



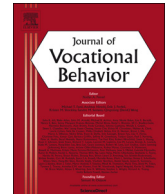
Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company's public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Vocational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvb

Editorial

Flexible employment relationships and careers in times of the COVID-19 pandemic



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

COVID-19
Crisis
Change
Flexible work arrangements
Gig work
Careers
Period effect
Corona

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic represents a crisis that affects several aspects of people's lives around the globe. Most of the affected countries took several measures, like lockdowns, business shut-downs, hygiene regulations, social distancing, school and university closings, or mobility tracking as a means of slowing down the distribution of COVID-19. These measures are expected to show short-term and long-term effects on people's working lives. However, most media reports focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on changes in work arrangements (e.g., short-time work, flexible location and hours) for workers in a regular employment relationship. We here focus on workers in flexible employment relationships (e.g. temporary agency work and other forms of subcontracted labor, as well as new forms of working, such as in the gig economy). Specifically, we will discuss (a) how the work and careers of individuals in flexible employment relationships might get affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) outline ideas how to examine period effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work and careers of those individuals, and (c) outline how the pandemic can contribute to the ramification of flexible employment relationships.

1. Introduction

Most media reports focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on changes in work arrangements (e.g., short-time work, paid short break, flexible location and hours, and financial consequences) for workers in a regular employment relationship (i.e., jobs with a fixed schedule, at the firm's place of business and with mutual expectation of continued employment; Kalleberg, 2000). However, there has been less discussion on what happens to the jobs and experiences of workers in flexible employment relationships (e.g. temporary agency work and other forms of subcontracted labor, as well as new forms of working, such as in the gig economy). Those workers are neither officially laid off, nor offered short-term work, paid sick leave, or a renewed contract with their employment or platform agency. Depending on country-specific labor law, the existence of these people is not secured by unemployment insurance or other financial help programs, leaving them unprotected – making the COVID-19 pandemic a crisis on top of a crisis.

During the past decades, in countries across the world, there have been important increases in the number of workers in flexible employment relationships (to at least 17% in Europe and 16% in the U.S. in recent years; Huws, Spencer, Coates, Sverre Syrdal, & Holts, 2019; Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017). Hence, those workers play an important role within the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this essay, we will discuss (a) how the work and careers of individuals in flexible employment relationships might get affected by the COVID-19 pandemic including risks and possibilities for workers, specifically for gig workers; (b) outline ideas how to examine period effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work and careers of those individuals, and (c) outline how the pandemic can contribute to the ramification of flexible employment relationships to minimize risks and optimize opportunities.

2. COVID-19 pandemic and risks and possibilities for workers within flexible employment relationships: Special case of gig workers

According to Spreitzer et al. (2017), flexibility of work arrangements can be categorized within three dimensions: (a) flexibility in the scheduling of work, (b) flexibility in the location where work is accomplished, and (c) flexibility in the employment relationships. To provide some examples, *standard workers with flexible schedules* usually work on-site but have flexibility on the schedule dimension

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2020.103435>

Available online 07 May 2020

0001-8791/ © 2020 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

(i.e., when to perform the work: flextime work schedules). *Standard workers with flexible location* usually work full-time with a fixed schedule but have flexibility on the location dimension (i.e., mostly working off-site because of duties outside the workplace or other reasons like telecommuting such as home office). It seems obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic has broad and immediate, short-term effects on shifts from regular employment to schedule and location flexibility. For instance, wherever possible people are now working from the home office with adapted working hours, including possible interruptions and distractions (e.g., due to family obligations). Although some people value this flexibility, reports also suggest that these shifts led to increased daily working hours (McKeever, 2020, April).

Agency workers are employed by an agency who assigns them to client work, usually full-time and on-site at a client. These workers return to the agency for next assignments. Usually, the employment relationship is flexible and exists between three parties: a client organization, a staffing agency, and the worker. It is difficult yet to estimate immediate, short-term shifts in the number of agency workers because labor market statistics are released time-delayed. However, it seems plausible that in system-relevant sectors (e.g., health care, delivery services, and logistics) with high labor demands due to the COVID-19 pandemic the number of agency workers could increase, whereas in others sectors the numbers already decreased (e.g., gastronomy, tourism, service, or non-food retail).

Finally, as the most flexible type of work arrangement, online platform mediated contracting (i.e., gig workers) has more flexibility compared to regular work arrangements on all three dimensions. *Gig work* is a type of temporary contract work that connects self-employed workers directly with clients via a digital platform (Spreitzer et al., 2017). Gig workers can be classified into crowd workers, who are completing and delivering tasks online—location independent, and work-on-demand workers, who are completing and delivering tasks offline—location-dependent (although it is location dependent the work is not inevitably performed on-site and hence still shows location flexibility). A further distinction between gig workers is the level of skills needed to deliver the tasks—high vs. low qualification requirements. For example, highly skilled gig workers (e.g., architects, software engineers, etc.) are represented on platforms such as Upwork, whereas low skilled gig workers (e.g., drivers, deliverers, etc.) take jobs through Task Rabbit, Uber, Amazon Mechanical Turk, etc. Again, it is difficult to estimate shifts in the number and types of gig workers or the total hours of performed gig work yet because of time-delayed labor markets statistics. However, due to contracting speed and flexibility to react on labor market demands, gig workers will also experience changes from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those who advocate gig work claim that it provides career opportunities by providing resources like greater work autonomy and a high potential for work-nonwork integration (Chen, Rossi, Chevalier, & Oehlsen, 2019), resulting in more boundaryless, individualized, and whole life careers (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Kost, Fieseler, & Wong, 2020). However, labor activists fear that gig work is associated with increased risks for workers, including precarious and demanding employment conditions (including low or sporadic pay, lack of welfare coverage, social isolation, overwork, less developmental opportunities, and job as well as career insecurity) (Peticca-Harris, deGama, & Ravishankar, 2020; Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019), resulting in more fragmented and bounded careers (Ashford et al., 2018; Kost et al., 2020).

Against the background of the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers now are in charge to put these contradictory claims—opportunities versus risks—to a test. The current crisis provides the possibility (1) to explore the resilience or vulnerability of gig work and other types of flexible employment relationships, and hereby (2) to examine short and long-term effects of the crisis on working conditions, work motivations and behavior, job and career attitudes, career development, and personal health and well-being.

Some opportunities and risks for most of the gig workers, who are falling under the category ‘work-on-demand workers’ have already been reported. Those workers complete and deliver tasks offline and are occasionally labeled as ‘system relevant’ during the pandemic. For example, warehouse, postal, and food delivery workers as well as health care professionals fall under this category. Following this, Amazon announced to hire 100,000 workers for their delivery services (Kelly, 2020, March), and Uber encouraged their drivers to transition to food couriers for Uber Eats with an increase in 15% of drivers (Buchwald, 2020, April). As food delivery services are in high demand, these workers may not fear income or job loss but instead fear of getting sick and being unable to continue working.

Contrary, Forbes Magazine reports a decrease of Uber passenger rides by a near-total 94% in the U.S. since the beginning of March. Thus, continuing to focus on passenger transport will confront the drivers with both an income loss *and* the fear of getting sick. Due to this, Uber launched a Work Hub that enables their drivers to find alternative gig work in other areas like food production and services, or logistics (Chandler, 2020, April). However, the COVID-19 pandemic makes the precarious situation for gig workers more salient within society and thereby provides the opportunity for these gig workers enhancing their skills, working conditions, and careers (Scheiber, 2020, April).

Media reports on how crowd workers, who complete and deliver tasks online, experience the effects of the pandemic are—to our knowledge—yet not available. However, we think that these types of gig workers are less affected by political measures like lockdowns, because they already are used to work under high levels of flexibility regarding location and work schedule. For instance, a gig worker on Amazon Mechanical Turk can still easily participate in online surveys at anytime from anywhere. A software engineer offering his work skills on Upwork or Fiverr can still be hired for programming mobile apps that, for example could support societies in the COVID-19 combat. Due to this, we expect that even if the world of work will be different after the COVID-19 pandemic, it might be that gig work and flexible employment relationships in general will take another, maybe even more recognized position in the labor market.

3. Period effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work and careers of individuals within flexible employment relationships

What becomes clear when discussing the above mentioned changes, possibilities, and risks of flexible employment relationships,

is that the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanied measures have the potential to affect a series of work- and career related variables: (1) working conditions, (2) work motivations and behavior, (3) job and career attitudes, (4) career development, and (5) personal health and well-being.

For example, labeling former low prestige work-on-demand jobs like warehouse workers, food delivery workers as well as cleaning staff and nurses as system relevant represents a prestige boost for these workers. Such a prestige boost can be considered as an increase in career success and recognition that might enhance work engagement, job satisfaction, occupational commitment, and even income (Spurk, Hirschi, & Dries, 2019). Moreover, gig workers in low-skilled jobs like Uber drivers might on the one hand, experience increased levels of job insecurity due to immediate, short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic like having less rides due to lock- and shutdowns. This might also reduce their job commitment or job satisfaction. On the other hand, acknowledging the importance of such drivers might support the simultaneous discussion for better working conditions, promoting improvements in job or career security in the more mid- to long-term.

More important, besides conceptualizing different kinds of correlates of the COVID-19 pandemic for these flexible employment relationship workers, is in our view the question about how to conceptualize the COVID-19 pandemic per se within the careers of such workers. We agree with Rudolph and Zacher (2020) that the COVID-19 pandemic provides opportunities to study period effects. Period effects are delineated by a specific time point or time phase (e.g., economic cycles, national conflicts, one-off events, or the onset and development of the COVID-19 pandemic). Period effects are typically taken as evidence for the effect of time, including the role that important events play. Neutrally speaking, the COVID-19 pandemic can well be conceptualized as an event. More specifically, it represents a prolonged event that per se exists of different sub-events or sub-phases.

Therefore, if studying period effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the above-mentioned variables, researchers first need to consider the exact onset of the COVID-19 pandemic event and related measures. This onset might vary by country, occupational field, or organization. Second, researchers should consider the development and dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures per se. For example, countries speak of phase 1 and phase 2, and so on, lockdowns and exit strategies, a pandemic per se can be differentiated in several phases, and organizations develop different shutdown (working from home office) and exit (returning back to office) strategies. Finally, it is still unclear when politics or research can declare an “end” of the pandemic, which is a further critical issue for studying period effects. These different and time-varying phases should be considered when developing a COVID-19 pandemic related research program for flexible employment relationships. For example, effects on or of flexible schedule or location might vary with the different phases because besides representing an objective marker for the COVID-19 pandemic, transitioning into different COVID-19 related phases might also change psychological experiences of individuals (Van Bavel et al., 2020). Researchers should use the most appropriate and yet flexible timing scheme available for their research question and sample.

Related to this, a highly important question is the sustainability of COVID-19 related effects. In other words, can we expect immediate, short-term effects or delayed, long-term effects? Does the type of period effect differ by type of outcome variables explained above, or by the intensity of COVID-19 experiences? Can we observe changes on some variables that return to their baseline level after the worker has adapted to the new situation? Of course, it is not possible to give detailed answers on such complex questions within this short essay; however, we think that vocational behavior science can add substantial knowledge to these questions. For example, some individuals might experience the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures as positive (e.g., less contact to bullying colleagues), others as negative (e.g., becoming exhausted from role conflicts), and others even as a career shock (Akkermans, Seibert, & Mol, 2018). Moreover, the intensity of this career shock might vary by onset, phase, and offset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We could speculate that immediate, short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic might be specifically visible shifts in work arrangements (more location and schedule flexibility), workload, work motivations like commitment, job attitudes like satisfaction with colleagues or supervisors, detachment from work, and managing the daily or weekly work-nonwork interface of workers within flexible employment relationships. Such effects could well be investigated with qualitative interviews as well as daily or weekly diary studies that allow for a rich assessment of workers' experiences over a specific period of time. However, we also think that career-related aspects like career decision-making (“Should I continue gig work?”), job search (“Should I go for a high demand job in healthcare now?”), or dealing with intense career shocks (e.g., driving stops for Uber drivers) are well suited to be analyzed here.

Contrary, long-term effects might be investigated and observed for more fundamental changes in career development or job characteristics. For example, do recent discussions about the precariousness of flexible employment relationships and gig work lead to enhanced working conditions and subsequently to more long-term career planning of such workers? Does the COVID-19 pandemic affect career satisfaction or job and career insecurity of flexible employment workers for several years? Are there groups of gig workers that benefit more than others in terms of career progression, maybe because of their career adaptability? Are there types of flexible work relationships that benefit or suffer most from COVID-19 related developments on the labor market? In any case, the answers for such questions can be given by adopting longitudinal research designs with several assessments over several weeks, months, and potentially years. Longitudinal studies that measured the variables of interest already before the COVID-19 outbreak are thereby of specific relevance for investigating any level shifts across time. Furthermore, as alternative events also play a more important role over longer periods of time, researchers should assess additional variables (e.g., other events or shocks like layoffs, restructuring) for more precise interpretations of study results.

4. COVID-19 pandemic and improvement of the work and career conditions for flexible employment relationships

Examining workers' experience considering period effects of the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to inform several stakeholders on how to improve conditions for flexible employment relationships in the long-term. For *online labor platforms and*

contracting firms, workers' experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic will provide information on the demands faced by workers. Those insights can be used by platforms to align their infrastructure and services towards sustainability, in particular by minimizing depletion of workers through support, promoting their work performance, and hereby improving the quality of their workforce. For society, workers' experiences during the pandemic will highlight the risks and opportunities of flexible employment relationships and foster a deeper understanding of the potential role of different stakeholders such as platforms, unions and federal offices in driving sustainability in flexible employment relationships. Ideally, this leads to the development and enactment of new policies and regulations that support workers in flexible employment relationships. Finally, flexible employment workers will become more aware of the impact of their working conditions on their health, work and career development, potentially leading to empowerment of workers in form of conscious self-care and request for workers' rights. Vocational behavior research can add its own contribution to inform all stakeholders and to support a sustainable career development of these workers.

References

- Akkermans, J., Seibert, S. E., & Mol, S. T. (2018). Tales of the unexpected: Integrating career shocks in the contemporary careers literature. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 44*, 1–10.
- Ashford, S. J., Caza, B. B., & Reid, E. M. (2018). From surviving to thriving in the gig economy: A research agenda for individuals in the new world of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 38*, 23–41.
- Buchwald, E. (2020, April). These gig-economy jobs can earn you extra cash during the coronavirus pandemic — without having to leave your home MarketWatch. Retrieved from www.marketwatch.com.
- Chandler, S. (2020, April). *Coronavirus turns uber into gig platform for all work*. Forbes. Retrieved from www.forbes.com.
- Chen, M. K., Rossi, P. E., Chevalier, J. A., & Oehlsen, E. (2019). The value of flexible work: Evidence from Uber drivers. *Journal of Political Economy, 127*, 2735–2794.
- Huws, U., Spencer, N., Coates, M., Sverre Syrdal, D., & Holts, K. (2019). *The platformisation of work in Europe: Results from research in 13 European countries*. University of Hertfordshire Research Archive.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2000). Nonstandard employment relations: Part-time, temporary and contract work. *Annual Review of Sociology, 26*, 341–365.
- Kelly, J. (2020, March). *Thousands of new jobs are being created in response to the coronavirus*. Forbes. Retrieved from www.forbes.com.
- Kost, D., Fieseler, C., & Wong, S. I. (2020). Boundaryless careers in the gig economy: An oxymoron? *Human Resource Management Journal, 30*, 100–113.
- McKeever, V. (2020, April). *Coronavirus lockdowns are making the working day longer for many*. CNBC. Retrieved from www.cnbc.com.
- Peticca-Harris, A., deGama, N., & Ravishankar, M. (2020). Postcapitalist precarious work and those in the 'drivers' seat: Exploring the motivations and lived experiences of Uber drivers in Canada. *Organization, 27*, 36–59.
- Rudolph, C. W., & Zacher, H. (2020). "The COVID-19 generation": A cautionary note. *Work, Aging & Retirement*.
- Scheiber, N. (2020, April). *Jobless claims by uber and lyft drivers revive fight over labor status*. The New York Times. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com.
- Spreitzer, G. M., Cameron, L., & Garrett, L. (2017). Alternative work arrangements: Two images of the new world of work. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior, 4*, 473–499.
- Spurk, D., Hirschi, A., & Dries, N. (2019). Antecedents and outcomes of objective versus subjective career success: Competing perspectives and future directions. *Journal of Management, 45*, 35–69.
- Van Bavel, J. J., Boggio, P., Capraro, V., Cichocka, A., Cikara, M., Crockett, M., ... Drury, J. (2020). *Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response*. PsyArXiv Preprints.
- Wood, A. J., Graham, M., Lehdonvirta, V., & Hjorth, I. (2019). Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment and Society, 33*, 56–75.

Daniel Spurk^{a,*}, Caroline Straub^b

^a University of Bern, Switzerland

^b Bern University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

E-mail address: daniel.spurk@psy.unibe.ch (D. Spurk).

* Corresponding author at: University of Bern, Department of Work and Organizational Psychology, Fabrikstrasse 8, 3012 Bern, Switzerland.