

Skilling opportunities in public markets for irregular work

Increasingly work for the low to middle skilled is irregular; selling hours, often across multiple employers, rather than having a steady job. This workforce has new skilling needs and potential new routes to upskilling. With the right infrastructure for irregular work, running at scale, there are multiple opportunities for educators.

This memo offers some starting points for local thinking. We welcome suggested refinements.

CONTEXT: The status quo

The growth of irregular work, inadequacies of current marketplaces and possibilities of better labor exchanges for hourly labor are outlined at www.BeyondJobs.com

Despite a shift to irregular use of staff, employers retain an interest in advancing workers' skills and prospects. In an era of working through online platforms, this advancement *could* harness a potent combination of Big Data and sophisticated administration tools.

Currently this potential is far from reality. Data that could drive targeted upskilling is proprietary and [secret](#), siloed within thousands of fiercely incompatible profit-maximising "gig work" markets. Algorithms that could underpin progression and alignment cannot meaningfully function for lack of information.

Commercial markets [commoditize work-seekers](#), [drive down wages](#), [mislead regulators](#) and [foster over-supply](#) to increase customer convenience. High overhead, low quality marketplaces seem to be a factor in the growth of demand for workers in shadow economies and a [decline](#) in formal labor market participation. The best opportunities may be [off-the-books](#).

Lack of progression in current marketplaces is one factor driving agencies such as workforce boards to [consider public markets](#) for the spectrum of irregular employment. In oversight, funding and operational responsibilities, these could mirror the public markets for all types of jobs commissioned by each state workforce agency.

New data from public markets for irregular work

Online labor platforms are not generic. A public market will have different aims, structures, processes and technologies from an Uber, DoorDash, Handy or Taskrabbit. Current attempts to better conditions for "gig workers" tend to be divorced from the forums in which they are booked. A recent Government Accountability Office [report](#) for instance noted that any workforce board upskilling "gig workers" would likely have to phone round trainees six months later to assess outcomes!

A public market should report on outcomes instantly. It's one part of uniquely precise data about work-seeker capabilities and bookings by employers. Some key aspects of this information:

- **Reliability**: Does an individual do what they say they will do? If they receive a period of work that aligns with all their stipulations do they confirm in time and does the timesheet get signed-off by their employer? Those who build reliability across a range of employers are clearly cost-effective to train for further opportunities.
- **Verifications**: Each work-seeker can have an infinite number of data points that have been verified. For example; "holder of carpet-laying certificate", "has done >50 home renovation bookings", "veteran", "happy to work at height". Such a person is likely a good fit for anyone seeking candidates to train as roofers. That could be with a view to job-offers or creating a reserve pool of labor for peak times.
- **Utilization**: If a person listed 30 hours she wanted to work in the last 7 days but was only booked for 20 of them, she had a weekly personal Utilization (ratio of hours offered to hours booked) of 67%. Utilization can be measured across sectors, geographies and worker data points. Or any combination. (*"How many under-26-year olds were booked as market-researchers within a mile of the city center last month, and what was their Utilization compared to older promotions staff?"*) This is enormously granular insight into local demand.
- **Skills-gaps foreseen**: A platform dedicated to worker control will take in availability for weeks ahead. Comparing this to historical Utilization data, skills gaps can be seen in real time. (*"It's late-October, based on last year's usage we have insufficient childcare workers for the Christmas period".*)
- **Hyper-personalized support/ training**: Creating a deep market in hours of local work-seekers with detailed analysis of reliability, skills and willingness can shape new ways of training. Pools of peer supporters, for example, could cost-effectively be cultivated. Assume, for instance, the challenge is helping opportunity youth into the labor market. A pool of 40 irregular workers with the right verifications, track records and aptitude can be instantly identified for the role of Peer Navigator.

These people are offered a choice of group training sessions. Then each youth is offered 10, structured one-hour sessions, with a Navigator living locally. Meetings are in public places; the Navigator must complete a pro-forma report on progress at end of each. Session One may focus on the youngster's needs, Two helps them register in the market, Three involves co-attendance for vetting by an intermediary, Four and Five are support in preparing for a first booking, and so on. The same structure could be applied to a dislocated worker being trained incrementally for a new sector.

Skills strategy in public markets

Based on work in Britain, we suggest a scalable, sustainable, route to upskilling this new workforce could be built on five pillars:

1) The importance of broad soft skills: Punctuality, ability to interpret instructions and comfort with technology interfaces could become the foundations of advancement for a worker as much as sector-specific credentials. So, for example, a supermarket will always value someone with Retail Industry Fundamentals certification over a complete labor market beginner. But someone who has been rebooked across warehousing, data entry and promotions bookings in the last two months has demonstrated adaptability and trustworthiness that means showing them how to operate a checkout is unlikely to be wasted. These diverse inputs could then be coordinated within a formalized career-readiness program.

2) Skills portfolios create pathways: An irregular worker is often best able to progress by moving into additional sectors, without necessarily giving up their previous role. For example; a hotel room attendant may have some skills, a record of workplace reliability and the availability for more work, that prove attractive to homecare providers. A company may wish to offer her a place on an induction session. She is then ready to be booked by both hoteliers and at-home-care clients with entry-level needs. Educators might use market data to anticipate these needs with targeted training offers to employers.

3) Employer training can become on-demand: Opportunities for irregular workers can come up erratically. An event security company faced with additional ticket sales for a concert this weekend may decide *“We need 25 extra guards for the event, data shows a shortage, so we will train 10 new people to basic standards on Friday afternoon”*. Their search for trainees could major on military veterans with some recent bookings involving customer service. These will be the most cost effective to train. Someone matching that need has an opportunity to add qualifications in a new sector, but it is fleeting.

4) Life-long learning can fit around unpredictable work: In a world where opportunities come up faster, paid work is uncertain and granular data on localized skills gaps is real-time, the benefits of continuous learning are obvious. But a fixed-times-in-the-classroom model of learning is often not best for irregular workers. They need to prioritize availability for paid work at times they are free to leave the home, for example when a family member can provide childcare (*“I can work this afternoon because Mom will look after the kids”*).

Online courses are valuable but can be isolating. A public market knows when work-seekers are available to leave the home and will do everything to find them paid work at those times. But, as in any labor market, it won't always be able to do so. It can intelligently schedule training opportunities for these unsold hours (*“you are available from 1.00PM to 5.00PM today, if you have no paid booking by 2.00PM would you like to be booked into a class on operating a switchboard at your community college?”*) This relies on a college having stand-by faculty.

5) Tailored earn-as-you-learn: Many who need to study [can't afford](#) to take the time off work. This can be a particular problem if course attendance times vary week-to-week for example in a multi-site, multiple-module, course. A public market should maximize opportunities for work around fluctuating college attendance. It can of course ensure work dovetails with learning, aligning bookings with course matter. A sophomore in hotel-management for example might be a part of a pool of students working hours of their choice across diverse cafes, bars and front-desks with unpredictable times of need. Her progression through roles would be fully tracked.

Potential opportunities for community colleges

A public market for irregular work has no agenda beyond focusing its sophisticated technology on improved opportunities for progression, stability and alignment. But software can only go so far. The markets specifically create opportunities for training providers to add value with new services. They should be designed to make a spectrum of labor market interventions uniquely cost-effective to target, administer and monitor. For example, assume a local philanthropy wish to invest \$40,000 in teaching single-parent living in deprived zipcodes to work in healthcare: the system could prioritize qualifying individuals, schedule training sessions and report on enhanced hours/earnings thereafter.

Some services community colleges could refine, or launch, within public markets:

1. **Agency for students:** Labor market intermediaries are key in public markets; vetting, payroll and acting as employer-of-record in return for a cut of the employer's charge for each hour. College students are typically prized by employers: work-ready, technology literate, semi-skilled, seeking progression in their chosen sector. Public markets offer a new channel for the fluid working and breadth of exposure so many need. A college has already vetted its students and may choose to provide the service at-cost to maximize their competitiveness or treat the agency function as a revenue opportunity. The college may choose to continue this function for alumni, offering them lifelong-learning in line with their market activity over the years.
2. **Micro-apprenticeships:** Initiatives like the National Retail Federation's [RISE Up](#) show how competing employers can usefully collaborate to train newcomers in broad skills for their industry. Colleges could act as catalysts for a sector seeking a pipeline of work-ready talent. A course could combine commitments to induct workers by multiple organizations using entry-level workers at times of need. Thus, a course might include learning different skills at five or six places of work when each employer needed extra staff.
3. **Ringfenced markets:** A public system has specific offerings for vulnerable groups of work-seekers. A college could run these sub-markets by cultivating trusted employers. For example: a high school may want its Year 10's experiencing an array of micro-work on Saturdays for no more than 4 hours a week restricted to trusted employers within half a mile of the student's home. Once a college certifies a group of employers, possibly with random

checks and strict reporting rules, the platform can handle logistics. Similar markets could run for ex-felons, those with learning disabilities or new immigrants.

4. **Investable training:** Public markets will monitor a work-seeker's reliability to ensure those who consistently do what they say they will quickly become more attractive to employers. This data can be used to offer training-for-profit to investors. For instance; assume a local shortage of truck drivers. The platform could be told to keep watching for anyone completing more than 50 warehouse bookings for at least 3 employers. Those dependable, relevantly trained, individuals could then be offered driving training in return for a cut of their enhanced earnings deducted by the system over the months after tuition. An investor funds the learning, then gets a cut of the income uplift.

5. **Flexi-faculty:** The time of adjunct faculty could be bought as required through a public market. This allows services to be further tailored to local conditions (*"When at least 10 students on a catering pathway who have not completed an 'Introduction to pastry' module are available but without a paid assignment, book a tutor and room and assemble a class of up to 15"*). Students employed by their college could likewise combine that work with exposure to other employers by using a public market.