

The Evolution of American Labor: A Defense of the Gig Economy

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“This is the real secret of life -- to be completely engaged with what you are doing in the here and now. And instead of calling it work, realize it is play.”

– Alan Watts, American philosopher

What would you like to do if money were no object? How would you really enjoy your life? Throughout my first two years at the University of Notre Dame, while developing my own answers to these questions, I posed these same questions to numerous classmates, friends, and strangers. Most people’s responses had to do with activities such as creating music, traveling the world, or volunteering for humanitarian causes.

Next, I would ask people what they were actually studying, followed by the familiar question, “What are you going to be when you grow up?” Shockingly, many people’s responses to the two sets of questions were completely dissimilar. I met investment bankers-to-be who dreamed of teaching, prospective engineers who fancied the idea of sailing the world in a small wooden boat, and a magnitude of other students with brilliant dreams who were bound by the grasp of a disheartening reality: If your dream was something creative and unconventional you were destined to be Usher, Michelangelo, or unemployed.

People seemed to be investing their money and time on an education that would prepare them to work in jobs they would hate doing. They are willing to sacrifice years of their lives on jobs they anticipate hating in the hope that they could make enough money to spend any remaining time they had doing the things they really loved doing.

At the same time, I began reading articles about people like Kara Oh, a 67-year-old Uber driver from Santa Barbara, California, who was using “the gig economy” to work *and* do what she loved. In the morning, she’d write novels and manage a non-profit that helps young writers publish their work. In the afternoon and evening, she’d make a living driving people around using the Uber platform, all the while dreaming up new characters and stories for her books. She writes, “I have a story I want to tell through my writing, and Uber is allowing me to do it.”

Inspired by this idea, I dug deeper into ‘the gig economy,’ a collection of companies using software platforms to create a more flexible work option by paying workers for each task they perform. Available to anyone with a smartphone, the gig economy makes part time labor in a variety of industries accessible to everyone.

I began finding Uber-esque business models for anything I could imagine. There was DoorDash, a food-delivery company, and Handy, an on-demand handyman service. People were delivering alcohol with Grizzly, parking each other’s cars with Luxe, and transforming their garages into professional studios with Etsy.

I could travel the world for next to nothing using Airbnb, get detailed guided tours created by locals in each destination using a smartphone with the Canogle app, and make enough money to fund it all by performing basic tasks on Mechanical Turk. Everywhere I

looked, ‘the gig economy’ was creating a revolutionary way turn work into play, but this freedom is coming at a cost.

In fact, many are arguing that it was a splinter in the invisible hand of economics, and a part of me couldn’t help but agree. It was irrefutably dangerous, and as Robert B. Reich from the University of California, Berkeley put it, “This on-demand economy means a work life that is unpredictable, doesn’t pay very well, and is terribly insecure.”

While Uber and similar business models are creating freedom in the workplace, they are also manipulating a gray area of the law by classifying and treating their workers as independent contractors instead of employees. As Travis Kalanick, the founder and CEO of Uber, stated, “Drivers value their independence – the freedom to push a button rather than punch a clock, to use Uber and Lyft simultaneously, to drive most of the week or just a few hours.” Uber painted itself as the white knight come to free workers from the shackles of full-time employment, but the reality they have created an all-or-nothing situation in which workers choose job security and constraint or freedom and uncertainty.

Today we stand at a pivotal crossroads. Having just reached a settlement of \$100 million dollars with drivers requesting the revenue they should have earned through tips, Uber must adapt to avoid facing tighter regulation. At the same time however, we would all benefit from re-opening the conversation about what labor can and should be.

All faults aside, Uber and ‘the gig economy’ have redefined what it means to work and earn a living in western culture. A recent report produced by Alan B. Krueger, an economist at Princeton University and former chairman of President Obama’s Council

of Economic Advisors, found that at the end of 2014 Uber had 160,000 drivers working on a regular basis, and on average Uber drivers worked less and earned more than full-time taxi drivers.

Time magazine recently reported that 44% of Americans have participated in ‘the gig economy’ as drivers or riders, hosts or guests, and lenders and borrowers, and there is a multitude of reasons why. Hailing an Uber is easier than getting a taxi, staying in somebody’s apartment is cheaper than booking a hotel, and buying a hand-crafted ring from a individual vendor on Etsy is far more personal than any commercial jewelry.

While a full-time career may suit some individuals this traditionally accepted employment model is at odds with the numerous realities and desires of people living in today’s world. People have many different dreams and they often change their mind. We need a labor model that is as flexible as the human species. .

Dr. Sundararajan, professor of business at NYU, has closely studied ‘the gig economy’ since its conception and is optimistic about its prospects. He explained, “These services are successful because they are tapping into people’s time more efficiently. You could say that people are monetizing their own downtime,” and believes that by allowing people to “monetize their downtime” we are incentivizing a culture to do what they love doing without having to sacrifice financial security.

Those who tap into the potential of the “gig economy” have the opportunity to exercise personal agency in a non-traditional way, , and although it is far from perfect, the “gig economy” is something worth defending. If Alan Watts were still alive, I imagine he would smile at the idea of ‘the gig economy.’ Hundreds of thousands of

Americans are finally combining work and play, and are able to lead more meaningful lives.

I have a dream that when my future children attend college, they can ask the same questions that I so persistently ask. I hope that they will hear about dreams as grand as the ones that I am consistently told, but I hope that they will not consider them dreams. I hope that by then, 'the gig economy' will have caught on, and they will know that any dream can become a reality.

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