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Job Placement

ENVISION SYSTEM'S POTENTIAL TO AID GIG WORKERS, PROJECT ASKS

The public workforce development system is increasingly coming into contact with the gig economy. A recent project asked system leaders and stakeholders from around the country for their thoughts how to respond, particularly if, in some way, they could enhance career opportunities for gig workers.

This came about from cumulative observations by workforce professionals.

One workforce agency manager in Florida spotted a jobseeker's resume that listed only "gig work" and no traditional employment. Another front-line staffer, in Georgia, noticed that some companies recruiting from their agency are practicing on-demand scheduling. A workforce board member from the San Francisco Bay area acknowledged turning to gig workers both for extra help at his printing business and for tasks at home, like pet sitting and gardening.

Opinions were mixed, but one thing is clear: growth in nontraditional employment is bringing gig work to the table.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation and urban issues intermediary Living Cities commissioned a forthcoming report built around these discussions, *Beyond Gig Work: Public Markets for Irregular Employment*. It was authored by Wingham Rowan, founder of Beyond Jobs, a United Kingdom-based organization working to develop public markets for gig work.

The Casey Foundation is holding a webinar on July 18, to release the report and share findings.

Stakeholders See Role

Senior executives from 25 state and local workforce agencies took part in discussion and review groups contributing to this project.

In addition, more than 200 people — a mix of employers, worker advocates, agency staff and policymakers — participated in roundtable discussions on the subject, convened by workforce boards in California, Florida, Oregon and Washington state.

Project participant Stefani Pashman, chief executive of Pittsburgh's workforce agency

Partner4Work, told MII that gig workers aren't streaming through the doors of the city's one-stop career centers to access jobs, but the agency is increasingly encountering them when offering entrepreneurship training and in training programs to help jobseekers learn to use "makerspaces." These facilities provide access to technology and equipment needed to make things.

Lately, Partner4Work has been collaborating with MONMADE a network of lampmakers, woodworkers, glassblowers, leatherworkers, fabric artists and other small-scale, local goods producers. As these entrepreneurial craftspeople grow their businesses, Pashman expects some will seek help on an as-needed basis. There may even be opportunities for the workforce system to send them workers.

"I think the workforce system can play a role in strengthening these opportunities and aligning training opportunities to these jobs," she said.

Before getting at what stakeholders thought about the gig economy and how the workforce system might support it, some definitions were necessary. Rowan uses the term "irregular employment" to cover everything from retail positions with unpredictable schedules to formal gig work such as Uber driving, TaskRabbit chores or similar work outside the formal economy.

He places these workers in four categories. Core irregulars take on jobs around other commitments, such as parenting, family caregiving or school. Voluntary irregulars are capable of traditional employment but prefer gig work. Forced irregulars are limited to unsteady, part-time employment. Occasional irregulars may have steady income from traditional jobs but work extra jobs in their off time to supplement it. These groups have different goals. Core irregulars might be looking to increase their wages, build skills and prepare for a steady job if their life circumstances change, while forced irregulars probably want a steady, traditional job as soon as possible.

Need Assessment

There are differing counts of how many irregular or gig workers are active in the economy.

Using the term contingent workers, the Government Accountability Office has estimated that the nation's gig workforce could equal about a third of

all labor force participants, depending on how it is counted (ETR 1/25/16, p. 242).

Participants in the workforce development project were surveyed about their initial thoughts on irregular work.

Twenty-three percent called it “a welcome development in labor markets.” Thirty-three percent said “unwelcome for some, but probably good for many.” Thirty percent characterized gig work as “an unwelcome but probably unstoppable development.”

Only 7 percent called it “a damaging trend that should be legislated against,” and just as many held no view at the time.

Asked “Who would be best placed to raise standards in this type of work?” only 3 percent said no intervention is needed. Thirty-five percent chose workforce boards, 23 percent selected employer or worker groups, 22 percent went with state governments and 17 percent with the federal government.

The workforce stakeholders discussed 40 potential interventions to support irregular workers, both in their jobs and in attempts to move into traditional employment.

These ranged from child care to entrepreneurship training and assistance, portable benefits, prohibitions against just-in-time staffing, temp-to-permanent placement programs, mentor or navigator programs to help people establish themselves as gig workers and job-ready databases of irregular workers looking for permanent jobs.

Resource and capacity issues were noted. Some irregular work transactions, such as those for car services, are complex. Attempts to fill their technological footprint through the phone or email capacity of most workforce agencies is probably not feasible.

There was consensus that costs need to be kept

minimal. The workforce system should primarily provide self-directed services; higher-intensity service should be targeted to specific populations, participants concurred.

Discussion proceeded to the feasibility of a “public marketplace” for irregular work. The thinking here is complex and is laid out in more detail in the forthcoming report. The concept, in a nutshell, is that gig workers could sign up with a publicly run service, identifying the types of work they are looking to perform, their availability and desired wage rates. Businesses and other employers needing gig workers would turn to the service with their worker needs. The service could vet both the qualifications of those seeking work and the jobs offered and make placements.

Stakeholders were split when asked what type of organization would be best to run such a marketplace. Twenty-two percent thought community colleges and 19 percent picked workforce boards. Slightly smaller shares of project participants went with private sector placement firms, nonprofits working in job placement, employer groups and unions.

This wasn’t just thinking out loud. Beyond Jobs has supported pilots of such market systems in the United Kingdom. One project in London saw jobseekers book 18,000 hours of availability in the first week, but only 70 hours of work were purchased. Gradually, jobseekers backed out and demand for work through the system grew until a balance was reached with about 40 workers receiving about 500 hours of work per week, according to the report.

—Ryan Hess

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