



SKILLSNEXT

Understanding the Nature and Experience of Gig Work in Canada

JULY 2020

Elle Ziegler, Karen E. McCallum,
Katherine Porter, and
Reyhaneh Noshiravani

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The word "Canada" is written in a large, black, serif font. A small Canadian flag is positioned above the letter 'a'.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the projectiv

About the authorsv

What is gig work?1

Historical context10

What we know about gig work13

A nod to modern times: Where do we go from here?14

The meaning of work16

The organization of work and workers18

The shifting of risk20

Dimensions impacting on gig workers23

Areas for future research25

References26

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Canadians' needs for skills training are changing rapidly. Through Skills Next, the Public Policy Forum and the Diversity Institute—in its role as a research lead for the Future Skills Centre—are publishing a series of reports that explore a number of the most important issues currently impacting the skills ecosystem in Canada. Each report focuses on one issue, reviews the existing state of knowledge on this topic, and identifies areas in need of additional research. This strong foundation is intended to help support further research and strengthen policymaking. A diverse set of authors who are engaged in the skills ecosystem through various roles, including through research, activism and policymaking, have been carefully selected to provide a broad range of perspectives while also foregrounding the Canadian context. Their varied backgrounds, experiences and expertise have shaped their individual perspectives, their analyses of the current skills ecosystem, and the reports they have authored.

MAJOR THEMES EXPLORED IN SKILLS NEXT INCLUDE:

- Digital skills and training;
- Barriers to employment for specific groups and demographics;
- Alternative approaches to skills & training; and
- Offering readers a primer on what we know, what we don't know, and how we can dig deeper on skills training & the future of work.

RELEASES SUMMER 2020:

- Indigenous skills and employment training;
- Competency frameworks and essential skills;
- Technology-enabled innovations in the skills and employment ecosystem;
- Understanding gig work and the experience of gig work in Canada;
- Barriers to employment based on gender; and
- Skills in small- and medium-sized enterprises.

RELEASES JANUARY 2020

- See the [eight Skills Next papers](#) from the winter 2020 release and the [full series](#).



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



ELLE ZIEGLER

As a leader in design and research at Doblin Canada, Elle Ziegler leads public and private sector projects in research and insights development, capability-building, community engagement, and strategy. Her background in architecture and participatory methods has given her a unique understanding of how to apply a deep knowledge of research and human-centred design to a range of issues. Elle has had the pleasure of speaking about her research methods at conferences such as the Canada Service Design Conference and the Gehl Institute's Public x Design. Most recently, she was a panelist at the PPF Brave New Work 2020 Conference.



KAREN E. MCCALLUM

Senior Research Associate, Diversity Institute, Future Skills Centre, Ryerson University

Karen has a research background in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences with degrees from Waterloo and McMaster, and is proud to have returned to Canada to re-engage on the vanguard of Canadian human rights after completing doctoral studies at the University of London (UK). Karen's work at Ryerson builds on her previous academic experience as a visiting professor at Bridgewater State University (US) and lecturer at the University of Oxford. She is driven to work in constructive partnerships to improve public policy and contribute meaningful research to boost outcomes for Indigenous peoples, racialized minorities, and other equity-seeking groups. Her research and teaching draw primarily from Indigenous studies, Sociology (social movement studies), and Social psychology (group identity theory, contact theory, and sociology of emotions).



KATHERINE PORTER

Katherine is a design consultant with experience in architecture and design, design education and design research. She earned master's degrees from the University of Toronto and the Rhode Island School of Design. A former consultant with Deloitte, Katherine specializes in helping clients find new opportunities for innovation through design research and facilitation. Katherine is co-founder and Chief Design Officer for Undu Wearables Ltd, a health tech company developing wearable menstrual pain therapies. Her team was awarded the 2019 National James Dyson Award.



REYHANEH NOSHIRAVANI

Reyhaneh Noshiravani is a researcher and consultant specialising in risk, regulation, and international security. She is an associate professor at ESCP Europe and a fellow at the Sir Michael Howard Centre for the History of War at King's College London, where she obtained her doctorate in War Studies. Previously, she was a consultant at Deloitte, where she developed thought leadership on topics connected to Canada's growth and global competitiveness.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue t-shirt, is holding a professional camera up to her eye, looking through the viewfinder. She is in a studio or office environment. In the background, there is a large, circular light fixture with a radial pattern, and a computer monitor is visible on the left. The overall lighting is warm and professional.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gig work and gig workers have become increasingly prominent in Canada’s labour market. As we shift further away from the traditional model of the employee-employer relationship that dominated following the Second World War, the alternative forms of work that have developed—particularly those enabled by technology—have become much more important to grasp.

This paper represents an effort to understand what we know, and what we need to know, about the nature of Canada’s gig economy and the experiences of its workers. The goal is to highlight areas that require research, build a foundation for that research, and help shape an evidence-based policy agenda that supports the full spectrum of gig workers in Canada.

While technology has enabled gig work for some time in areas such as call centres and outsourced information and communications technology industries, more recent app- and web-based innovations such as matching platforms have changed modern gig work to the point that it requires a re-think from a policy standpoint. Modern technology has amplified and altered the way gig work is conducted so much that it has fundamentally changed the activity.

In this report we’ll explore different dimensions, such as supply and demand of work, as well as the now nearly universal ability of people to access technology-enabled gig work platforms, have influenced and catalyzed an increase in gig work in Canada.

But what do these changes mean for platform operators, labour and trade policy-makers, and gig workers themselves?

Gig work is often dichotomized—a gig worker is seen as either a young millennial making enormous amounts of money flexing digital skills sets or as a low-skilled person making an irregular income while being exploited by faceless, absentee platform operators. To have a sophisticated conversation about pros, cons and regulatory frameworks to guide gig work and protect workers, it is necessary to clarify differences across the diverse experiences of those workers.

Whether or not gig work is “good” for workers in any generalizable sense, it is increasing in popularity. Therefore, it’s imperative that policy-makers, academics and potential gig workers themselves understand this area of work and its implications for their working lives and their projected lives (e.g. retirement), as well as understand from an employer perspective what gig work means in terms of available labour. Looking at different dimensions that impact gig work and the experiences of gig workers can help us understand circumstances and begin to understand this employment type.

The need for such knowledge is all the more critical due to the increased uncertainty, vulnerability and precarity many workers are experiencing as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Gig workers are particularly vulnerable while also perceived to be essential workers. It is worth questioning whether gig workers’ needs are perhaps more illuminated than they have been in the past and whether, consequently, this essential worker paradigm shift will persist post-pandemic.



Modern technology has amplified and altered the way gig work is conducted so much that it has fundamentally changed the activity, providing access to a labour pool never more loosely attached to the labour market, nor more available for on-demand work around the clock and around the globe.



WHAT IS GIG WORK?

In both existing literature and broader social discourse and debates, there is no agreed definition of gig work. We have scanned the literature using search terms for alternate work forms such as freelancer, self-employment, alternative workers, and independent contractors to capture publications that also mention gig work and its synonyms. As we will show, the tech-enabled gig economy represents a shift in the Canadian economy and labour market, though the concept of gig work is consistent with historical and global norms around non-standard employment.

While flexible and part-time work arrangements are in no sense new, technological-enabled platforms have contributed to a proliferation of gig work opportunities that are characterized by very loose labour force attachment. This working arrangement is not new in structure, but its growth is coming at a time in labour history that has until very recently celebrated a deliberately secure labour force attachment style. We will explain this shift in more detail below.

While there is no agreed-upon definition of gig work, there are some common attributes found in describing it broadly:

- work that is less structured than a standard employment relationship;
- work that is temporary, on demand and very loosely attached to the labour market.

According to Statistics Canada, gig workers “are usually not employed on a long-term basis by a single firm; instead, they enter into various contracts with firms or individuals (task requesters) to complete a specific task or to work for a specific period of time for which they are paid a negotiated sum.”¹ The gig economy in Canada and around the world is a rapidly growing category of work, though the exact size and rate at which it is growing can be difficult to determine, in part due to a lack of an agreed-upon definition.²

Despite terminological difficulties, in 2019 Statistics Canada released a ground-breaking study about gig work in Canada.³ Drawing primarily from 2016 census data and the Statistics Canada Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database (CEEDD), it has collated relevant data and generated substantial insights pertaining to gig work. The CEEDD is a new database that includes matched data with both firm-level and individual-level sources and characteristics. It is a collated longitudinal dataset

¹ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data](#).

² Abraham, K.G. and Amaya, A. (2019). [Probing for informal work activity](#), p. 487-508.

³ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data](#).

that draws from tax files, covering all individual and corporate tax filers from 2001 to 2016. The release of this dataset has in large part enabled much deeper analysis into Canadian gig work.⁴

The CEEDD dataset reveals that between 2005 and 2016 the percentage of gig workers in Canada rose to about 8.2 percent from about 5.5 percent.⁵ Figure 1, generated from CEEDD data, shows gig work participation is increasing for all Canadians, and that more women than men are turning to gig work.

Figure 1: Trends in gig workers among all workers, by sex, 2005-2016⁶



The dataset does not indicate a significant correlation between age and gig work involvement, as shown in Figure 2, with gig work involvement being distributed evenly across most working-age brackets differentiated by age. Interestingly, the data shows women are more likely to do gig work in general, as also shown in Figure 1, and that women’s prevalence⁷ in gig work is higher. Also of note: gig work prevalence is highest in the over-65 age category, possibly a result of the fact that people in this category are least likely to be earning T4 income and more likely to work in gig work if they work at all.

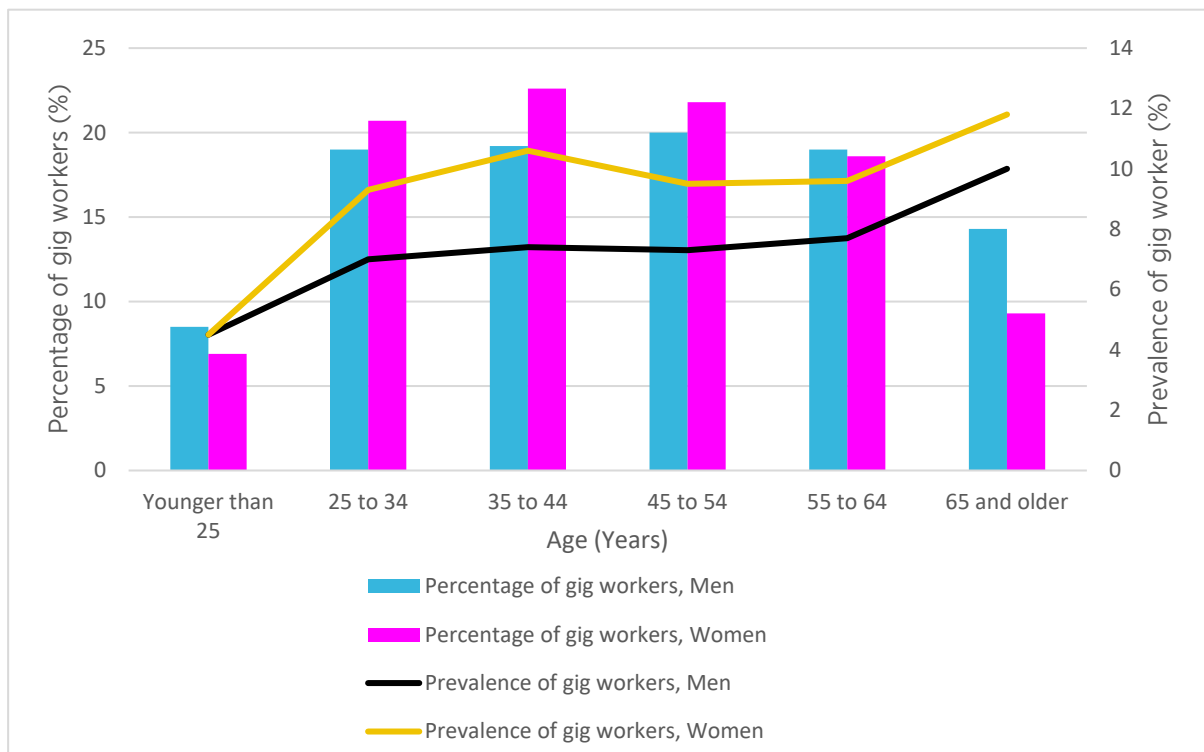
⁴ Liu, H. and Grekou, D. (2018). [The entry into and exit out of self-employment and business ownership in Canada.](#)

⁵ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

⁶ Developed from data reported in Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

⁷ Prevalence refers to a measure of proportion — a high prevalence means that there is disproportionately high proportion of a defined sub-group within a sample.

Figure 2: Characteristics of gig workers in tax data and linked tax-census data, 2016⁸



Western, and indeed global, labour history is a highly gendered process and there are differences relative to gender found in the gig economy that are imperfectly understood. The top three of Canada’s National Occupational Classification (NOC) categories in which women are involved in gig work, totaling almost 60 percent of all gig work done by women, are:

1. **6 – Sales and service occupations (22.1%);**
2. **4 – Occupations in education, law and social, community and government services (20.3%);**
and
3. **1 – Business, finance and administration occupations (17%).**

For men, the top three NOC categories in which they perform gig work, totaling 47 percent of all gig work done by men, are:

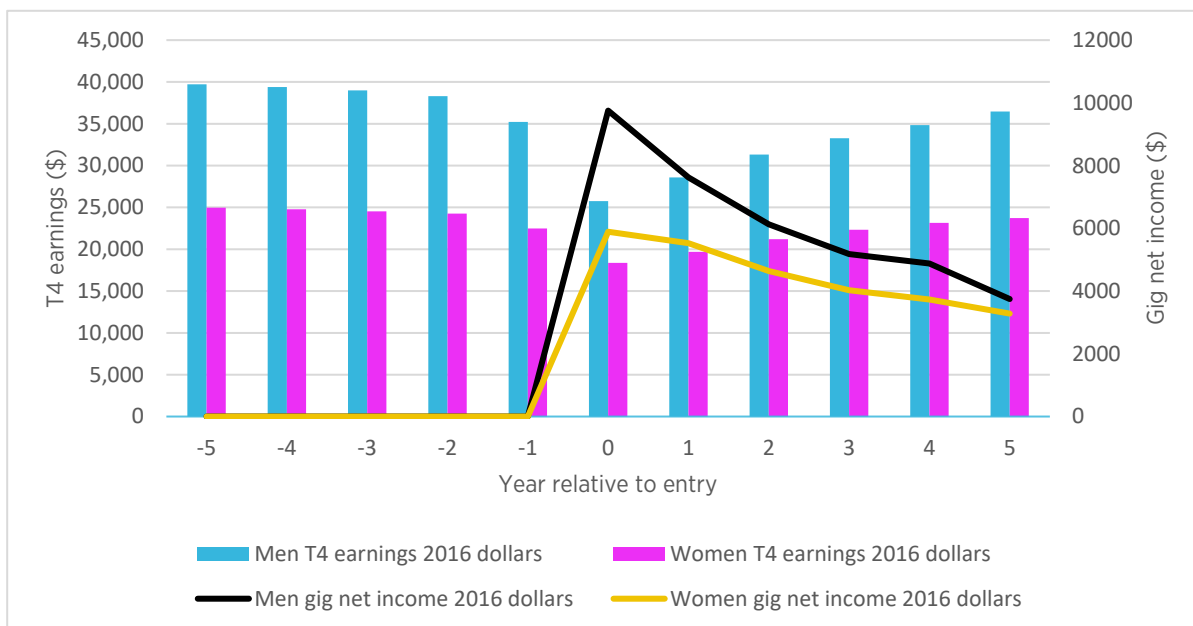
1. **7 – Trades, transport and equipment operators and related occupations (19.6%);**
2. **6 – Sales and service occupations (16.2%); and**
3. **1 – Business, finance and administration occupations (10.8%).**

⁸ Developed from data reported in Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

Clearly, NOC occupational categories 1 and 6 lend themselves to gig work, capturing significant proportions of the gig work economy amongst all genders and requiring particular regulatory and policy-maker attention. NOC categories 4 and 7, which each capture a similar share of workers at about 20 percent, are also highly relevant to the question of how to track, regulate, and understand gig work in Canada.

Figure 3 speaks to gender breakdowns of earnings related to gig work, also generated from the Statistics Canada Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database. We see that men make more than women both in T4-reported earnings and gig earnings. Other trends arise. For example, when men enter the gig economy they experience a bigger spike in earnings, and even after five years continue to make more money in gig work than women. We also find that after five years of doing gig work, women tend to make five percent less in their T4-affiliated work than they did five years prior to entering gig work, while men experience a greater drop of eight percent in T4 income. The rate of increase in income between men and women is uneven: comparing what people in each category made five years prior to entering gig work with what they made five years after entering gig work (including both earnings from gig work and T4 work), we find men’s incomes have risen only one percent, while women’s have risen eight percent.

Figure 3: Gig net income and T4 earnings, by sex, 5 years prior and after entry into gig economy⁹

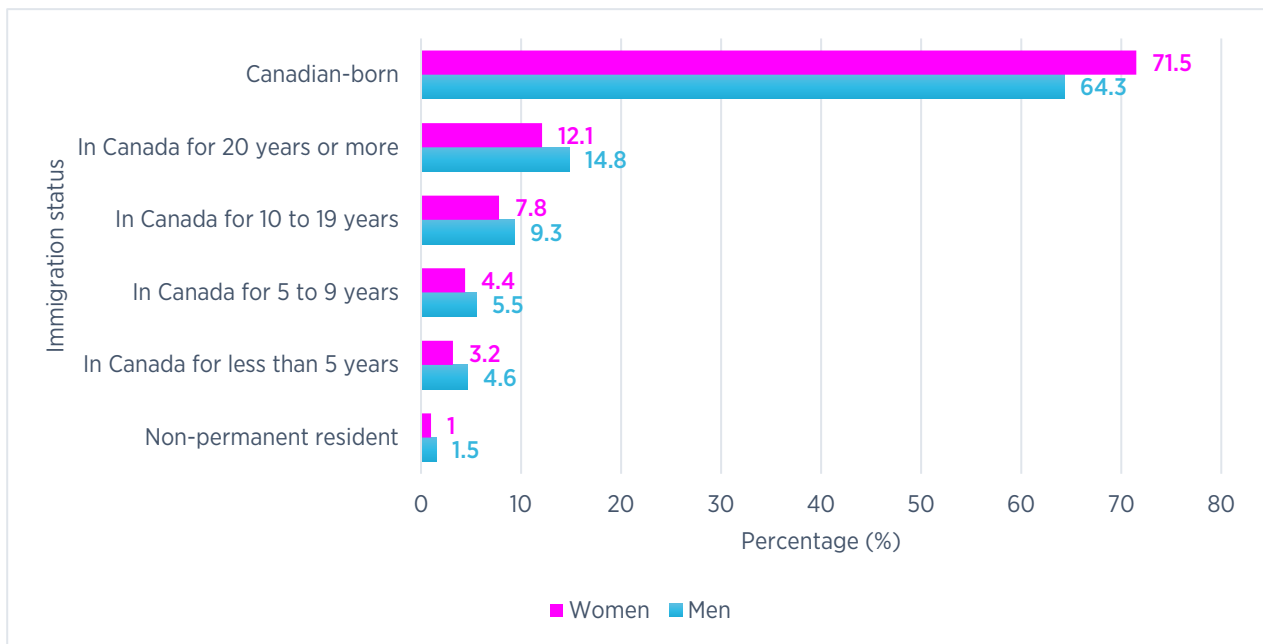


⁹ Developed from data reported in Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

This quick initial consideration of gig work statistics already raises questions related to how gig work is conducted. How is skill level related to remuneration? What are the costs and benefits involved with a person taking on gig work to the detriment of T4 work earning capacity? Is it worth it; if so, for whom and why? These questions are as relevant to the gig economy as to the standard, regular workplace.

Figure 4 below introduces another angle of analysis, looking at gig workers from the perspective of immigration status. We again see gender differences, as well as differences between immigration status and gig work involvement. For example, while 70 percent of gig working women are Canadian born, only 64.3 percent of men are Canadian born. In every immigration status category other than Canadian born, more men than women do gig work. In general, the trend is that the longer someone lives in Canada, regardless of gender, the more likely they are to do gig work.

Figure 4: Characteristics of gig workers in tax data and linked tax-census data, immigration status, 2016¹⁰



One key feature of this tranche of statistical data is that the average annual income of someone in the gig economy is low. The 2018 Canadian Income Survey calculates the median after-tax income of families and unattached individuals was \$61,400 in 2018.¹¹ For senior families, where the main wage earner was 65 or older, this median after-tax income was much lower, at \$30,700. Comparing these figures to gig worker earnings reported in Figure 3 from the Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database is not

¹⁰ Developed from data reported in Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

¹¹ Statistics Canada. (2020). [Canadian income survey, 2018.](#)

fully possible, there being differences in data collection and reporting mechanisms. However, we can say generally that people who enter gig work in Canada tend to, on average, make less than the median of working families. This suggests that while some gig workers surely make much more than national averages or medians, the average gig worker may be turning to gig work opportunistically to augment or replace an inadequate income.

One way to think about the gig economy is through the lens of what it is not, the counterfactual being the standard employment relationship (SER). In the SER model, workers have one employer, work full time and year round on the employer's premises, and have an agreed approach to compensation that allows for predictable total rewards, often including extra income benefits such as health insurance, pension payments, etc. Moreover, the conditions of work in a SER are highly regulated through collective agreements or legislation that protects the worker from down cycles, with greater financial risk placed onto the employer.¹² In the gig economy, workers exchange the regulatory protections of a SER for flexible and easy labour market attachment, forgoing employment benefits.^{13, 14}

Gig work also differs in important ways from temporary employment. In its Workforce 2025 report, human resources consulting firm Randstad differentiates gig workers from "the 'temps' of the past,"¹⁵ explaining instead that gig workers can be engaged through short- or long-term contracts and asked to perform roles ranging from blue-collar industrial labourers to IT, accounting and other types of office or HR professionals. Gig workers are available on demand, temporarily, on an as-needed basis, mimicking a form of relationship more coherent if one thinks of gig workers as independent, self-employed contractors.

In fact, gig work has been conceptualized by Statistics Canada as a form of self-employment and is reported within the self-employed category in data collection instruments. Correspondingly, the Canadian Employer–Employee Dynamics Database distinguishes between incorporated self-employed, unincorporated self-employed, unincorporated self-employed excluding fishing and farming, and gig workers, underlining the regulatory interests in understanding and properly tracking gig work in the self-employment economy.¹⁶

It is worth stressing that this decision to classify gig workers as unincorporated self-employed workers is not without controversy or rightful challenge. The decision earlier this year of the Ontario Labour Relations Board in *Canadian Union of Postal Workers v. Foodora Inc.* found Foodora gig workers to be a

¹² Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy.](#)

¹³ Graham, M. and Woodcock, J. (2020). [The gig economy: A critical introduction.](#)

¹⁴ Vosko, L.F. (2000). [Temporary work: The gendered rise of a precarious employment relationship.](#)

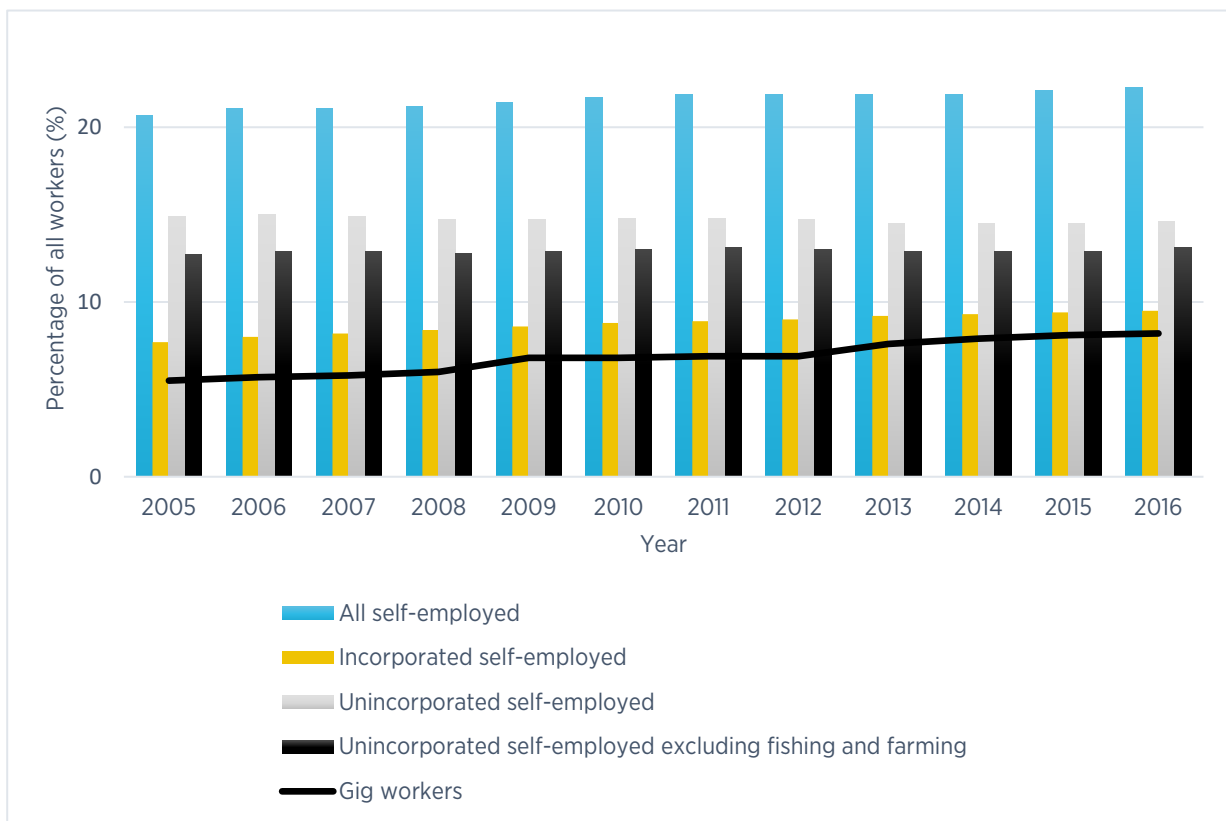
¹⁵ Randstad. (2019). [Workforce 2025: The future of the world of work](#), p. 2.

¹⁶ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

type of loosely regulated, hyper-flexible type of Foodora employee.¹⁷ Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Uber lost its right to appeal a decision that found its workers were not self-employed, as Uber insisted, but were rather employees of the company.¹⁸ These are a couple of examples in a litany of cases involving challenges to the idea that gig workers are self-employed, with many people arguing they are employed by the company but in a relationship characterized by unusual levels of flexibility.

Figure 5 shows the proportion of all Canadian workers who work in self-employment, and how many work in the sub-category of the gig economy, making it possible to ascertain that from 2005 to 2016 the proportion of the self-employed working in so-called gig work grew significantly, with the percentage of those working in self-employment rising to 22.3 percent from 20.7 percent, an increase of eight percent. Correspondingly, the percentage of those working as gig workers rose to 8.2% from 5.5%, a 49% increase over the same period, demonstrating a higher rate of growth in the gig work category than in self-employment overall.

Figure 5: Changes in the shares of self-employed workers aged 15+, 2005-2016¹⁹



¹⁷ Ontario Labour Relations Board. (February 25, 2020). [Canadian union of postal workers v. Foodora Inc.](#)

¹⁸ Butler, S. (December 20, 2018). [Uber loses appeal over driver employment rights.](#)

¹⁹ Developed from data reported in Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

One of the most interesting ways to measure and consider gig work from a policy and regulatory perspective is to look at annual growth rate. Figure 6 shows dramatic spikes in the percentage of workers in gig work, corresponding presumably to the development, change and influx of technological, policy-level and/or corporate entrants. While the rate of growth in the gig work category remained positive, it was low and even very low in some years, dropping to almost zero in 2010 and 2012, and rendering a growth rate lower than the growth rate in self-employment overall in 2010. Nonetheless, gig work spiked dramatically between 2008 and 2009, and again from 2012 to 2013.

Figure 6: Percent of self-employed workers against gig workers, rate of annual change, 2005-2016²⁰



Analyzing the data in this way can offer insights into how corporations, policy changes and/or technology enable entry into the gig economy for workers previously not engaged in any form of self-employment.

This quick peek into the most recent data available from Statistics Canada about gig work speaks to the way this type of work and employment relation is changing the experience of Canadian workers. As we see an upward trend in Canadians conducting gig work, we also see there is uneven and at times

²⁰ Developed from data reported in Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

contradictory evidence to assess whether gig work involvement improves worker outcomes over time. These averages and broad-sweeping trends tend to mask the reality that gig worker experiences vary drastically depending on dimensions such as skills level, capital investment, level of precarity, NOC area of engagement, and income level, indicating that it's vitally important to understand gig work better from employee, employer and regulatory perspectives.

In the last two decades, a key driver in the growth of alternative work has been the emergence of online platforms or “labour platforms”²¹ as a new business model. For example, the first online freelancing platform launched in 1999 (Elance), followed by Odesk in 2003. Then, the two firms merged to form Upwork, which as of 2018 reports over 12 million registered freelancers worldwide. At the most general level, platforms are digital infrastructures that facilitate group interactions. Labour platforms vary substantially in terms of target markets and other configurations, but all operate in order to liaise between consumers/clients and service-providing individuals.²² Gig work is “increasingly part of the way work is done in many industries and across all types of organizations.”²³ Online platforms have become central to almost every aspect of our economic activity, including work.

The value of platforms as a tool to match employers and workers is in their ability to provide information on worker reliability, invoicing and payments, and providing the digital infrastructure for exchanges to take place, thereby removing typical labour market frictions.^{24, 25} For example, a 2018 survey of Canada’s digital economy—the first of its kind—found that 28 percent of Canadians aged 18 and older were making money through online platforms.²⁶ The removal of friction between these parties makes digital platform employment difficult to identify, understand and regulate with the historical methods available to us.

For the purpose of this review, we have developed the following definition of gig work:

A category of work, or work arrangement, deemed to be non-standard or informal compared to a standard employment relationship. This alternative work fills a need by providing access to labour (for employers) and flexibility and access to the labour market (for workers). While people at all socioeconomic levels can participate in gig work, it is characterized as having uncertain future business activities, being minor or casual in nature, lacking options for career or personal advancement, and lacking in formalized protection for the worker and employers.

²¹ Kuhn, K.M. and Galloway, T.L. (2019). [Expanding perspectives on gig work and gig workers](#), p. 186-191.

²² Kuhn, K.M. and Galloway, T.L. (2019). [Expanding perspectives on gig work and gig workers](#), p. 186.

²³ Harpel, E. (2019). [Gig and independent work](#), p. 18-23.

²⁴ Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#).

²⁵ Graham, M. and Woodcock, J. (2020). [The gig economy: A critical introduction](#).

²⁶ Statistics Canada. (2018). [Digital economy, July 2017 to June 2018](#).

A working definition allows for meaningful inquiry into gig work but also acknowledges that the classification or definition of gig work is historically, socially and economically situated.²⁷

These new and emerging conditions within the gig economy lead us to frame gig work as extremely varied in terms of work done, over what time period, and how much compensation is delivered. While it is essential to acknowledge that gig work is not fully limited to this definition (precarious employment has a long history that is not necessarily technology-enabled), the focus of this review is of unprecedented importance now because within this frame, gig work:

- Is technology-enabled, and both the work and the employment relation are usually managed through a matching platform;
- Outsources the burden of risk onto workers, relying disproportionately on independent contractors to carry out main business activities;
- Sells flexibility and opportunity as part of the worker experience;
- Is ever-present, but relatively understudied and poorly understood, particularly in Canada;
- Involves individuals of all ages, and at all ends of the socioeconomic spectrum;
- Can be short term or long term by contract, while spanning an entire career, but is characterized by on-demand labour availability; and
- Is often positioned as part of the sharing economy, though it facilitates profit-making capabilities.

These characteristics represent a change from traditional forms of part-time, temporary, and informal work, presenting new challenges to our current regulatory labour landscape.

In the section below, we offer a primer on the historical context of gig work today, situating this type of employment relationship as a new form of technology-enabled work that is derivative of a very old form of labour relation. Then, we will consider different dimensions—such as precarity—as conditions for understanding and making sense of gig work in its modern iteration and within this working definition, revealing new and important distinctions.

Historical context

As noted, gig work as defined within this frame exists in contrast to historical standard employment relationships (SERs). The origins of the SER as a normative model of employment in the Global North is in the institutional rapprochement between labour and capital that was mandated by postwar

²⁷ Haraway, D. (1988). [Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective](#), p. 575-599.

reconstruction. For employers, the operation of capital-intensive industries demanded a stable workforce. This need was met by the core of the organized labour force that was attached to the mass production system in exchange for the promise of economic security. For workers, this meant the expectation of a “stable, socially protected, dependent, full-time job... the basic conditions of which (working time, pay, healthcare) are regulated to a minimum level by collective agreement or by labour and/or social security law.”^{28, 29} In Canada, this compromise was buttressed by the socioeconomic policies that created the postwar welfare state.³⁰

In many ways, the SER is a misnomer. From both a historical and global perspective, it represents an anomaly that even at its peak was not universally accessible. In Canada, SERs and the “family wage” were the sole prerogative of men employed in core sectors of the economy, while policies and practices explicitly curtailed the participation of women and minorities.^{31, 32} Regardless of this, the loss of reliable SERs in the Global North has become a key element of changing labour relations of our time.

The decline of SERs can be traced to the 1970s, when a global economic downturn and long decline in manufacturing profitability mandated greater flexibility in labour markets. This trend accelerated in the 1990s, when technological innovations facilitated the unbundling of work into its constituent tasks, while new networks of connectivity provided employers with access to geographically dispersed labour markets.^{33, 34, 35} Like much of the industrialized west, Canada subsequently witnessed a dramatic rise in non-standard forms of employment. Since the 1970s, academics and Statistics Canada report that part-time work and self-employment have grown by almost 200 percent, while full-time work has grown by 80 percent.^{36, 37}

²⁸ Bosch, G. (1986). [Hat das Normalarbeitsverhältnis eine Zukunft?](#), p. 163-176.

²⁹ International Labour Organization. (February 13, 2018). [What can the past tell us about the future of work?](#)

³⁰ Hyman, L. (2018). [Temp: How American work, American business, and the American dream became temporary.](#)

³¹ Ibid.

³² Vosko, L.F. (2000). [Temporary work: The gendered rise of a precarious employment relationship.](#)

³³ Hyman, L. (2018). [Temp: How American work, American business, and the American dream became temporary.](#)

³⁴ Johal, S. and Thirgood, J. (2016). [Working without a net: Rethinking Canada's social policy in the new age of work.](#)

³⁵ Srnicek, N. (2016). [Platform capitalism.](#)

³⁶ Vosko, L. F. (2000). [Temporary work: The gendered rise of a precarious employment relationship.](#)

³⁷ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data.](#)

The main enabler of this shift is technology—platforms that connect service providers with service deliverers can enable paid transactions to take place in real life, as in a ride service arrangement.



According to Statistics Canada, self-employed temporary workers now constitute more than 20 percent of the labour force and are by far the fastest growing labour group in Canada.³⁸ Data in both Canada and the United States suggest an ongoing upward trend in people who are employed through the gig economy.^{39, 40, 41} Further to that, the idea that gig work is a temporary type of employment may also be changing. According to one report, there are now “as many freelancers who view freelancing as long-term as there are that view it as temporary, at 50% each.”⁴²

A 2018 survey of Canada’s digital economy found 28 percent of Canadians aged 18 and older were making money through online platforms.⁴³ The most common method of earning was by selling new or used products through online bulletin boards such as Kijiji, eBay and Etsy. This amounted to \$4.9 billion in earnings, or an average of \$722 per person. This activity was most popular among Canadians under age 44 as well as those with an annual personal income above \$100,000. Other ways of making money included providing online freelance services, posting creative content online (e.g., YouTube videos), and offering peer-to-peer ride, delivery or accommodation services. The survey did not shed light on the earnings of this group.

It’s clear that many workers are diversifying their income streams or changing their style of employment altogether, shifting from an SER model

³⁸ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data](#).

³⁹ Katz, L.F. and Krueger, A.B. (2016). [The rise and nature of alternative work arrangements in the United States, 1995–2015](#), p. 1-48.

⁴⁰ Intuit. (2010). [Intuit 2020 report: Twenty trends that will shape the next decade](#).

⁴¹ Yssaad, L. and Ferrao, V. (2019). [Self-employed Canadians: Who and why?](#)

⁴² Ozimek, A. (2019). [Report: Freelancing and the economy in 2019](#).

⁴³ Statistics Canada. (2018). [Digital economy, July 2017 to June 2018](#).

to working through a gig work or freelance model. The main enabler of this shift is technology—platforms that connect service providers with service deliverers can enable paid transactions to take place in real life, as in a ride service arrangement. However, digital tools and platforms can now also enable delivery of digital services, such as graphic design, translation, website coding and so on, which means transactions, labour and service delivery can take place completely online, and are often mediated through a centralized digital platform.

While precarious engagement mediated through temporary contracts is old, this form of easy access, hyper-mobile, on-demand labour that can effortlessly cross national boundaries, time zones and currencies is new. Changes in the mode of transaction and labour relationship management also have sociological impacts, such as on cultures of work, identity formation through work, and certainly upon the kinds of norms that exist for workers around workplace benefits and protections.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT GIG WORK

Through the literature review, three key themes emerged around the nature and experience of a technology-enabled gig economy in Canada:

1 The meaning of work

2 The organization of work and workers

3 The shifting of risk

Each theme is described below in relation to practices of work, answering questions such as: What is new and different when it comes to technology-enabled gig work? And how has gig work changed this element of the worker experience? These themes are used to understand the key dimensions of the experience of gig workers within the literature.



A NOD TO MODERN TIMES

Where do we go from here?

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) a pandemic.⁴⁴ Beginning initially as an epidemic far away, the virus spread quickly, soon crossing Canadian borders. At the time of writing, we find ourselves nearly three months into a nation-wide quarantine—closed borders, remote work and the cancelling of all non-essential services.

Effects of COVID-19 on the organization of work and workers

The economic cost of this change has been difficult for all, but gig workers have been particularly exposed. Cancelled shows, closed bars, rigid travel restrictions and collective cutbacks on non-essential spending mean many who have relied on gig work—work deemed to be non-standard as compared to full-time employment—are uniquely precarious. Many gig workers are not covered by employment insurance or even early iterations of economic relief, and we are seeing this lack of worker protection and the overall precarity of gig workers manifested in more amplified and critical ways than before. For instance, two months after Foodora (an app-based food-delivery service) workers won the right to unionize in Canada—a monumental and precedent-setting determination—the company declared it would shut down its Canadian

operations on May 11.⁴⁵ The timing raises concerns that Foodora's exit from Canada had more to do with the threat of its workers unionizing than the high competition it mentioned in its press release.⁴⁶ These concerns are only amplified when considering the unique circumstances imposed by COVID-19. The decision comes at a time when food delivery and other types of gig workers are increasingly perceived as frontline and essential workers, but without the remuneration and benefits to recognize the risks they adopt in continuing to work.

Exacerbating shifts in risk

This consideration of gig workers as representatives of large numbers of working Canadians has motivated a federal economic response to protect people working in this area. As of early April 2020, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB)

⁴⁴ Ducharme, J. (March 11, 2020). [World Health Organization declares COVID-19 a 'pandemic'. Here's what that means.](#)

⁴⁵ Mojtehdzadeh, S. (April 27, 2020). [Food-delivery app Foodora announces exit from Canada two months after historic worker win.](#)

⁴⁶ Foodora Canada. (April 28, 2020). [Foodora Canada announces plans to close business while assuring support for employees.](#)

expanded to fit the needs of gig workers, becoming available to those working 10 hours or less a week or earning less than \$500 a month.⁴⁷ This intervention complements those made available to other essential workers, such as grocery store employees who received a \$2-an-hour increase in wages to recognize their contributions as frontline workers.⁴⁸ Further, Canadians are becoming increasingly concerned over the health and safety of workers and local economies, resulting in an influx of informal support networks for gig workers such as ilostmygig.ca⁴⁹ or online fundraisers for vulnerable Foodsters United couriers.⁵⁰

Many gig workers are either out of work entirely or are in a position where they are forced to consider a trade-off: having no income but ensuring they can safely socially distance; or having a source of income that comes at the risk of exposing oneself to the virus. For some, this risk is acceptable, in return for high compensation that is contractual in nature.

For many, it is a necessity and a condition accepted as a way of getting connected to

easy, available labour or an employment relationship that was working well, until now.

The federal government's rapid action on behalf of this group is evidence of the growing slice of the labour market earning in the gig work arena.⁵¹

More than ever, it is important to know who gig workers in Canada are and what their experience is like, working in the gig economy. Our review of the literature and some initial analysis of available data have led us to consider the diverse experiences of gig workers. There is a need to consider the many dimensions that impact on the experiences of gig workers, and to describe the nature and experience of gig work in Canada. In the following section we outline different dimensions that moderate gig work.



⁴⁷ Mojtehdzadeh, S. (April 7, 2020). [For artists and gig workers, expanded emergency benefit access is 'encouraging' ... but worries about the post-COVID-19 future remain.](#)

⁴⁸ Grant, T. and Baum, K.B. (March 29, 2020). [Front-line workers receiving pay increases from big companies.](#)

⁴⁹ I Lost My Gig Canada (ILMG). (n.d.). [I lost my gig.](#)

⁵⁰ FundRazr. (n.d.). [COVID-19 hardship fund for vulnerable foodsters united couriers.](#)

⁵¹ Government of Canada. (2020). [Canada's COVID-19 economic response plan.](#)

The meaning of work

Historically, work was a place for individuals to build meaning—an important source for forming individual identities and finding a sense of purpose and social validation. Over the last half century, work has superseded the church, family and education in this role, as a place where identity is built.⁵² For example, when someone is asked what they do, it is usually to understand how they identify, act, and move through the world. This becomes a way to understand people—their identity, their abilities, their values, their purpose and their socioeconomic standing. Despite changes to the nature and availability of standard employment, work is still seen as a way to build and maintain a sense of self. Meaning and a sense of purpose are derived from personal job satisfaction, economic status and well-being, and the perceived meaning or social value placed on the work.

Further to that, work now dominates and pervades everyday life more completely than at any time in recent history. The obsession with work and employability spans across the socioeconomic spectrum. Society places the expectation on everybody—from welfare claimants to highly paid white-collar workers—that we should be actively seeking and prioritizing work, and it instills the notion that being “hard-working” is a quality to strive for. In these ways, work is described as increasingly forming our routines and psyches, squeezing out other influences.⁵³ It is in this context—one that puts so much personal and professional stake in work—that the changing nature of work and the relative disappearance of SERs become all the more concerning and impactful. Where in the past work provided a clear set of benefits and tradeoffs, today that exchange produces an increasingly unclear—or precarious—return on investment for workers.⁵⁴

Similar to traditional self-employment, work in the gig economy does not accept responsibility for meaning in work—it is up to the worker to find purpose and value in their jobs. For some, such as workers interviewed in a study within the oil and gas industry, gig work provides a return on investment that is a worthy trade-off, offering direct market access, a wider reach for jobs, and leading overall to improved job satisfaction.⁵⁵ For others, gig work and its flexible structure—which is often facilitated by a digital platform—may also fulfil goals and needs that extend beyond compensation. For example, gig work can sometimes be structured such that a person can act as a caregiver and a gig worker

⁵² Mumby, D.K. (2019). [Work: What is it good for? \(Absolutely nothing\). – A critical theorist’s perspective](#), p. 429-443.

⁵³ Beckett, A. (January 19, 2018). [Post-work: The radical idea of a world without jobs](#).

⁵⁴ Mumby, D.K. (2019). [Work: What is it good for? \(Absolutely nothing\). – A critical theorist’s perspective](#), p. 429-443.

⁵⁵ Khalid, F.A. Chan, W.M. and Jalil, A.A. (2019). [An autoethnographic report on freelance employment in the Malaysian oil and gas industry during uncertain economic conditions](#), p. 2592-2607.

In Canada, there is evidence to suggest that many workers participating in the gig economy are doing so out of necessity, not choice, which may further erode a sense of purpose or freedom.



simultaneously.⁵⁶ In addition to the variability of work supply, the nature of what gig work requires of service providers also varies widely. Gig work can require vastly different forms of investment across the dimensions of social, economic and human capital in order to participate. In fact, the opportunity to derive meaning or any social capital from work varies as well. Of particular interest is the prevalence of social capital as a form of investment in gig work, which is a relatively new construct. In a study on social capital and self-branding, it was found that self-branding is a critical factor in obtaining a reputation—an essential component of securing employment in some areas of the gig economy: “self-branding becomes an investment in social relationships with expected return for the acquisition of a reputation.”⁵⁷ Social, economic and human capital can be more accessible to some gig workers over others. If one’s ability to derive a sense of meaning and purpose from their work is partially dependent on their ability to secure capital, the implication is that those without easy access to capital are at a disadvantage.

Interestingly, gig employers and workers can benefit differently from the recent increase in the importance of social capital and self-branding. Gig platform providers often take pride in the roles they play, facilitating entrepreneurship opportunities.⁵⁸ Evidence of this can be seen in the degree to which platform operators refer to themselves and their platforms as central to the “democratization of

⁵⁶ Wallenstein et al. (2019). [The new freelancers: Tapping talent in the gig economy](#).

⁵⁷ Gandini, A. (2015). [Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy](#), p. 123-141.

⁵⁸ Ravenelle, A.J. (2017). [Sharing economy workers: Selling, not sharing](#), p. 281-295.

entrepreneurship.”⁵⁹ This idea has become so central to the brand and commercial value propositions of platform corporations that, for them, gig work is still a valuable (and profitable) source of identity. However, for many workers—who would normally also benefit from building personal or professional identity through work—the feeling isn’t mutual. In fact, many workers who gig on these platforms report not telling family or friends about their work, even when it represents a proportionately large source of their income.⁶⁰ This indicates that gig employers and gig workers benefit differently and disproportionately from the opportunities to build identity through work and this, in turn, might be a function of dimensions such as how much money they have put at stake to gig, how precarious their income stream is, or how exploited versus empowered they feel in their experiment with gig work “self-employment.” In Canada, there is evidence to suggest that many workers participating in the gig economy are doing so out of necessity, not choice, which may further erode a sense of purpose or freedom.⁶¹

The organization of work and workers

Non-standard work has quickly become a dominant form of work over the past 50 years, ironically, making it more standard than not. However, unlike traditional forms of non-standard work, such as self-employment or informal work, technology-enabled gig work can exacerbate precarious working conditions due to various factors. These factors can include the varied degree of flexibility and autonomy experienced by workers, the impact of a decentralized and disaggregated workforce, and the inherent difficulty of regulating the gig economy. While there is much that is innovative about the gig economy’s reliance on modern technology, in so far as the organization of work and workers is concerned, the underlying business model is deep-rooted.

Many platforms’ business models are built around large workforces competing to conduct relatively low-skilled tasks, controlled by powerful intermediaries, reiterating a model that evokes 18th-century outwork to 19th-century dock labour.⁶²

The blurring of boundaries between activities that constitute work has been an issue exacerbated by the addition of mobile phones into the work environment. Workers, for the first time, were available around the clock—raising questions about worker autonomy and freedom to parameterize work hours.⁶³ More

⁵⁹ Ravenelle, A.J. (2017). [Sharing economy workers: Selling, not sharing](#), p. 281-295.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Kostyshyna, O. and Luu, C. (2019). [The size and characteristics of informal \(“gig”\) work in Canada](#).

⁶² Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#), p. 9.

⁶³ Mazmanian, M. Orlikowski, W.J. and Yates, J. (2013). [The autonomy paradox: The implications of mobile email devices for knowledge professionals](#).

recently, it has been argued that technology-enabled gig work is intentionally sold as offering workers just enough schedule control to feel autonomous, while maintaining enough constraints so platforms have a safety net.⁶⁴ For example, in the February 2020 Ontario Labour Board ruling on the status of workers at Foodora, it's clear that while Foodora drivers are provided with options for *when* they work, which is presented as a choice, their decisions are always constrained in two ways⁶⁵—schedules have prescribed timeslots that are made available to them and earning potential is restricted by pricing models that are dictated to them. Both their schedules and their earning potential are designed and controlled by the app and ultimately limit their choice.^{66, 67} These types of constrained choices have been experienced not only by Foodora workers in Canada, but also by Uber, TaskRabbit and Kitchensurfing workers in the United States.⁶⁸ So, while it's true that in many ways workers are given the freedom of choice, their choices are ultimately bound by the constraints of the app.

Despite the promise of autonomy and flexibility, gig employers can also exercise considerable control over how workers deliver their labour. Algorithmic management enables platforms to deliver tightly curated services, wherein they can dictate the entire transaction by means of close control over their workforce: from setting terms and conditions and checking relevant qualifications to ensuring proper performance and payment. Lack of decision-making power for workers across these dimensions continues to restrict worker autonomy.^{69, 70}

The decentralization and disaggregation of gig workers, enabled by digital platforms, is also an important consideration in how gig work has changed from traditional models of work and worker organization. A decentralized workforce and the distance placed between the gig workers and gig employers leads to a lack of visibility and reduced lines of accountability, which is in turn difficult to regulate. This lack of accountability and regulation shapeshifts to conform differently to scenarios but can often be seen working to protect gig platform operators from work behaviour deemed to be risky to the brand. For example, Airbnb has often been found to be conspicuously absent when a guest's or host's behaviour requires reprimand or reparations, taking the public stance that it's "a marketplace and that control—and risk—falls on the hosts and guests." This same distancing can be seen in worker termination in the form of platform dismissals that are often wrapped in opaque messaging about "demonstrating unprofessional behaviour" without option for evidence, dispute or inquiry.⁷¹

⁶⁴ Jarrahi et al. (2019). [Platformic management, boundary resources for gig work and worker autonomy](#), p. 153-189.

⁶⁵ Ontario Labour Relations Board. (February 25, 2020). [Canadian union of postal workers v. Foodora Inc.](#)

⁶⁶ Kellogg, K.C. Valentine, M.A. and Christin, A. (2020). [Algorithms at work: The new contested terrain of control](#), p. 366-410.

⁶⁷ Rosenblat, A. and Stark, L. (2016). [Algorithmic labor and information asymmetries: A case study of Uber's drivers](#), p. 3758-3784.

⁶⁸ Ravenelle, A.J. (2019). [Hustle and gig: Struggling and surviving in the sharing economy](#).

⁶⁹ Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#).

⁷⁰ Rosenblat, A. (2018). [Uberland: How algorithms are rewriting the rules of work](#).

⁷¹ Ravenelle, A.J. (2019). [Hustle and gig: Struggling and surviving in the sharing economy](#).

The difficulty in regulating the gig economy and the lack of standard labour laws that protect gig worker rights are widely agreed upon problems in the literature reviewed.^{72, 73, 74, 75} The absence of labour regulation and rights leaves workers largely exposed to the forces of the external labour market.^{76, 77} Additionally, the decentralized nature of gig work can become a barrier to the creation of relationships and community building for workers, making it difficult to collectively organize around worker experience. The remoteness of work undermines workers' ability to form interpersonal networks of trust through personal interaction with their clients, which can undermine the ability of workers to disintermediate their labour from platforms.⁷⁸ Co-working has been identified as one method gig workers can use to share experiences and provide further security and structure to the structurally informal, uncertain and precarious nature of gig work.

The shifting of risk

In a standard employment relationship, employers accept a number of protective obligations imposed by labour policies and regulations in exchange for the economic benefits of control over their workforce. It's a crucial trade-off: workers follow their employers' orders and enjoy a basic level of stability and economic security in return. This trade-off—which became standard under Fordism, the system of mass production pioneered in the early 20th century by the Ford Motor Company—meant a worker could expect to trade the deskilling of their labour (through the introduction of simplified, menial and repetitive tasks) in exchange for stability.⁷⁹ Today, gig workers continue to conduct deskilled work, but without work protection, opportunities for job progression, or any guarantee of financial stability.⁸⁰

There can also be a connection drawn between the development of gig work as we know it today and the increased need to identify and align with the corporate brand. Management thinking in the last half century has increasingly recommended identifying what your company is best at and hiring employees to do only those core competencies. Everything else, they say, should be outsourced to lessen overhead and reduce risk.⁸¹

⁷² Donovan, S.A. Bradley, D.H. and Shimabukuru, J.O. (2016). [What does the gig economy mean for workers?](#), p. 22.

⁷³ Salamon, E. (2019). [Digitizing freelance media labor: A class of workers negotiates entrepreneurialism and activism](#), p. 105-122.

⁷⁴ Poon, T.S. (2018). [Independent workers: Growth trends, categories, and employee relations implications in the emerging gig economy](#), p. 63-69.

⁷⁵ Stewart, A. and Stanford, J. (2017). [Regulating work in the gig economy: What are the options?](#), p. 420-437.

⁷⁶ Wood et al. (2019). [Networked but commodified: The \(dis\)embeddedness of digital labour in the gig economy](#), p. 931-950.

⁷⁷ Todoli-Signes, A. (2017). [The 'gig economy': Employee, self-employed or the need for a special employment regulation?](#), p. 193-205.

⁷⁸ Merkel, J. (2018). ['Freelance isn't free.' Co-working as a critical urban practice to cope with informality in creative labour markets](#), p. 526-547.

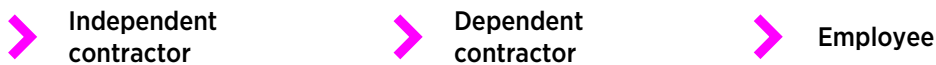
⁷⁹ Mumby, D.K. (2019). [Work: What is it good for? \(Absolutely nothing\). – A critical theorist's perspective](#), p. 429-443.

⁸⁰ Ontario Labour Relations Board. (February 25, 2020). [Canadian union of postal workers v. Foodora Inc.](#)

⁸¹ Mumby, D.K. (2019). [Work: What is it good for? \(Absolutely nothing\). – A critical theorist's perspective](#), p. 429-443.

Examples of this style of management thinking can be seen across all types of employment, not just gig work. For instance, it's this style of thinking that helps businesses like Nike realize its most valuable asset isn't the ability to design and manufacture running shoes, it's the ability to build an athletic lifestyle brand.⁸² This style of management thinking in standard work relationships has made it easy to justify the outsourcing of many types of work activities previously held under the umbrella of the employer in order to lessen or shift the burden of risk away from the corporation.

Despite changes to the experience of work for gig workers in recent years, the categorizations for workers are still created through the lens of risk and its proportional reward. Canada has three types of employment characterized around risk:



Gig workers have received a lot of attention over the issue of misclassification^{83, 84} — categorizing them as independent contractors when, in many instances, their dependency on the employer resembles more that of an employee.

Canada's dependent contractor status exists to fill this gap—when a contractor more closely resembles the status of an employee than independent contractor and is granted the right to collective bargaining. This was a central argument in the 2020 Foodora unionization ruling.⁸⁵ The United States does not have this status.^{86, 87} In Europe, a study showed that employees who fell between self-employed and employed—a dependent self-employed worker—ended up experiencing an increase in job demands compared to full-time employees, and a lowered amount of job control compared to those who were self-employed, resulting in overall worse job outcomes.⁸⁸

⁸² Mumby, D.K. (2019). [Work: What is it good for? \(Absolutely nothing\) — A critical theorist's perspective](#), p. 429-443.

⁸³ Bajwa et al. (2018). [Towards an understanding of workers' experiences in the global gig economy](#).

⁸⁴ Zwick, A. (2017). [Welcome to the gig economy: Neoliberal industrial relations and the case of Uber](#), p. 679-691.

⁸⁵ Ontario Labour Relations Board. (February 25, 2020). [Canadian union of postal workers v. Foodora Inc.](#)

⁸⁶ Ravenelle, A.J. (2019). [Hustle and gig: Struggling and surviving in the sharing economy](#).

⁸⁷ Jeon, S.H. Liu, H. and Ostrovsky, Y. (2019). [Measuring the gig economy in Canada using administrative data](#).

⁸⁸ Millán, A. Millán, J.M. and Caçador-Rodrigues, L. (2019). [Disclosing 'masked employees' in Europe: Job control, job demands and job outcomes of 'dependent self-employed workers.'](#)

In many ways, independent contractors have emerged as part of a strategic business model, particularly in the gig economy. Portraying workers as independent contractors or even “partners”⁸⁹ and refuting their employment status creates shareholder value by avoiding the cost of, and responsibility for, a large workforce. Instead, employers can devolve responsibility for assets, remuneration, insurance, tax and risks of fluctuating demand onto a fleet of “micro-entrepreneurs.”⁹⁰ This explains the high valuation of many platforms’ companies. In reality, most platform operators have been sustaining high losses thanks to subsidies funded by venture capitals—this has allowed them to create network effects and establish monopoly power.^{91, 92}

The outsourcing of labour and misclassification of workers, combined with the proliferation of personal devices and platform technology, has made labour less visible—and in many ways there are strategic advantages to diminished visibility. Workers are kept at a distance from the operational centres of the business, even where an element of physical interaction remains. Invisible though it might be, labour is still central to the gig economy: without access to large pools of on-demand workers, it would be impossible for platforms and apps to deliver any of the gigs, tasks and rides they offer.

Technology allows this type of employment to be scaled, to permeate traditional borders, and to be increasingly difficult to contain. It also shapes our perceptions of what’s going on behind the scenes. For instance, when we interact with a well-designed app on our computers or mobile devices, it’s easy for us to forget that we are interacting with a human being on the other side of that device who will ultimately provide the service, blurring the lines between algorithms and humans.⁹³

Perceiving the worker as a service, whether implicitly or not, is a core component of the gig economy model and contributes to the precarity and risk associated with being a gig worker. This can be seen quite clearly in Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos’ discussion of gig workers as “artificial, artificial intelligence” and the historical roots of gig platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT).⁹⁴ The multitudes of workers coordinated through AMT comprise what Bezos called in 2006 “humans as a service.”⁹⁵ The attraction of humans as a service and its prevalence in 21st-century business modeling is simple: functions such as IT infrastructure, in large workforces, are expensive to build and maintain. Workers need to be trained and paid wages—irrespective of peaks and troughs in consumer demand. Once work itself becomes the

⁸⁹ Ahsan, M. (2020). [Entrepreneurship and ethics in the sharing economy: A critical perspective](#), p. 19-33.

⁹⁰ Adams, A. Freedman, J. and Prassl, J. (2018). [Rethinking legal taxonomies for the gig economy](#), p. 475-494.

⁹¹ Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#).

⁹² Srnicek, N. (2016). [Platform capitalism](#).

⁹³ Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#), p. 5.

⁹⁴ Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#).

⁹⁵ Ibid.

service or commodity, however, such responsibilities can be avoided, lowering prices for consumers and increasing employer profits.⁹⁶

At a fundamental level, by presenting themselves as intermediaries rather than service providers, gig economy platform operators can shift nearly all of their business risk and cost onto others. This presents risks for workers, but also for consumers and taxpayers. For instance, there have been numerous incidents of consumers facing serious problems (e.g., assault, discrimination, death), for which the platforms did not accept liability. For taxpayers, the gig economy business model leads to significant tax-income losses—both directly, through unpaid taxes, and indirectly, through taxpayer-funded subsidies for platform workers who may have to rely more heavily on the social security system, despite working full-time hours.⁹⁷

An interesting point to consider, however, is that the way in which platforms are changing the nature of the formal and informal economies is not necessarily one directional. Although the nature of gig platforms erode SERs, they may also offer a progressive onramp to work formalization. Less-educated workers often come from a low-income background, labouring in insecure, low-paid work in informal local markets. It's quite possible they see technology-enabled gig work as an attractive substitute to a dysfunctional informal labour market, and one that represents a significant chance to access opportunities to support one's livelihood.⁹⁸ While much attention has been paid to the de-skilling of gig work, it's possible that gig work also functions inversely—to give structure and make visible new groups of workers.

Dimensions impacting on gig workers

This overview of the literature has revealed interwoven themes about the meaning and organization of work and the shifting of risk. Within these themes, some key dimensions have been revealed. We suspect that differences in these following categories will significantly impact a person's experiences in gig work, and are all factors that policy-makers might consider as requiring gig-work-specific consideration:

- skill level;
- level of initial financial and social capital investment at entry;
- level of compensation;
- level of identification and meaning derivation a person gets from their work;

⁹⁶ Prassl, J. (2018). [Humans as a service: The promise and perils of work in the gig economy](#).

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Anwar, M.A. and Graham, M. (2019). [Hidden transcripts of the gig economy: Labour agency and the new art of resistance among African gig workers](#).

- level of precarity/insecurity; and
- level of true autonomy/freedom.

These factors all have levels—individual spectrums of low to high—that together condition a person’s experience. However, none of these factors are fixed entities. As environmental conditions change, so will a person’s impression that they are making enough, or not enough, compensation. As a person’s family factors change—they get married, develop an illness, or become a parent, for example—the level of financial risk they are willing to take to enter work may decrease, or their needs around accessing employer pension contributions may increase. Even shifts in immigration status could alter how a person perceives job satisfaction in gig work. If the only job someone is able to access is in the informal gig economy because they don’t have the correct work visa, they may have high levels of satisfaction with that opportunity. However, when the same person gains Canadian work rights, they may wish for gig work to be replaced by a more secure income stream. The fact is, more Canadians are conducting gig work than ever before, underlining the urgency of the need to further research and better understand gig work for the Canadian economy.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The purpose of this review was to develop a deeper understanding of the gig economy in Canada—in particular the nature of gig work and the experiences of its workers. From the lack of regulated controls for gig workers to establish financial and personal security to the low-skill nature of some of the tasks at the centre of their work, the gig model represents a shift away from standard employment relationships. To understand gig work and gig workers, it is necessary to create defined typologies to characterize them. Doing so would enable policy and research specific to their unique circumstances and would also enable the opportunity to articulate worker needs and experiences more clearly, across the full spectrum of gig work.

Understanding gig work and gig workers is necessary. Firstly, we recommend that a set of speculative worker typologies be defined to model different outcomes of the variations we have identified. Having more defined categories of gig workers would enable policy and research specific to their unique circumstances, and would also enable the opportunity to articulate worker needs and experiences more clearly, across the full spectrum of gig work.

The need for such knowledge is all the more critical due to the increased uncertainty, vulnerability and precarity many workers are experiencing as a result of COVID-19. We have seen how gig workers are left precarious in these times: Foodora workers' successful fight to reject the independent contractor labelling and secure the right to unionize was shattered when the company exited the country mid-pandemic. This decision to exit casts uncertainty on the viability and ease of unionizing the gig economy (or at least reinforcing certain labour standards for gig workers) at scale. It also reinforces the disproportionate power gig employers can have over their workers and lays bare the question of how we might begin to dismantle or better regulate those power structures. Furthermore, many gig workers are now perceived as essential workers and their needs are being incorporated in Canada's pandemic-related emergency benefits. It is worth questioning whether gig workers' needs are perhaps more illuminated than they have been in the past and whether, consequently, the essential worker paradigm shift will persist post-pandemic.

Questions around the recognition and regulation of gig work in Canada need to be explored further. Understanding how workers enter, navigate and experience the gig economy is a critical component to better understanding what policies are required to best protect and support them. By applying the insights and frameworks identified throughout this paper, and supplementing them with additional primary research, we can build a policy agenda that addresses the nuances of gig work in Canada.

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