Further, Mumby (2019) argues that some forms of gig work decompose the boundaries between an individual's work and personal sectors of life, therefore resulting in a consolidation of one's self and work identities. The wide availability of employment options for gig workers has created an environment in which work is no longer conducted during "working" hours (i.e., the traditional 9-to-5 schedule) but instead occurs during "waking" hours (Van der Spiegel, 1995). Research on gig worker work–life balance satisfaction has produced reports of both employee satisfaction (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2015) and dissatisfaction (Graham et al., 2017). Notably, a number of individuals strategically pursue gig work in order to achieve their desired work–life balance, including rideshare drivers (Hall & Krueger, 2018) and eLancers (Deng & Joshi, 2016), yet others have reported a complete erosion of boundaries, such as sleeping and eating near a computer to avoid missing work opportunities (Lehdonvirta, 2018). These mixed findings suggest that there may be moderating factors, such as resource management skills, which have been identified as an important determinant of one's ability to effectively cope with role demands (Hochwarter, Perrewé, Meurs, & Kacmar, 2007). Therefore, the scheduling flexibility and precarity of gig work does not necessarily indicate that work–life balance is not achievable or realistic in this context, but instead that workers must possess appropriate boundary management skills in order to effectively balance competing life demands.

Conclusion

In closing, the workplace is constantly evolving and so should our efforts to understand the phenomena that occur in contemporary jobs. As such, this commentary expands on Mumby's (2019) analysis of workforce trends by highlighting several key issues related to work meaning, work climate, and work–life balance among gig workers in today's rapidly evolving work context. We hope this commentary sparks interest in this important segment of the workforce, thereby prompting more research that advances our understanding of the gig work experience.

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