The Impact of Work Arrangements on Work-Life Balance
One of the research questions we asked financially vulnerable Non-Traditional workers was if they chose this work arrangement, what they found attractive about it, what they saw as its principal drawbacks, and how they assessed the tradeoffs between the two. We found that they have mostly chosen this work and believe the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Non-Traditional work provides them with the privilege of choice - enabling them to choose work suited to their household circumstances, professional desires, and personal needs.

**What is the role of choice in non-traditional work?**

We found that most Non-Traditional workers willingly chose this work. A few did not feel they had a choice, for example, because they had an immediate need for income most easily fulfilled through Non-Traditional work. We spoke with multiple Non-Traditional workers who, at first, left Traditional work after friends referred them to it. Once they did the work, they found themselves drawn to its characteristics. For example, many gig workers reported leaving Traditional work because it was too constricting, and they heard that gig work would allow them to have more control over their schedules. Lucy, a 31-year-old woman doing gig work in New York, said she enjoyed the money she was making at her accounting job but hated the hours and decided that “it just wasn’t (her) thing.” Her gig work allowed her to make money and structure her work schedule around her son.

We also heard from people who wanted to work while pursuing other professional aspirations or personal passions. The ease of earning income from Non-Traditional work made this possible. Victoria, a freelance writer in Colorado, left her job in corporate human resources because she felt she had strayed too far from her passion of journalistic writing. She now feels more fulfilled in her work.

No matter how they became Non-Traditional workers, most of our research participants are satisfied with their work. In our nationwide survey, only 31% of Non-Traditional workers reported dissatisfaction with their current work.

**What makes non-traditional work attractive?**

In our in-depth interviews, we asked Non-Traditional workers to identify two to three words to describe how they felt about their work and why. This word cloud represents their responses:
Flexible

Flexibility is seen as a major benefit to many. Workers said that this flexibility allowed them to have more control over their lives. The most common example of this was being able to spend more time with family. Barbara, a 47-year-old woman driving for a gig platform in Nevada, has two special needs children so she always needs to be available in case something happens at school. This has prevented her from working a Traditional job, which would not provide her the flexibility to be available for her children when needed. Danielle, a 30-year-old woman working for a temp agency in California, used to work as a retail manager and made good money while enjoying the work. “But in retail, especially in management, you have no life outside of retail,” she said. “It was too time consuming and took away too much time from my family.”

Another example of how flexibility gave workers a sense of control over their lives was from workers who wanted to pursue their professional passions, such as becoming a musician, a writer, or a business owner. Non-Traditional work’s flexible schedules freed up time and energy to focus on these pursuits while still making sufficient income. Laura, an Uber driver in Massachusetts, was passionate about real estate and used her income from driving to make ends meet while she advanced her real estate career. Drew, a freelance writer in New York, left what he described as “the drudgery of being a production assistant” to pursue his true passion for digital media and writing. He used income generated from TaskRabbit to support himself when his writing income was insufficient.

Workers also shared that the schedule flexibility of Non-Traditional work enabled them to better integrate their work schedules into their day-to-day lives. Rhonda, a sub-contracted home care quality assurance nurse, was able to work the hours she wanted while going to school. The additional education would accelerate her nursing career and allow her to eventually launch her own nonprofit. Joan needed a flexible schedule because ongoing grief from the loss of her daughter made it hard to work at certain times of the day.

These examples demonstrate that flexibility is a highly valued characteristic of Non-Traditional work because it allows workers to have their work support other life needs - family needs, need for fulfillment, or scheduling needs.

Interesting

The workers we spoke with often described their work as “interesting” because of the variety of the work. They were exposed to new experiences, going places they would not otherwise go (drivers and taskers, mostly) and doing something different each day, week, or month. This variety combined with the opportunity to be fully engaged with and by the work was exciting for workers. Sandra, a 59-year-old in Massachusetts, has multiple sources of income including gig economy recruiting, owning her own small shop, and working as a psychic. She has always worked in Non-Traditional arrangements and loves it. “I’ve always done gig work, even before there was a gig economy. It’s what I’m drawn to—the exposure is different from working a 9 to 5 job.”

Fulfilling

A powerful desire to both help and interact with others was another common theme. Workers valued the numerous and consistently different interactions. We heard “I love meeting new people” time and time again. This type of work – driving someone somewhere, completing a task for someone, or even pointing someone in the right direction as a security guard – can also be more rewarding because the impact can be seen. Research has found that recognition for one’s work is important to people, and our research suggests recognition may be built into Non-Traditional work in different ways than Traditional work. Elizabeth, a 32-year-old woman sub-contracted as a personal care assistant to special needs children in Pennsylvania, said it was a priority for her not to feel like “another body working for a company,” which was her experience in her prior Traditional job. The recognition she feels every day from the families she works with makes her work fulfilling.
Independence

Independence – control over what one does, when it is done, how it is done, and for whom – figured prominently in descriptions of Non-Traditional work. Many people described “breaking away from the ‘9 to 5 norm,’” and not having to “sit behind a desk” or “be on someone else’s clock” as examples of this independence. Damon, a 28-year-old doing both freelance and task-based gig work in New York, best expressed these sentiments about traditional work: “You’re working forty hours a week for someone else’s company and someone else’s dream. You can make a lot of money and still not be happy.”

What are the drawbacks of non-traditional work?

Workers also identified drawbacks in doing Non-Traditional work. Stephen, a 34-year-old in Kentucky doing contract work as a public health consultant, said the biggest challenge was “Not being sure about work coming in. It's very stressful. The insecurity and instability of it all is the biggest risk.” This sentiment was echoed by many workers saying that this work arrangement was "unstable." The results from our nationwide survey also supported this finding with significantly more Non-Traditional workers reporting that they had “no idea” about their future income prospects.

“Lack of access to benefits is a well-documented drawback to non-traditional work; health insurance and retirement benefits are largely non-existent.”

Gig economy workers also discussed the problems they experienced with the gig platforms. They felt strongly that many of these companies prioritized the needs of customers over the needs of the platform workers. Andrea, a 47-year-old driver for two ride platforms in California, said, "It is pathetic the way they treat their drivers.” She only continues to drive because she enjoys the work more than she dislikes the platforms. Workers reported that platforms are not always easy to navigate and can make finding gigs difficult. Sarah, a 32-year-old gig worker in New York, said, "It seems like every other week they make it more difficult for people to find you and hire you.” She also felt that the platform unpredictably increased the percentage deducted from each payment and changed the perks available to workers. In our nationwide survey, Non-Traditional workers reported the least positive relationships with their “employers.”

Lack of access to benefits is a well-documented drawback to Non-Traditional work; health insurance and retirement benefits are largely non-existent. From our nationwide survey of workers, we found that workers want these benefits: 85% of Non-Traditional respondents ranked health insurance and 52% ranked access to retirement savings in the top 3 of preferred benefits.

How do Non-Traditional workers view the tradeoffs?

Non-Traditional workers acknowledged that their work and financial lives could be improved but they mostly said they currently do not have plans to stop doing this type of work; they believe the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Although workers identified the “unstable” nature of Non-Traditional work as a drawback, our nationwide survey found that having a predictable income was a lesser priority among these workers. For some, this uncertainty can even be exciting, which attracts them to the work. Adrian, an independent manager, producer, and designer in Pennsylvania, said that he’s always nervous about new ventures and the timing of opportunities coming to him, but that “it’s a good kind of nervousness.” The uncertainty of their work lives is not ideal, but they accept that this is an aspect of their chosen work arrangement.

For the gig workers who had issues with their platforms, those issues were not significant enough to negate their positive feelings about the work, including the new interactions drivers had with every passenger or the fun taskers had with the variety of projects they completed.

Workers also considered the disadvantages of Traditional work in choosing their work. Many specifically called out the problems of peers in Traditional work. Bad relationships with coworkers, horror stories about supervisors, and sitting in the same office every day doing the same “monotonous work” were common threads workers shared about traditional jobs. Although few of the workers we spoke with had retirement savings or access to benefits generally, this is true for many in low-wage traditional jobs. Stephanie, a 46-year-old who loves her work as a driver in Georgia, went so far as to say that “I hear all of my friends on Friday complaining about their week and being so happy that it’s Friday. I don’t feel that way. For me, any day could be Friday.”

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What are some implications?

The privilege of choice – the opportunity to find employment suited to their household circumstances, professional desires, and personal needs - that Non-Traditional work offers to workers is a potential benefit to everyone: employers, families, and communities. When workers are not interested in their work or cannot adapt it to their personal or familial obligations, employers suffer the consequences in high turnover, absenteeism, and underperformance.

A good job should include an assessment of fit with the individual’s life at a specific moment in time. Certain work arrangements simply do not fit. A Traditional job may be poorly suited for someone who has to be on call for their family throughout the day. If a person needs to feel like they are their own boss, then working “on someone else's clock” might not satisfy them. Our research revealed that these types of considerations are in fact what lead many people into Non-Traditional work.

Solutions could be developed to support workers in finding a work arrangement that meets both their immediate and longer-term needs. It could help workers understand the benefits and challenges of different work arrangements to help them make an informed decision.

People working in arrangements that best meet their personal and professional needs strengthens the social fabric and encourages prosperity that enhances financial opportunity for all.

Limitations

We acknowledge that our findings are affected by how we did the research. The findings do not account for all variables of potential significance. The accompanying research papers provide additional background on project limitations.