

Call for papers: Special Issue on *Operations Management in a Fissured Workforce Economy*

Background

Operations management (OM) researchers have recognized the significance of outsourced work in both upstream and downstream supply chain activities. Traditionally, these arrangements have been conceptualized as stable dyadic relationships between two large, monolithic business entities, each with a relatively stable, permanent workforce. However, many variants of outsourced work arrangements involve firms directly contracting with agents outside these traditional boundaries, both temporarily and on an ongoing basis. Studying these ubiquitous yet understudied outsourcing arrangements provides opportunities to enrich and expand existing OM theory.

Alternatives to traditional employment and work outsourcing relationships have grown across nearly all global economies. For instance, U.S. tax filings indicate that the number of people earning money through gig work (e.g., Uber, DoorDash) tripled between 2017 and 2021 (Delouya, 2023). These arrangements, where individuals are contracted to work outside the traditional boundaries of the firm, have been termed a “fissured” workplace (Weil, 2014). Fissured employment occurs when tasks and responsibilities are outsourced or delegated to independent contractors, franchisees, gig workers, or freelancers.

In many instances, customers are unaware that these workers are not employed by the firm itself (e.g., franchising, temporary staffing), cannot distinguish them from the firm’s own employees, or incorrectly associate their performance with the brand of the core good or service. However, other fissured workforce arrangements (e.g., DoorDash, Instacart) exist where consumers readily make such distinctions. Additionally, many contemporary arrangements involve multiple layers, hybrid structures, or a series of fissured relationships, complicating operations management. Examples of fissured workforce arrangements include:

- Logistics companies, such as FedEx, increasingly contract with independent owner-operator delivery drivers or pay hourly or per-delivery wages.
- Large retailers like Walmart subcontract logistics work to providers who then render warehousing and transloading services. Amazon contracts much of its last mile delivery to Delivery Service Providers (DSP)s that are deemed independent third-party providers.
- The majority of quick service meals and hotel rooms in the US market are delivered via the franchising model. Franchisees can further contract with staffing agencies to service customers or utilize third party agents to deliver their products.
- Restaurants rely on third party delivery apps like DoorDash and UberEats to provide last mile delivery via gig workers rather than maintain their own delivery drivers.

Technological advances have facilitated and accelerated shifts towards fissured workforces, providing readily-available platforms for firms to efficiently schedule, monitor, and communicate with individuals outside their traditional boundaries. At the same time, federal rulings, including the National Labor Relations Board's (NLRB) joint employer rule (National Labor Relations Board, 2023), challenge fissured work arrangements as multiple entities may share control over a worker’s employment terms and conditions. Regulatory bodies and legal rulings continue to alter the landscape of such relationships, making the management of operations more uncertain and complex (Moreno, 2024). In addition, competitive pressures have driven firms to reevaluate the scope and depth of their existing employee relationships, contributing to the evolution of fissured employment.

Fissuring occurs because firms can derive significant benefits from adopting this strategy. These benefits may include cost savings, flexibility, scalability, access to specialized skills, risk mitigation, and an increased focus on core competencies. However, there are also significant disadvantages and risks, such as quality control challenges, setup and screening costs, communication and coordination difficulties, dependency on external parties, operational reliability and resiliency issues, loss of institutional knowledge, ethical and legal implications, and threats to brand reputation. Therefore, a greater understanding of OM and the development of new theoretical frameworks to account for multiple layers or types of fissuring is warranted.

Special Issue (SI) Focus

As the employment relationship between a firm and its downstream service providers and upstream suppliers has evolved, so has the complexity of managing the network of the corresponding operational inputs and outputs. In addition to manufacturing (Handley, 2012) and IT outsourcing (Handley et al., 2022), which reflect the characteristics of a fissured workplace, this special issue includes relationships that are often overlooked in the OM literature (e.g., franchising) (Lawrence & Zhang, 2022) and those that have gained dominance in the service economy (e.g., gig workers). This special issue focuses on OM in these ubiquitous and evolving structures, including but not limited to gig economy platforms (Miao et al., 2023), franchising (Massimino & Lawrence, 2019), warehousing and logistics (Miao et al., 2023) and healthcare staffing (Mishra et al., 2020).

This SI is designed to attract submissions of rigorous and creative scholarly work that can help us understand the impact of these types of fissured workforce relationships on various facets of operations management in the current regulatory landscape. We want to stress that submissions to this SI must contribute primarily to a greater understanding of OM and the process of managing work.

Some possible topics for this SI include, but are not limited to, the impact of fissured employment on:

- **Coordination (Monitoring, Incentive Alignment, Communication):** Managing a workforce that is not only spread out across different locations but may also have competing incentives and varying degrees of autonomy can complicate coordination, leaving open questions about whether or when existing models about supply chain coordination may hold in more fissured arrangements.
- **Technology and Business Practice Enablers:** Advanced technologies such as GPS and location tracking, rating and review systems for individuals, and advanced decision support systems are becoming increasingly accessible and implementable for a fissured workforce. Much remains to be understood of these technologies' impact on the adoption and success of fissured workforce structures.
- **Flexibility in Scaling Operations:** One of the benefits of a fissured workforce is the ability to quickly scale operations up or down based on demand without the need for significant investment in full-time staff. Insights are needed into the conditions under which firms may be able to take advantage of these possible benefits.
- **Cost and Quality Management:** While a fissured workforce can lead to cost savings in labor, they also introduce new costs related to managing multiple contracts, quality assurance processes, and potential legal fees for compliance issues. How do firms account for these costs and ensure that quality and service standards are maintained when developing operations management strategy?
- **Innovation and Knowledge Sharing:** Innovation can be hampered with a fissured workforce due to the separation between the core company and its contractors, as well as the increased demands on finite resources for finding and monitoring this type of workforce. Fissuring may also lead to knowledge leakage and the outsourced provider can become a competitor of the firm. Studies on this topic can offer new insights into how firms can effectively manage these challenges.

- **Risk Management:** Dependency on third-party service providers and contractors can introduce new risks, including operational, reputational, and financial risks. Examining how firms quantify these risks a priori provides one area of potential contribution.
- **Regulatory Compliance and Public Policy:** Ensuring compliance with continually changing labor laws and regulations becomes more complicated with a fissured workforce. Studies which consider the operational impact of both current and proposed public policy structures would provide timely and useful insights in this rapidly evolving landscape.
- **Search and Onboarding:** Fissured workforces introduce new challenges in finding suitable and qualified workers to perform the necessary work and require novel approaches to effectively integrate this workforce with the firm's permanent staff and operations. The scheduling of fissured workforces along with permanent staff stands out as one example area that would require careful consideration.
- **Workforce Morale, Loyalty, and Organizational Culture:** A fissured workforce can lead to issues with morale and loyalty among workers who may feel less connected to the main company. Current firm employees may fear future outsourcing which could impact operational performance. Adopting a fissured workforce may have consequences for organizational culture which in turn can impact employee turnover and quality of care.
- **Emerging Operational Structures:** Organizations are incorporating fissured workforces into increasingly complex operational structures. Studies are needed to more clearly articulate the types that exist, their benefits & risks, and the conditions under which different structures are most appropriate.

Timeline

February 28th 2025 Extended Abstract: The submission format will include an initial screening of extended abstracts. Extended abstracts (5 Pages, 11-point font in Times New Roman, 1.5 line spacing) will provide the salient points and topics that the final submission intends to cover. Figures and data tables may be included as an appendix that does not count toward page limit. The first page of the abstract should describe the study's relevance to operations and supply chain management theory and practice. The extended abstract will be reviewed, and if accepted, authors will be invited to submit the full-length paper. Acceptance of the extended abstract is not a guarantee that the final full-length paper will be accepted. The full-length paper will go through the review process as per *JOM's* standard practice.

Full Paper August 31st 2025: First-round decisions targeted for three months after manuscript reception.

We will operate with the goal of making final acceptances to the special issue by May 2026.

Guest Editors

Questions may be sent to any, or all, of the SI guest editors, at any time:

Sean Handley (Sean.handley@moore.sc.edu) is Department Chair and Distinguished Moore Research Fellow and Professor at the Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina. Handley's primary scholarly interests lie in studying the challenges and approaches to managing outsourced business processes with a particular interest in: formal and informal mechanisms for managing inter-organizational relationships, the management of offshore outsourcing engagements, and quality management with outsourced manufacturing. His research has been published in several leading academic journals including the *Journal of Operations Management*, *Production and Operations Management*, *Decision Sciences*, *Strategic Management Journal*, *MIS Quarterly* and *Journal of Business Logistics*. He serves on the editorial review board for *Production and Operations Management* and *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, is an associate editor for *Decision Sciences*, and is a department editor for the *Journal of Operations Management*.

Benjamin Lawrence (blawrence@gsu.edu) is the Aziz Hashim Professor of Franchise Entrepreneurship and Associate Professor at the Robinson College of Business at Georgia State University. Lawrence's broad domains of interest include franchise relationships, consumer coproduction, and service innovation. He has published research articles in leading business journals including *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Production and Operations Management* and *Service Science*. He serves as President of the POMS College of Service Operations and President of the International Society of Franchising.

Brett Massimino (bjmassimino@vcu.edu) is Department Chair and Associate Professor at the School of Business at Virginia Commonwealth University. Massimino's research interests include supply chain management within digital economies, the confidentiality of digital assets exchanged among supply chain partners, and the operational challenges of transitioning from traditional to digital environments. He has published articles in *Production and Operations Management*, *Journal of Operations Management*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, and *Journal of Business Logistics*. He is an associate editor for the *Journal of Operations Management*.

Keith Skowronski (keith.kowronski@moore.sc.edu) is an Associate Professor at the Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina. Skowronski's primary research interests examine complications that arise in globally dispersed manufacturing supply chains and how manufacturers can better manage those relationships. He has conducted research that examines the hidden costs associated with the offshore outsourcing of manufacturing as well as why firms might bring offshored manufacturing back to the United States, otherwise known as reshoring. Skowronski's research has been accepted for publication in the *Journal of Operations Management*, *Production and Operations Management* and the *Journal of Supply Chain Management*. He serves on the editorial review board for *Production and Operations Management*, is an associate editor for *Decision Sciences*, and is a department editor for the *Journal of Operations Management*.

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