The Impact of Work Arrangements on Work Quality
Commonwealth believes that society is stronger and more prosperous when everyone has financial security and opportunity, and employment is a primary avenue of opportunity. Work is about the money that can be earned but work also affects one’s sense of self and place in society.

For many people, the nature of work is in flux. All indications are that the Traditional full-time job with one employer will continue to become less common as other work arrangements flourish. Those Non-Traditional alternatives are themselves evolving rapidly. To increase knowledge about how these changes are being experienced by the financially vulnerable (annual household income under $55,000), Commonwealth conducted a review of current research and then engaged with over a thousand workers nationwide through a survey, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and online. By giving voice to lower-wage people living the changing nature of work, we learn better how to support them in building their financial security and opportunity.

One of the challenges of doing this research is definitional. Given the ongoing changes in the types of work arrangements, how do we define the different types of work arrangements and what terminology do we use to describe them? In this paper, we have chosen to identify 3 broad categories: Freelancers, Traditional, and Non-Traditional, which includes people who work at temp agencies, gig platforms, and are sub-contracted workers. For a full definition of these categories please read “The Impact of Work Arrangements on Worker Identity.”

This is one of four briefs highlighting key findings. Two research papers detail methodologies and additional findings. Individual quotes and stories employ pseudonyms.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Non-Traditional</th>
<th>Freelancers</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Typical Traditional</td>
<td>Atypical Non-Traditional (mostly sub-contracted, some temp, gig)</td>
<td>Typical Non-Traditional (mostly gig, temp and some sub-contracted)</td>
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<tr>
<td>High Attributes</td>
<td>Moderate Attributes</td>
<td>Low Attributes</td>
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<td>Low Attributes</td>
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One of our research questions explored the qualities of a “good job” and how they manifest in different lower wage work arrangements. Our findings show that workers in Non-Traditional work arrangements agree with the literature about what makes a good job and that some qualities of a good job can be found in all types of work arrangements. Regardless of work arrangement, work that is both good for the pocketbook and good for the soul should be accessible to all.

Given the on-going evolution of work arrangements, one of the challenges of doing this research is definitional – how do we define the different types of work arrangements and what do we call them? For this project, based on a review of the academic literature and a detailed analysis of nationwide survey findings, we have identified 3 broad categories: Freelancers, Traditional, and Non-Traditional, which includes people who work at temp agencies, gig platforms, and are sub-contracted workers. For a full definition of these categories please read “Research Paper: Nationwide Survey” and “The Impact of Work Arrangements on Worker Identity.”

Individual quotes and stories employ pseudonyms.
What is a good job?

The literature defines a good job as one that meets a combination of basic and higher needs:

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<tr>
<th>Basic Needs</th>
<th>Higher Needs</th>
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<tr>
<td>• A steady income with good benefits</td>
<td>• Meaningfulness, value, and recognition</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Scheduling that provides flexibility for</td>
<td>• Respect</td>
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<tr>
<td>maintaining good work-life balance</td>
<td>• Opportunities to learn and thrive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Opportunities to grow with the workplace</td>
<td>• Open workplace communication that promotes honesty and transparency</td>
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<td>• Safety on the job</td>
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**Basic Needs**

In conversations with Non-Traditional workers about the most important qualities of a good job, all workers described attributes consistent with the literature. Olivia, a freelancer from North Carolina, cited fair wages, a good benefits package, and safe working conditions as features of a good job. Charlotte, a gig worker from California, shared that her ideal work environment was one in which the employers “realize people have lives” outside of work and should ensure work-life balance.

Our nationwide survey asked about eight work attributes that overlap with the basic needs criteria for a good job, such as a consistent and predictable work schedule, access to benefits, and on-the-job training. We also asked respondents to rate their job satisfaction. We found that individuals in work arrangements with most of these work attributes were the most satisfied with their work. However, Freelancers had the fewest of these work attributes and yet still reported higher levels of job satisfaction. One hypothesis is that Freelancers, despite having fewer of the “basic needs” work attributes, are more satisfied with their work because some higher needs are being met.

![Job Satisfaction Chart](chart.png)

(1 – Extremely Dissatisfied to 5 – Extremely Satisfied)
**Higher Needs**

Non-Traditional workers also mentioned the higher needs criteria of a good job. Respondents repeatedly defined good jobs as those that gave them a sense of meaningfulness, value, and respect. Abigail, a temp worker from Maine, indicated that a good job not only provides workers with good pay but also “makes you happy and feel like you are doing something important.” Nancy, a freelancer from Virginia, considered a good job as one in which both employer and employee treated each other with respect. Similar sentiments were expressed by temp workers, who wanted to be respected and have their contributions in the workplace valued.

Our conversations indicated that Non-Traditional workers regarded opportunities to learn and thrive as important to an ideal work environment. Ethan, a temp worker from Texas, wanted to work for a company in which he could grow. Jacob, a contract worker, liked the opportunity to meet new people in his work and felt that this could possibly lead to better work.

Open workplace communication was also a key component of an ideal work environment. Susan, a contract worker, loved her ability to sit down with her boss and “talk about anything.” Likewise, a number of focus group participants expressed that honesty and transparency from an employer was a quality of a good job.

**The Pros and Cons of Non-Traditional Work**

One of the reasons that Non-Traditional workers view their arrangements positively is that these arrangements meet a basic need to have control over their work, with scheduling flexibility that can support family and life circumstances. For Nora, a contract worker from Georgia, her family was a motivating factor in pursuing her current work arrangement because it allowed her to be more involved in her kids’ lives. The same was true for Grace, a gig worker from New York, whose work arrangement enabled her to schedule her life around her son.

But other aspects of Non-Traditional work do not meet basic needs such as steady income or benefits. In our nationwide survey, Non-Traditional workers were significantly more likely to have volatile incomes than Traditional workers and less likely to have access to benefits. Non-Traditional work can also leave workers feeling unvalued. Non-Traditional workers in our nationwide survey reported the least positive relationships with employers, significantly lower than what other types of workers reported.

Our interviews with workers confirmed these findings. Emily, a gig worker from California, acknowledged the challenge of paying out-of-pocket for medical costs and shared that she wished she had “the benefits, the 401k” and a steady income like her peers doing Traditional work. She also expressed frustration with not being valued by her employer and customers. Victoria, a freelancer from Colorado, similarly spoke of the difficulty of securing health insurance and of how others “don’t see what I do as real work,” which “doesn’t make me feel good for sure.”

**The Pros and Cons of Traditional Work**

Lower-wage Traditional work also often lacks the attributes that meet workers’ basic needs. In our national survey, 50% of Traditional workers reported that their work did not include many of the basic-needs attributes. These workers expressed the same lower job satisfaction as those in Non-Traditional arrangements, which supports the idea that meeting workers’ basic needs is a key driver of job satisfaction.

Traditional work also tends to lack the scheduling flexibility of Non-Traditional work, with negative impacts. In 2015, researchers studying a national women’s clothing chain found that the firm’s scheduling practices created instability that interrupted workers’ lives. More than half of the employees (71% full-time, 59% part-time) had to change non-work-related plans at least some of the time as a consequence of unpredictable work scheduling.
What are some implications?

Some qualities of a good job are missing in both Traditional and Non-Traditional work. The needs of financially vulnerable workers will be better met by making changes to both types of work arrangements.

“For example, to address the challenge many Non-Traditional workers face in accessing benefits, Fair Care Labs, the innovation arm of the National Domestic Workers Alliance, developed the mobile platform Alia. This tool collects monetary contributions from clients to fund benefits such as sick leave, disability, and life insurance for domestic workers. In New York, The Black Car Fund, a non-profit created by the state, provides workers’ compensation benefits for contract drivers (Uber, Lyft, and traditional taxi or limousine services) through a 2.5 percent per-ride surcharge."

In Traditional workplaces, employers have begun to reevaluate their scheduling practices. Researchers from the University of Chicago partnered with Gap Inc. to introduce interventions designed to tackle schedule instability. The interventions were designed to increase week-to-week schedule consistency, give employees the ability to better predict when they would be working as well as more input on when they work, and offer more hours to employees who want them. After the intervention, employees reported more flexibility and control over their schedule and personal lives, and the company saw an increase in sales and labor productivity.

The mix of basic and higher needs met by a good job – that the work is both good for the pocket book and good for the soul – should be accessible to 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.