RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

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RESEARCH IN PERSONNEL AND HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT VOLUME 39

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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1. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND THE GIG ECONOMY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AT THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL HR DECISION-MAKERS AND DIGITAL LABOR PLATFORMS

Kristine M. Kuhn, Jeroen Meijerink and Anne Keegan

ABSTRACT

This work examines the intersection between traditional human resource management and the novel employment arrangements of the expanding gig economy. While there is a substantial multidisciplinary literature on the digital platform labor phenomenon, it has been largely centered on the experiences of gig workers. As digital labor platforms continue to grow and specialize, more managers, executives, and human resource practitioners will need to make decisions about whether and how to utilize gig workers. Here the authors explore and interrogate the unique features of human resource management (HRM) activities in the context of digital labor platforms. The authors discuss challenges and opportunities regarding (1) HRM in organizations that outsource

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labor needs to external labor platforms, (2) HRM functions within digital labor platform firms, and (3) HRM policies and practices for organizations that develop their own spin-off digital labor platform. To foster a more nuanced understanding of work in the gig economy, the authors identify common themes across these contexts, highlight knowledge gaps, offer recommendations for future research, and outline pathways for collecting empirical data on HRM in the gig economy.

Keywords: Gig economy; gig workers; digital platform labor; contingent work arrangements; sharing economy; future of work

The rise of the gig economy has transformed not only the lives of millions of workers worldwide but also the operations and outcomes of businesses, both small and large, that rely on digital platforms to source labor. Location-based (on-site) gig workers include skilled chefs as well as those who deliver food orders, and remote (online/virtual) gig work incorporates both (semi)anonymous crowdworkers who do online piecework and highly skilled knowledge professionals who work on longer term projects. The term "gig economy" has sometimes been used to refer broadly to all casual or contingent work arrangements, while "platform economy" and "sharing economy" can refer to both labor (e.g., Uber, Upwork) and capital-based platforms (e.g., Etsy, Airbnb). Increasingly, however, both popular and academic discourse are converging on a shared understanding of the gig economy as paid labor facilitated by intermediary platform firms that connect organizations or consumers with on-demand workers via apps or web sites (Aloisi, 2015; Friedman, 2014; Koutsimpogiorgos, Van Slageren, Herrmann, & Frenken, 2020; Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Prassl, 2018; Stewart & Stanford, 2016).

While the field of human resource management (HRM) has developed a substantial scholarly literature on temporary employees and other forms of nonstandard work (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Connelly & Gallagher, 2004; Fisher & Connelly, 2017; Lepak & Snell, 1999; McLean Parks, Kidder, & Gallagher, 1998; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988), digital labor platforms constitute a novel employment arrangement (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Vallas & Schor, 2020). Electronically mediated gig work poses unique challenges to human resource management theory and research (Aguinis & Lawal, 2013; Kuhn, 2016; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019).

To date, most academic and public discourse on the gig economy has centered on workers' experiences and outcomes (Prassl, 2018; Rosenblat, 2019). But as digital labor platforms continue to proliferate and the number of people seeking gig work continues to grow, more organizational decision-makers such as executives, line managers, and human resource practitioners will intersect with the gig economy as part of their employee roles, raising many questions of practical importance to traditional organizations. Here we provide a framework for considering the challenges and opportunities posed by the gig economy and digital labor platforms for such organizational decision-makers. In particular, we highlight

how the HR policies and practices organizations enact regarding gig work and gig workers should be informed by HR expertise. The executives, line managers, and project managers making these decisions do not necessarily have significant training or background in human resource management. HR professionals can benefit from expanding their scope of influence beyond the management of the firm's employees to offer strategic and operational guidance on non-employee gig labor. Similarly, an HR perspective has much to offer research on the digital labor platform phenomenon, which until recently was largely derived from other disciplines such as sociology, information systems, and economics (e.g., Sutherland & Jarrahi, 2018; Vallas & Schor, 2020).

This chapter is organized as follows. We begin by describing the nature of gig work and discuss unique features of HRM in the gig economy – that is, HRM without employment, algorithmic HR management, and a dispersed HRM function – that challenge current thinking in the HRM literature. Then we discuss three ways HRM (in traditional organizations) intersects with digital labor platforms and the challenges as well as opportunities that these intersections present for the managers, HR practitioners, and other employees who engage with gig workers. First, we outline the diverse ways organizations are sourcing contingent labor through external digital labor platforms, and the benefits of addressing associated issues through a HR lens. Second, we consider HRM and labor processes within digital labor platform firms themselves, detailing issues relevant to the service employees that are employed by the platform firm and who make decisions about gig workers and their management. Third, we discuss the growing trend of large firms developing (or acquiring) their own spin-off and/or in-house platforms, addressing the strategic implications for such firms and for HR practice. Throughout we identify common themes in the interplay between organizations, their employees, and their non-employee gig workers: outcomes for gig workers, social legitimacy, and organizational effectiveness. The overarching framework that underlies this work is presented in Fig. 1. We conclude by spotlighting specific knowledge gaps that merit future research into HRM and the gig economy, and outline barriers and pathways to conducting this research.

THE NATURE OF GIG WORK

Gig workers are officially considered to be self-employed, but the digital platforms they use to find clients shape their working conditions and compensation to varying degrees. Technology affords labor platforms ways to manage nominally independent gig workers while still allowing them to deny the existence of an employment relationship (Meijerink, Keegan, & Bondarouk, 2021). Most notably, digital labor platforms utilize automatically generated reputational feedback mechanisms and implement algorithmic controls that can determine compensation and eligibility for work opportunities (Duggan, Sherman, Carbery, & McDonnell, 2020; Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019a).

Gig workers in wealthy countries do not enjoy the same regulatory protections and benefits offered to those classified as employees, and so they can be viewed

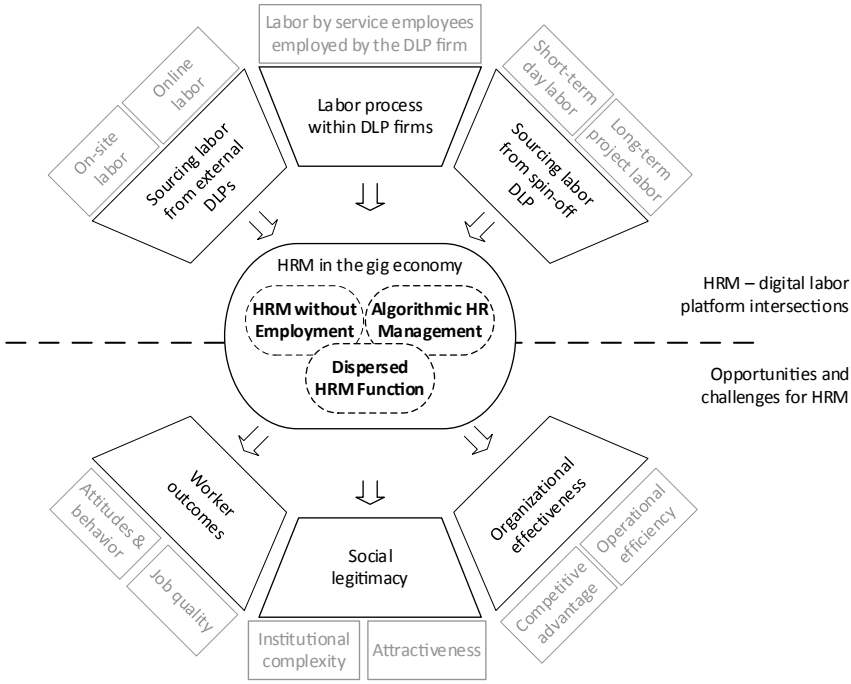

Fig. 1. The Kaleidoscope of Human Resource Management in the Gig Economy. *Note*: DLP, digital labor platform; HRM, human resource management.

as prime exemplars of the precariat, that is, workers who bear a great deal of risk with limited opportunity (e.g., Berg & Johnston, 2019; Gray & Suri, 2019; Pfeffer, 2015; Stewart & Stanford, 2017; Tran & Sokas, 2017). Those who do gig work as a side hustle to supplement regular waged employment may be better positioned to benefit from the flexibility and entrepreneurial aspects of gig work, and so labor platforms can arguably be viewed as free-riding off traditional employers (Schor, Attwood-Charles, Cansoy, Ladegaard, & Wengronowitz, 2020). However, growing numbers of people around the world depend on digital labor platforms as their primary source of income (Wallenstein, de Chalendar, Reeves, & Bailey, 2019), including workers with weaker labor market positions such as migrants (Van Doorn, Ferrari, & Graham, 2020).

The sustainability of gig work for individual workers and their economic vulnerability are ongoing topics of debate (Kost, Fieseler, & Wong, 2020; Prassl, 2018; Rosenblat, 2019), particularly in the United States where health care access remains largely tied to employment. Digital labor platforms that facilitate remote (i.e., online, such as Fiverr or Upwork) work may disproportionately benefit individuals in emerging economies who can use platform-generated signals of their quality to obtain better paid work from foreign clients (Kanat, Hong, & Raghu, 2018; Lehdonvirta, Kässi, Hjorth, Barnard, & Graham, 2019). Although remote

gig work may boost incomes for workers in developing nations, it also subjects them to risks like predatory intermediaries and social isolation (Graham et al., 2017).

Most empirical studies of gig workers have examined those who use prominent on-demand consumer service platforms, particularly Uber drivers (e.g., Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) and "Turkers" who do remote piecework tasks via Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform (Keith, Harms, & Tay, 2019). Digital labor platforms vary on a number of dimensions, however, and even the experiences of workers on the same platform are likely to vary depending on individual differences and the broader context.

For example, qualitative studies of Uber drivers in the United States and Europe have found sharply mixed emotional reactions and substantial variation in work-related attitudes (e.g., Malin & Chandler, 2017). Quantitative research has shown that the flexibility and autonomy of gig work creates surplus economic value for drivers (Chen, Rossi, Chevalier, & Oehlsen, 2019) as well as greater evaluative subjective well-being (Berger, Frey, Levin, & Danan, 2019), but only for those drivers motivated by this aspect of gig work. Some evidence suggests that the availability of Uber as an income-earning option allows people in wealthy countries to better weather unemployment shocks and other financial crises, and, therefore, it is still arguably a boon even to those drivers motivated by push rather than pull factors (Nian, Zhu, & Gurbaxani, 2020). Daniels and Grinstein-Weiss (2019), however, found it increases financial hardship for lower income households even if income volatility is reduced. In less developed countries, the advent of ride-hailing platforms may have increased the precarity and reduced the autonomy of people providing transportation services, because drivers no longer have the ability to negotiate with customers and apps supplant former methods of acquiring passengers (Sperber, 2020).

To date, there is limited empirical research on higher income professionals who utilize freelance labor platforms. HR and organizational behavior (OB) research on independent workers in knowledge-intensive and creative fields has typically studied freelancers who use word-of-mouth or other traditional methods to find clients (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Bidwell & Briscoe, 2009; Petriglieri, Ashford & Wrzesniewski, 2019). But tens of millions of professional freelancers now rely for all or part of their income on labor platforms such as Upwork and Freelancer.com, where they compete for project-based work. Some recent studies have demonstrated that platform features and policies are critical to shaping the experiences of these presumably more autonomous gig workers, analogous to their effects on remote gig workers who perform less complex and more repetitive work (see Lehdonvirta, 2018). Bellesia and her colleagues (Bellesia, Mattarelli, Bertolotti, & Sobrero, 2019) studied IT developers, translators, and graphic designers who source remote work from a major labor platform, finding evidence that platform design shapes construction of their work identities. Sutherland, Jarrahi, Dunn, and Nelson (2020) report that freelancers using the Upwork platform must develop "gig literacies" to leverage the platform effectively as well as adapt to its imposed structures and control mechanisms. In addition to the well-established open marketplace platforms such as Upwork, newer curated talent

platforms for specialized professions such as physicians (Li, Tang, Jiang, Yen, & Liu, 2019) and lawyers are proliferating (Kuhn, 2021); to date, workers on these pre-vetted platforms have received very little research attention.

Efforts to assess the number of gig workers and the overall economic impact of labor platforms have been complicated by methodological limitations and differences in how gig work is defined or interpreted by survey respondents (Abraham, Haltiwanger, Sandusky, & Spletzer, 2018; Collins, Garin, Jackson, Koustas, & Payne, 2019; Kuhn & Galloway, 2019). While perhaps as much as a third of the workforce in the United States and Europe are in flexible or non-standard employment arrangements (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017), an admittedly smaller percentage relies primarily on digital labor platforms for income (Wallenstein et al., 2019). Yet in 2016, an estimated 8% of American adults had earned money in the previous year by taking on a job or task via a digital platform (Smith, 2016). In the United Kingdom, 4% of workers were estimated to have participated in the gig economy in 2017 (CIPD), and the overall size of the gig economy was believed to have doubled between 2016 and 2019 (Partington, 2019). A recent representative survey in Australia found that 13% of the population had performed digital platform-mediated labor at some point, with one-third of those having performed both in-person location-based gig work and Internet-based gig work (McDonald, Williams, Stewart, Mayes, & Oliver, 2019). And there is no question that the global demand for Internet-based remote gig labor continues to grow at a remarkable pace (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018).

Extrapolating from current trends, some pundits have sounded dire warnings about "the Uberization of everything" and warned readers that "the gig economy is coming for your job" (Kim, 2020). At the time of this writing, the economic crisis and sudden shift to remote work caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is believed to be pushing more knowledge workers into platform-based work (Hasija, Padmanabhan, & Rampal, 2020). Digital labor platforms are adapting their infrastructure and focus to cope with changes in supply and demand for labor under current pandemic-related circumstances. For example, in response to the sharp drop in ride-hailing, Uber launched Work Hub in the spring of 2020, allowing its freelance "partners" to find work on other Uber platforms as well as temporary opportunities with a number of corporations (including McDonalds, UPS, and Pepsico) that Uber allows to use their system (Chandler, 2020).

Some labor experts, however, contend the gig economy is overhyped (Zumbrun, 2019), because most people will continue to prefer traditional employment. Crouch (2019) identifies limitations in the digital labor platform business model that could to prevent its expansion beyond current limited markets, such as the lack of willingness on the part of the state to provide social benefits to gig workers. Fleming, Rhodes, and Yu (2019, p. 488) characterized digital labor platform work as a minor phenomenon that will remain on the fringes because it is "unsuitable to the realities of work on a large scale."

We agree that digital labor platforms are unlikely to supplant traditional employment, but we are confident that digital labor platforms will continue to play a significant role in the global economy, both in their current forms and

perhaps in ways currently unforeseen. While legal challenges to the employment classification status of digital platform workers have been mounted in several countries over the past decade, sometimes with success (Meijerink et al., 2021; Schechner & Rana, 2020), as of this writing the business model appears well-established and positioned for continued growth. In 2020, Uber and other platform firms spent over $200 million in support of a California ballot initiative to ensure the continued status of gig workers as independent contractors, which was approved by a strong majority of voters. Moreover, some large hospitality corporations joined with digital platform firms to lobby for federal legislation to facilitate classifying anyone who finds work via online platforms as an independent contractor (Pinto, Smith, & Tung, 2019). This can be taken as evidence that traditional corporations see strategic potential in the platform business model as a way to supplement, or, in some cases, perhaps replace, their workforces.

THE UNIQUE FEATURES OF HRM IN THE GIG ECONOMY

The gig economy challenges conventional thinking in the HRM literature and its rapid growth presents a new reality to organizational HR decision-makers. We see three emerging themes that signify the unique features of HRM in the gig economy and which warrant attention: (1) HRM without employment (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019), (2) algorithmic HR management (Duggan et al., 2019; Lee, Kusbit, Metsky, & Dabbish, 2015a), and (3) a dispersed HRM function (Meijerink et al., 2021).

HRM Without Employment

Gig work challenges one of the key touchstones of HRM research: the standard employment relationship between an organization and employee. Gig workers are independent contractors that receive intermediation services from digital labor platforms and offer on-demand services to a contracting organization or client. Neither digital labor platform firms nor organizations in need of contingent labor are officially employers of gig workers. While employees in standard employment relationships often perform jobs that comprise an integrated set of roles and responsibilities (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Lepak & Snell, 1999), gig workers perform work that is task-based and usually of short duration, such as programming a piece of software (e.g., Upwork), ride-hailing (e.g., Uber), translating a piece of text (e.g., Fiverr), delivering a meal (e.g., Deliveroo), or day labor such as warehousing (e.g., YoungOnes), bartending (e.g., Temper), or cleaning (e.g., Helpling). That said, some gig workers do perform work that is more or less job-based, such as interim project managers or consultants that organizations hire through their own digital labor platforms for a longer period of time, or customer service representatives answering calls for major corporations via the intermediary services of a platform (discussed in later sections). Similar to their day laborer counterparts,

however, these gig workers remain independent contractors operating outside the confines of an employment relationship.

While disavowing employer responsibilities for gig workers, digital labor platforms nevertheless rely on a range of HRM activities to manage them, including workforce planning to match supply and demand for contingent labor (Chen, Mislove, & Wilson, 2015; Meijerink & Keegan, 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021), structuring compensation and rewards to retain gig workers and induce desired behavior (Rosenblat, 2019; Veen, Barratt, & Goods, 2019), performance management by means of algorithmic surveillance (Kellogg, Valentine, & Christin, 2020; Newlands, 2020), and job design to provide workers with the autonomy to work whenever and for whomever they want (Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Wood et al., 2019a). From an HRM perspective, this is surprising as HRM activities are often conceptualized – based on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), attribution theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and the inducements–contributions model (March & Simon, 1958) – as means to manage the employment relationship between an employee and an employer (Lepak & Snell, 1999; Tsui, Pearce, Porter, & Tripoli, 1997).

To conceptualize how digital labor platforms implement HRM activities without instituting an employment relationship, Meijerink and Keegan (2019) proposed the adoption of an ecosystem perspective. An ecosystem refers to a collective of interacting yet semi-autonomous entities that are interdependent and, therefore, need to be somewhat hierarchically controlled (Jacobides, Cennamo, & Gawer, 2018; Wareham, Fox, & Cano Giner, 2014). Digital labor platforms, gig workers, and organizations that request gig labor make up platform ecosystems: independent entities that nevertheless rely on one another in processes of intermediation between supply and demand for labor. Among others, these interdependencies are manifested in the need for digital labor platforms to create network effects (Lin & Lu, 2011), commit gig workers to the platform economy (Meijerink et al., 2021), and ensure gig workers comply with the interests of organizations that contract with gig workers (Shapiro, 2018; Veen et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019a). Thus, HRM activities in the gig economy can best be viewed as instruments for governing platform ecosystems, rather than as instituting employment relationships (Meijerink & Keegan, 2019).

Algorithmic HR Management

Digital labor platforms are a special HRM context in part because of their heavy reliance on the use of software algorithms to automate HR-related decision-making in areas such as selection, appraisal, workforce planning, and compensation (Duggan et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2015a; Veen et al., 2019). Among other purposes, this involves the use of software algorithms that decide which gig workers are allowed access to the online marketplace of a platform firm (Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2019; Meijerink et al., 2021; Veen et al., 2019), those that compile and publish reputation information from client ratings and deactivate those workers who drop below standards (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), and those that determine and adjust pay rates for gig workers and calculate surge prices (Rosenblat, 2019).