

# 4 The Way We Work Is Changing

Things may come to those who wait, but only the things left by those who hustle.

Source: Abraham Lincoln

**N**ow that you understand how and why the newest members of the American workforce are seeking alternatives to their parents' 60-plus-hour work weeks and dedication to climbing the corporate ladder, you can see why our nation's "gig economy" is growing at an unprecedented rate. The gig economy, of course, refers to the plethora of short-term and freelance ventures ballooning around the globe.

Thanks to the gig economy, you can catch an Uber ride in a Corvette driven by a local retiree, get an "influencer's" review of everything from makeup to bicycles via YouTube before you buy, or hire an independent language tutor to chat with on Skype. And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

You can find someone to assemble your Ikea bookshelf via TaskRabbit, recruit a designer for your business card on Fiverr, or make a reservation with someone renting a room on Airbnb. The gig economy is making it possible for individuals everywhere to earn an income in exchange for sharing their skill set.

Said another way, each of these individuals trades his or her time for a set fee in a direct contract with someone who needs a service. Companies are mainly cut out of the middle. Many giggers find safety in the opportunity for multiple income streams.

Remember our previous discussion of transaction costs with Professor Cocron in Chapter 2? He said that companies exist to absorb the overhead that's required to recruit, train, and negotiate with employees. Well, in the gig economy, entrepreneurs are disrupting all that by outcompeting those companies. In many cities, you'll get a cheaper, better ride with Uber than you will in a taxi.

And the gig economy is *exploding* today. Not just in the United States, but worldwide. Our neighbors to the north in Canada are embracing the concept in droves, with more than 40% of millennials participating in the gig economy over the past five years.<sup>1</sup> In the US, the concept first gathered serious steam during the Great Recession in 2008–2009 when the economy shed more than 8.7 million jobs.<sup>2</sup> And it has only grown since then.

Today, more than one-third of Americans report that they are participating in one way or another, with 49% of adults under 35 gigging it.<sup>3</sup> According to one Florida report,<sup>4</sup> gig workers tend to be slightly more educated than other US workers, are more likely to live in an urban area, and are younger (with 43% of them age 25 to 34).

And, for all the criticism that the gig economy takes advantage of freelancers by asking them to work without traditional employment benefits, one aspect that is often overlooked is that the gig economy is truly a champion of diversity. The nature of the gig business is ruthless in cutting through bureaucratic red tape to directly and specifically ensure that customers get what they are looking for: a specific skill to get the job done. In other words, the gig goes to the best-qualified applicant for the price, irrespective of location, gender, age, or background. It is market driven, and that's a beautiful thing.

These individuals view gig work as an opportunity to build new skills, get a career start, and as a pathway to entrepreneurship. Some see gigs as a potential entrée into full-time job opportunities. And, when the recent COVID-19 pandemic resulted in historic levels of unemployment—leaving 20.5 million unemployed by May 2020<sup>5</sup>—the gig economy was a blessing for many.

## The Number-One Thing Gig Workers Want

The biggest things to keep in mind as you compete for Gen X, Y, and Z workers in the gig economy? Work–life integration! It’s what next-gen workers crave *most* in a job. In one survey,<sup>6</sup> nearly 17% of respondents said it was the most important factor they consider when choosing a job . . . more than leadership opportunities, flexibility, professional development, and a laundry list of other benefits.

This is a particular area of concern for two-career couples. Just like Tom, my millennial associate who told me he wasn’t interested in long hours or a fast track to making partner at our firm because his wife’s career took precedence in their family, millions of couples are struggling with how to best balance dual careers. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, this is true for nearly half of American couples and 63% of couples with kids.<sup>7</sup>

They want to know: How can I be my best self at work while also meeting my family obligations and stay connected to my spouse? The most successful view themselves as a team—partners in navigating their individual challenges together—rather than competitors for time and resources.

They are able to say no to work requests for the good of the family and negotiate career expectations together. Does your organization recognize this reality for your employees? How will you help them succeed?

As we've discussed, it isn't really about the idea of work-life *balance* for these up and comers; it's about work-life *integration*. And that looks a bit different. Because if we are just talking about the opportunity to cut down on commute time with telecommuting, we've recently run that experiment and it isn't all it was cracked up to be.

In spring 2020, for the first time in the history of America, everyone who was not deemed to be an essential worker by the government was suddenly working from home during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, pre-pandemic—in January 2020—just 3% of workers were remote. That soared to 64% just three months later.<sup>8</sup> And that experiment demonstrated some surprising results.

The first surprise for many employers who'd been reluctant to allow workers to telecommute was that productivity actually soared. Although they began by telling telecommuters they'd be keeping a close eye on productivity, it soon became clear that work was bleeding into evening hours and weekends for pretty much everyone. In fact, for example, the 53,000 workers suddenly telecommuting at the Social Security Administration registered an 11% improvement in the backlog of pending cases in less than two months of working from home.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, presented its own challenges for employers whose workers were supposed to be "off the clock" when their normal workday ended.

Is remote work here to stay in a big way? That remains to be seen. Employers who rent lots of office space are looking around and wondering if they really need it. Concepts like hoteling—where remote workers share on-site office space by reserving a desk—may see an increase in popularity.

However comfortable the pandemic workday may have been during stay-at-home orders, many were also antsy to get back to the office. The structure so many of us relied on was missing. We realized for the first time that "drive time" was a welcome opportunity to plan

our workday on the way to the office and to decompress on the way home from work.

With no structure, it just seemed easier to work on clearing our email inbox before bed; there was just no escape from the world of work. But as you will see, the notion of shutting down and recharging, no matter how brief, remains important, even as we move toward more work–life integration.

When working from home is done well, psychologists emphasize that it can improve employee productivity, creativity, and morale. For certain types of workers—those who need to focus deeply and don't require a lot of collaboration or social support, for example, telecommuting can eliminate distractions and interruptions that affect performance.

Plus, it confers benefits to classes of workers who otherwise face discrimination when working from the office. That single mom who leaves early to pick up her child from day care? She's less likely to be passed over for promotions when working from home. Instead of getting the side eye from coworkers who suspect she's working less than they are, her quality job performance can speak for itself.

The same holds true for disabled workers who may be discriminated against when working at the office. At home, their disabilities are invisible, finally putting them on par with their coworkers when judged by actual job performance. Working from home can be an excellent way to reduce or eliminate the unconscious bias of workplace discrimination.

However, as most experts agree, there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction or “management by walking around.” Body language and eye contact are hugely beneficial in the world of work. So is the opportunity for supervisors to interact spontaneously and in-person with workers. Some of the very best innovations occur

because someone thought to stop by a coworker's desk on her way to or from a meeting with a great idea.

Throughout my career, I've had the habit of walking around the office to see who was available when I was ready to assign a project to a new associate. I also make a point of traveling to meet new colleagues in our firm or to spend time with clients, because I know there's no substitute for making a personal connection when it comes to work. Zoom or texting can never replace that.

There is great value in being physically visible at work for spontaneous, informal conversations, with both your supervisor and your coworkers. Offsite retreats, company picnics, and “icebreaker” exercises for teams have always worked as ways for people who work together to spend time together and learn to care about each other. Those activities improve loyalty, retention, and cultivate a cohesive team.

So, although the COVID-19 pandemic may have sped up the transition of more work-from-home arrangements, organizations that flex will think longer term as they weigh the trade-offs between what's good for the company and what's good for the worker. In some cases, maybe there is an opportunity to disrupt industries moving remotely with new ways of facilitating in-person engagement and interaction.

Face time—the old-fashioned kind—still matters.