

# **Conflict and Shifting Boundaries in the Gig Economy**

# THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF MANAGING PEOPLE

Edited by Professor Emma Parry, Cranfield School of Management, Swindon, UK

The past two decades have represented a time of unprecedented social, technological and economic change that has required a transformation in human resource management (HRM). Shifts in demographics, continued increases of women in the workforce and greater mobility across national borders have led to higher diversity in the workplace. Advances in technology, including social media, have enabled new ways of doing business through faster communications and vast amounts of data made available to all. Mobile technology with its ubiquitous connectivity has led to renewed concerns over work–life balance and extreme jobs. These and many other changes have seen evolving attitudes towards work and careers, leading to different expectations of the workplace and mean that existing ways of managing people may no longer be effective. This series examines in depth the changing context to identify its impact on the HRM and the workforce.

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# **Conflict and Shifting Boundaries in the Gig Economy: An Interdisciplinary Analysis**

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# Foreword

In recent years, we have seen increased attention in the “gig” economy – broadly, the trend towards using freelance contractors on a short-term basis to undertake specific pieces of work or “gigs”. The use of such contractors in itself is nothing new; however, interest in its use has increased due to the development of mobile platforms that connect contractors with possible clients and their dominance in areas such as takeaway delivery (e.g. Just Eat and Deliveroo) and taxi transportation (e.g. Uber and Lyft). The growth of the gig economy has led to questions in relation to the impact of this trend on workers and on people management. In particular, a debate has arisen about the tension between the freedom that gig works allows workers (and of course employers) and the precariousness and uncertainty that they experience. Despite the important implications of the gig economy, we have so far lacked a detailed academic analysis of its impacts at different levels and discussion of how this increasing trend could be managed by organisations. In my opinion, there is a general lack of understanding about the gig economy and its implications; therefore, research and analysis in this area is much needed.

I was therefore delighted to include this text *Conflict and Shifting Boundaries in the Gig Economy: An Interdisciplinary Analysis* in my book series about the *The Changing Context of Managing People*. Rebecca Page-Tickell and Elaine Yerby have provided a fascinating interdisciplinary analysis of the influence of the gig economy through the perspective of conflict and boundaries and have examined implications of this trend at the macro, meso and micro level. I am convinced that this book will be invaluable to both academic researchers and practitioners who are responsible for managing people on gig contracts. I would also like to see this as a call to other researchers to help to develop the evidence base in this increasingly important area.

Emma Parry  
Series Editor

*The Changing Context of Managing People*

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## Chapter 1

# Understanding Conflict and Shifting Boundaries in the Gig Economy Through the Dynamic Structural Model

*Rebecca Page-Tickell and Elaine Yerby*

### Introduction

The growth of the gig economy is evident across the globe and is often presented in the media, as a simple phenomenon characterised by conflict due to the upheaval of well-worn organisational structures and employee relations. This interdisciplinary and multilevel text seeks to expose the multifaceted nature of the gig economy and the granularity of experiences of key stakeholders operating within it. Conflicts as well as shifting boundaries are addressed to demonstrate the variety of forms the gig economy can take and how it creates tension and enhanced precariousness within existing global legal, economic and organisational structures and frameworks. Core to this analysis is an appreciation for what the gig economy actually is, as there is no singly agreed definition. The gig economy has been defined in encompassing terms as 'a work context comprised primarily of short-term independent freelance workers who contract with organisations or sell directly to the market' (Ashford, Caza, and Reid, 2018, p. 2) and people having non-permanent fixed hours of work and doing individual, separately paid pieces of work (CIPD, 2017, p. 4). Others have sought to focus more exclusively on the technological features of gig work and management by algorithm, as the defining characteristics of the gig economy (see Duggan, Sherman, Carbery, & McDonnell, 2019). In this chapter we will explore the benefits and inherent diversity in each approach and provide a working definition and also Dynamic Structural Model through which to study the various elements of this contested domain. Policy recommendations for the gig economy are not straightforward given its heterogeneous nature, spatial dimensions and how new forms of work impact individuals differently dependent on the skill set required (Johnes, 2019). This book seeks to contribute to policy debates on the future of work that recognise this complexity through applying an interdisciplinary and multilevel analysis to the gig economy.

Our premise in the book is that the range of platforms and types of 'gigs' available in modern labour markets are disrupting established borders of worker and employee status, organisations, professions and labour markets, and have created

conditions for conflict and shifting boundaries in both negative and positive ways. These conditions are created by the new global professional and working landscapes, which poses questions around the power balance between client, platform and worker, and if there can be trust and fairness when work is in a constant state of flux and the nature of work is always insecure (Graham, Hjorth, & Lehdonvirta, 2017). This book is written concurrently with the development of the gig economy itself and wider economic conditions, which make it difficult to see the outcomes of existing and future relations within the gig economy. For example, evidence is mounting that the current use of platform-based technology allows a concentration of wealth into fewer hands (Dachs, 2018). This may propel a response at governmental level, to enable a longer-term more stable and equitable economy. As explored in the book the pace of governmental response to the gig economy has varied across legislative regimes, types of economy and social welfare agendas (Johnston & Land-Kazkluska, 2019). Arguably in the UK the preoccupation and dominance of Brexit in the political and economic psyche has meant legislative attention to the gig economy has been left wanting (Bell & Clarke, 2017). Economic uncertainty and slow growth since the EU referendum result has meant a continued reliance on the flexibility afforded by the gig economy and conditions of precarity to be tolerated (Sisson, 2016). Whereas in the United States the first legislative protection for gig ‘workers’ will come into force in January 2020, in part due to the strength of the economy and growth of job opportunities in the traditional labour market (Irwin, 2019).

The apparent lack of appetite for legislative change in the UK was evident in the findings and response to the government-commissioned independent review of modern employment and working practices. *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices* (Taylor, Marsh, & Broadbent, 2017) came out against a wholesale shakeup in the law and extending protection to a wider range of workers. These findings and the main recommendations of the review for more responsible corporate governance, good management and employee relations within organisations were endorsed by the Conservative government of the time. It also addresses the macro perspective of the neoliberal context within which this ‘modern’ form of work takes place. The change in focus from labour to work is seen as part of the neo-liberal discourse (Wright, Wailes, Bamber and Landsbury, 2017). This book provides an analysis of the realities associated with platform companies and organisations engaged in gig-based work to voluntarily reform in these areas and the risks associated with the UK lagging behind legislative change, to both productivity and good work outcomes, for individuals and organisations.

Exploring different governmental responses raises important questions concerning the lifecycle of the gig economy as a permanent phenomenon. There are already claims of the gig economy contracting to just a niche arrangement for particular industries and those looking to ‘side hustle’ (Irwin, 2019). Healy, Nicholson, and Pekarek (2017) describe the gig economy as ephemeral and reports that in 2016 less than 1% of Australian adults were doing regular platform work. And in the UK the CIPD (2017) highlights:

The gig economy has not, as yet, fundamentally changed the nature of work in the UK. Over the past 20 years the share of

people in permanent employee jobs has remained high by international standards and has not greatly changed.

This picture needs to be understood against the backdrop of the significant problem of measurement in the gig economy. It is particularly difficult to identify the number of people engaged in the gig economy, due to the hidden, precarious and short-lived nature of the work. Governmental surveys of labour and employment were designed for a world of work based on traditional employment practices and are only now catching up with the fast pace and trans-global nature of the gig economy (Abraham, Haltiwanger, Sandusky, & Spletzer, 2017). As the number of dedicated large-scale surveys of the gig economy has started to grow an alternative picture to decline emerges. McKinsey & Co. (2016) published, what was at the time, one of the first global and large-scale surveys exploring the backgrounds and motivations of people working in the gig economy. *Independent Work: Choice, Necessity and the Gig Economy* revealed a burgeoning gig economy. The category of independent workers were not solely represented by those on low-incomes, doing one off jobs out of necessity. The survey revealed that whilst, approximately 45% of low-income households engaged in gig work, this made up less than 25% of all independent earners in all countries surveyed, with the exception of Spain. This survey and subsequent studies in the United Kingdom and the United States also revealed the high number of people engaged in gig work to top up salaries gained in traditional labour markets (see Broughton et al., 2018; CIPD, 2017; The Edison Report, 2018). The McKinsey Report (2016) described conditions whereby 'casual earners' supplement their income through choice, compared to the 'financially strapped' that do this through necessity. Demonstrating the uneven distribution of the benefits and costs associated with enhanced digitalisation and changed labour markets due to the skill-based nature of technological and role reforms (Dachs, 2018).

Hence, the aim of this book is not to provide definitive answers on its lifecycle trajectory but rather to explore the new interfaces taking place between traditional work and the gig economy and localities of enhanced precariousness versus flexibility and lifestyle freedoms. In doing so we also contribute to debates, as to whether the gig economy is a substantive change of kind from previous forms of non-standard working, or whether there is a change of degree engendered by the involvement of platforms. Facey and Eakin (2010) suggest that the main difference in the pattern of what they refer to as contingent work is its expansion into occupational categories which had previously longer-term working patterns. To ascertain the impact of these changes and boundary spanning issues in organisational and professional domains, a range of questions are posed and addressed in the book including: if more legal changes will be forthcoming to protect individuals against the precarious nature of the gig economy? Can trade unions have a valid and valuable role in this economy and has organisational and individual decision-making in relation to the management of people and careers fundamentally changed, as a consequence of the growth of the gig economy?

In addressing these questions macro economic experiences and sources of conflict are examined, as well as meso organisational responses and solutions and micro level issues and disagreements between gig workers, employees and managers that

occur from the blurring of role boundaries and how benefits are divided in the gig economy. In this respect, the book seeks to keep a balance between overly positivistic and negative accounts, of both the organisational and gig worker perspectives, on the realities of modern working practices. Including an analysis of a range of stakeholder perspectives and experiences from industry and organisational settings in the exploration of case law and empirical research supports this ambition. The emphasis lies in the nature of trust and fairness and the extent to which there are opportunities or growing hidden problems, and if existing mechanisms for conflict resolution are still viable in the gig economy. In doing so, visibility of the gig economy and its accessibility for trade unions and human resource management (HRM) are also considered.

Thus, throughout the book connectivity is made to the ongoing people management challenge of the possibility of effective engagement and involvement of those working in the gig economy. The spatial dimension of the gig economy and the different skills sets, talents and motivations that are required in relation to different forms of gig work are examined in this context. In this respect conflict and blurred boundaries between gig workers, employees and the wider goals of the organisation and, in particular, strategic HRM become evident. As such the book considers the practitioner perspective and makes recommendations for managing organisational level conflict that is created by the gig economy.

In sum, the different chapters of the book each undertake a review of current literature, case law and empirical research on sources of economic, legal, institutional and organisational and individual level conflict and shifting boundaries in the gig economy and provide provocations, insights for future research and policy recommendations. The conclusion provides a synthesis of these emerging trends and issues but there is no false integration to provide a seemingly clear conclusion, simply because at this stage of its development the gig economy remains too amorphous and rapidly changing for definitive conclusions or judgements to be made.

## **Defining the Gig Economy**

A key challenge associated with producing an interdisciplinary text on the gig economy is the application of one singly agreed definition that can account for the divergent author perspectives and subject specialism. As explored above analysing and measuring the gig economy is problematic due to its amorphous nature and the lack of precise classification of gig work (Duggan et al., 2019). These debates are tied into the number of terms that are used to refer to the gig economy and have contributed to some of the confusion around the boundaries of this type of work. References to the ‘on-demand’ economy focus attention on the temporary and unpredictable nature of the gigs. Stewart and Stanford (2017) make the point that the terms used are chosen to communicate something of the desirability of this form of commerce. Commentators can create a positivity around the various terms for the gig economy ‘using rose-coloured euphemisms to make the phenomenon sound exciting and positive’ (p. 421). Facey and Eakin (2010) comment ‘it is framed negatively when discussed in relation to workers and



positively when viewed in relation to the economy’ (p. 372). This section outlines our perspective on a range of definitional debates and issues that impact the way in which the gig economy is understood and examined and provides context to the working definition applied in the book.

Definitional issues within the gig economy are inherently complicated by the existence of non-standard and informal workplaces for a very long time. The gig economy may be understood, as a new development in employment or a circular development, in which the opportunities for work have returned to a previous era of low pay, protection and tenure as the employment market becomes fractured in a reinformalisation (Juravich, 2018). Precarity is synonymous with the term ‘gig economy’ as it came into common usage around the height of the financial crisis and unemployment levels in early 2009. Yet, Gleason (2006, p. 1) notes discussions of an increasing prevalence of non-standard employment practices during the 1970s in the private sector in the United States and contextualises this as part of a broader shift in the economy following World War II. Non-standard and temporary work was discussed as early as the 1980s under the term of contingent work by Audrey Freedman. A rapid increase in the incidence of the emergent gig economy has since then been identified at various points across the globe as well as diverse occupations and professions where it had previously not been prevalent (Facey and Eakin, 2010, de Ruyter, 2004).

A point of departure between previous cycles of non-standard work and the gig economy which we see today are the way in which advances in technology, automation and digitalisation have created task parcelling. Task parcelling involves the breaking down of work activities into micro tasks (Berg & de Stefano, 2018). This has the potential to break down boundaries between roles in organisations and whilst each individual task is completed to the lowest cost, the role as an entity may no longer exist (Healy et al., 2017). The global and economic development potential is evident as jobs, or part of jobs can be taken to geographically dispersed areas where work is needed (Graham et al., 2017). New technologies make it more feasible to organise work, as a series of tasks or on a project-specific basis, engaging a global cast of people with a mix of skills for each task or project (Sisson, 2016). Whilst this can create important tangible benefits for a wider range of workers, there are also risks and costs for all stakeholders engaged in this type of work organisation (Graham et al., 2017). Enhanced digitalisation through the creation of time space distancing creates the denudation of interpersonal and social elements of the workplace. The lack of collectivity can be experienced as an isolating effect that heightens the impact of the precarious work and access to protection (Johnston & Land-Kazluskas, 2019). It also can be seen to have a limiting effect on the entrepreneurial and innovative behaviours of firms and freelancers, as the latter may have difficulty in contextualising their opportunities due to the lack of information provided through the platform and agencies (Barlage, Born, & Witteloostuijn, 2019).

The boundaries between role, level and even function are also challenged by this new way of organising work. As the boundary between standard and non-standard work is eroded through an ongoing increase in flexible and contingent working patterns this has the potential to impact whole families of roles and

even professions. [Healy et al. \(2017\)](#) go on to reference *The Economist* (2015, p. 63) in describing the gig economy as a form of ‘digital Taylorism’ with the implications of control and measurement in the search for efficiency and reduced costs. At organisational level, this impacts the local competitive field and has seen examples such as Uber and Deliveroo perceive themselves as disruptors of inefficient economies inducing conflict and change amongst local competitive the infrastructures. [Prassl \(2018\)](#) suggests this is ‘platform paradox’ as whilst large organisations present themselves as a marketplace, the control they take over workers through algorithm is comparable with direct employment.

Taken together these debates reveal how the gig economy can be understood as qualitatively different from that of previous precarious employment markets. [Duggan et al. \(2019\)](#) advocate definitions of the gig economy, whereby the presence of an intermediary digital platform distinguishes gig work as a unique unit of classification and analysis. In identifying three types of platform work (demonstrating complexity even in bounded definitions), as capital platform work, crowdwork and app work the algorithmic management of those engaged in this type of work becomes the key research focus and differentiator from previous forms of contingent work. The primary perspective in this book is that of employee relations. Therefore we are excluding the study of platforms that enable the sharing of resources such as AirBNB. Whilst we recognise the importance of platform-based work and control, the working definition in the book applies a broader lens to reflect the diversity of experiences in contingent work. We define the gig economy as being constructed of short term, task focused exchange of labour for money, frequently but not necessarily involving the engagement of mediating online marketplaces enabling a geographical asynchronous separation of provider and purchaser. Thus, our definition builds on an understanding of the importance of technology and platforms without allowing them to define the totality of the gig experience and so exclude different and newer forms of technology and working that operate outside the marketplace construct. Together, these changes mean that the gig economy we see today can be considered at least as a step change from previous iterations of contingent and non-standard work by the space-time distancing that enables the denudation of mutuality in the contractual relationship. By adopting this more encompassing definition each chapter can contribute to key debates relating to the extent to which conflict and boundaries between existing structures are now changed, or if this is the continuation of the range of structures and conflicts within the economy on which new technology has shone a light and made visible.

An established boundary in the book is that our definition does not incorporate the sales of goods such as on e-bay or on the sharing economy. [Martin, Upham, and Klapper \(2017, p. 3\)](#) discuss the ‘sharing economy’ as one iteration of the gig economy. This is commerce, mediated by online platforms which ‘enable citizens to share, lend, gift, sell and rent resources’. Defined as

forms of exchange facilitated through online platforms, encompassing a diversity of for-profit and non-profit activities that all broadly aim to open access to under-utilised resources through what is termed ‘sharing’. ([Richardson, 2015](#))

Instead we focus on the sale of labour in both a fixed term as well as a per hour agreement. An individual may offer a specific piece of work, for example, the platform People per Hour advertises the management of five social media posts for \$25 (People Per Hour, 2019). Alternatively, individuals may offer their time and skill, for example, on Amazon Turk, individuals can be paid per task for ‘human annotated data to train new systems and measure our progress’ (Amazon Turk, 2019). Thus, we have limited our discussion in relation to the ‘sharing economy’ within this book to those who have contracted at least genuine piece work with an identifiable income and self-determination. However, within the complexities of the modern global gig economy, this is not a given. Plant (2015, p. 155) notes the importance and complexity of this:

[...] the subject is beset by grey and contentious areas, such as the high charges that migrant workers often pay to recruitment agencies, the unexplained deductions from wages that migrants have to put up with, the long hours of work, and the insalubrious living and working conditions. This is often presented as a chain of deception involving subtle forms of coercion that can drive migrants and other vulnerable workers into situations of extreme degradation, arguably amounting to debt bondage.

Certainly, the gig economy has been demonstrated to reinforce and perhaps even exacerbate already existing inequalities (COVE Report, 2018) this demonstrates the value of a penetrating and explicatory scholarship of the gig economy that reveals its complexities and allows for clarity of regulation. We test this position through the relational analysis at the macro, meso and micro levels and how key stakeholder behaviours at each level impacts each other and our understanding of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ gig work and the blurring of boundaries between them.

## **Dynamic Structural Model of the Gig Economy**

The gig economy is defined in this book in what could be considered a broad sense to encompass the full diversity of both positive and negative experiences characterising ‘new’ ways of working. The definition recognises the significance of app- or platform-based work and accompanying algorithmic management and also extends to include contingent work that is not necessarily mediated through a platform. We have constructed a model based on the key structural elements of the gig economy, which offers an integrated way for analysing the diverse experiences associated with different types of gig-based work. This descriptive and explanatory model focusses on the primary structures of the gig economy and presents the key drivers that can mediate experiences of precarity. Precarity is inherent in the gig economy and is experienced by all those working in gig work. Thus, central to the model is peak precarity and on the outer edges the concepts of flexibility and lifestyle freedom. Centre of the diagram represents those giggers with least trust, lowest pay, shortest gigs and greatest isolation both in terms of social and geographical isolation and as a result tend to experience peak precarity. The model reflects how working in the gig economy can be enhanced and damaged