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THE GREAT REALIZATION:
ONLINE FREELANCERS AND THE
MEANING OF FLEXIBILITY

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ABSTRACT:

In this chapter we theorize about online freelancers' approaches to work flexibility. Drawing from an ongoing digital ethnography of United-States-based online freelancers pursuing work on digital platforms, our data questions the common conceptualizations around the flexibility of online freelancing. We posit that the flexibility of where to work, not when to work, is the most important attribute of their work arrangement. Our data show 1) the online freelancers in our study prefer the stability and sustainability of full-time work over freelancing when both are offered as remote options; 2) full-time remote employment increases these workers' freelancing control/flexibility; 3) these workers keep freelance work options open even as they transition to more permanent full-time work arrangements. We discuss how these findings relate to workplace culture shifts and what this means for contemporary working arrangements. Our insights contribute to the discourses on knowledge-based gig work and for what it means to study individuals online.

KEYWORDS:

1. Digital Ethnography
2. Flexibility
3. Platforms
4. Gig Economy
5. Future of Work
6. Non-standard work arrangement

Main Body:

Through this chapter we focus attention on online freelancers and their pursuit of work flexibility. To do this we draw on data from an ongoing digital ethnography of online freelancers in the United States that now involves 95 participants, 187 interviews, 200 survey responses and substantial trace and secondary data collection across the first 46 months of this study. Beginning in 2019, we have been following online freelancers as they have navigated from pre-COVID times through the turbulence of a pandemic and now into the current “great resignation”. We have observed that while the workers have claimed that the flexibility of when to work was the most important attribute for their work, it turns out that the flexibility of where they work is most important. These insights contribute to the thematic issue’s call to ethnographically advance the discourses on knowledge-based gig work and online platforms.

Flexibility has been an issue explored in work scholarship, across multiple intellectual spaces, for many decades (e.g., Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockey, 2013; Brozovic, 2018; Smith, 1997, Wood, 1989). Bal and Izak (2021) analyzed nearly 50 years of literature in workplace flexibility, including 262 of the most important publications in the topic, and summarized the four lenses through which flexibility has been examined across the different disciplines: 1) organizational flexibility (e.g. Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010), 2) flexibility in worker behavior (e.g. Beltrán-Martín, Roca-Puig, Escrig-Tena, & Bou-Llusar, 2008; Wright & Snell, 1998), 3) flexible kinds of work (e.g. contractual status, Wilson, Brown, & Cregan, 2008), and 4) workplace flexibility (e.g. Hill et al., 2008). The increase in workplace flexibility has been identified as beneficial because it promotes employee productivity and satisfaction (Glass & Finley, 2002).

The current issues surrounding flexibility have come front and center with the increases in non-standard work arrangements. Prioritization of work-life balance often drives workers to secure a flexible arrangement that fits their personal priorities, including childcare (White & Maniam, 2020). Gig work platforms allow for increased flexibility, but additional labor is often necessary to combat the restraints of the digital platform itself (Lehdonvirta, 2018). An increase of non-standard work arrangements suggests that the definition of flexibility is continually evolving. Indeed, “flexibility” is recognized as one of the major shifts in the future of work and workplaces (Kossek, Gettings, & Misra, 2021).

While the desire for flexibility predates the COVID-19 era, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace of flexible work arrangements. Indeed, firms have been turning to flexible structures and specifically the platform economy to increase business flexibility and agility. Flexible workers enable firms to quickly and efficiently scale human resources up and down to meet changes in the market (Davis, 2016). Workers have also been increasingly more willing to embark on flexible or non-standard work arrangements, which has also accelerated through the pandemic (Saad & Wigert, 2021; Managing Flexible Work Arrangements, 2022; Thier, 2022). In 2021 alone, 47.4 million workers in the United States voluntarily left their jobs (Tappe & CNN Business, 2022), representing over a quarter of the total workforce (Andrew, 2022). In tandem - seemingly due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic - the work landscape has brought a greater focus on (and greater dependence on) remote work, with estimates that almost 70% of full-time “white collar” workers are working remotely in some capacity (Saad & Wigert, 2021). Many scholars and pundits believe the trend will continue in perpetuity (Gibbons, 2022; Kambouris, 2021). This suggests flexible work arrangements are likely to be an increasingly common aspect of many futures of work.

One type of independent worker, online freelancers, have always worked remotely, increasingly securing these temporary jobs or gigs via online labor platforms like Upwork, Toptal, and many other similar sites. Online freelance work differs in at least three ways from the food delivery, ride-sharing

and home-renting gigs that get substantial scholarly and public attention. First, online freelancing tends to be performed independent of place (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Second, online freelancing requires cognitive labor, leveraging both the worker's experience and mastery of a body of knowledge, such as architecture, graphic design, or legal writing (Gandini, 2019). Third, online freelance work typically requires sustained interaction between a worker and an employer (Sutherland, Jarrahi, Dunn, & Nelson, 2020). These differences noted, online freelance work is similar to other gig-, or project-, based-work in that there is little commitment between employer and worker beyond the specifics of the project's contract: it is explicitly temporary work (Wood, Graham, Lehdonvirta, & Hjorth, 2019; Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019).

Because online freelance work is secured and completed remotely, workers are susceptible to greater competition in the online labor market, as the easy access to online platforms reduces barriers for other workers to enter and compete (Dunn, 2017). And, online labor markets have few of the workplace protections afforded to full-time workers, particularly in the United States (Mckay, Pollack, & Fitzpayne, 2019; ILO Organization, 2016).

The online labor markets in which freelancers seek jobs rely on online labor platforms like Upwork and Fiverr. These online labor platforms serve as intermediaries, standing between employers and workers. As such, they are market-makers, exerting control over the ways in which employers present their jobs; the ways in which workers present themselves online, seek and complete work; and how these parties resolve differences. Given their powerful role and positionality, Vallas and Schor (2020) argue that these online labor platforms are "permissive potentates:" providing a set of generative mechanisms that give platform owners the ability to establish the ways in which their online presence and the market they mediate will operate. For the workers, one of the reasons online labor platforms, and the online labor markets they intermediate, have become so important is the flexibility afforded by the gigs (Dunn, Munoz, & Sawyer, 2021; Kuek et al., 2015; Munoz, Dunn, & Sawyer, 2022). Simultaneously, digital platforms have emerged as a key technological form enabling and constraining work flexibility (Rani & Furrer, 2021).

The platform economy literature has focused on several different axes of flexibility. Some argue flexibility is about freedom for the workers to optimize their resources (time and other assets) (Burtch, Carnahan, & Greenwood, 2018). Others have cited hours worked and workplace location (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). And, some see flexibility as multi-dimensional (Berg, Furrer, Harmon, Rani, & Silberman, 2018; Churchill & Craig, 2019). The flexibility most commonly associated with this work arrangement is that of flexibility to decide when to work, schedule flexibility [e.g., (Chen, Chevalier, Rossi, & Oehlsen, 2019; Johns & Gratton, 2013; Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2021; Kuek et al., 2015; Malone, 2004; Sundararajan, 2017; Wheatley, 2017; Wu, Zhang, Li, & Liu, 2019)]. Scholars have identified various potential advantages to flexible scheduling, such as allowing paid work to be combined with life circumstances that prevent otherwise regular work and a reduction in tensions related to work-family conflicts (Jarrahi, Sawyer, & Erickson, 2021). Furthermore, several large scale consumer surveys have found that the general public's perception of flexibility in the gig economy is about scheduling flexibility (Atske, 2021; Healy, Pekarek, & Vromen, 2020).

Perhaps the biggest proponents of schedule flexibility as a hallmark of gig work are the platforms themselves (Warren, 2021). Platforms, by asserting schedule flexibility as a core benefit, also distance themselves from the ongoing debate on worker classification. Without the promise of flexible scheduling, platforms would have a more difficult time asserting the current legal status of online freelance workers as independent contractors. Warren (2021) frames the "positive sell of flexibility to worker(s)" by the platforms to the workers as "... one to achieve better work-life balance" (p. 529).

Indeed, online freelancers, much like other workers, have multiple and diverse work preferences and motivations that bring them to this work arrangement. Warren (2021) asserts for online freelance workers that these factors are centered on temporal (time) and monetary (money) dimensions. Our research has led us to the conclusion that while workers might have different motivations and preferences, they have explicitly selected a more precarious work arrangement in exchange for the flexibility it affords. And, as we have explored career strategies and motivations, schedule flexibility was a central attribute (Dunn, Stephany, Sawyer, Munoz, Raheja, 2021; Munoz et al., 2022; Sawyer, Dunn, Munoz, Stephany, & Raheja, 2020a; Sawyer et al., 2020b).

More recently we have witnessed an empirical shift in the career strategies of these workers. We argue this is being fueled in part by the greater availability of remote work options in the traditional workplace. We have seen many of the workers we have been following in our digital ethnography who had chosen online freelancing for the “flexibility” it affords, leaving for what can be argued as less “flexible” work arrangements. While the workers participating in our study claimed that the flexibility of when to work was the most important attribute for their work, when presented with an opportunity for a remote position in a more traditional work arrangement (with less flexibility of when to work) that was seen as a more attractive option.

Following Online Freelancers over Time: Digital Ethnography of Career Paths

The data and interim analyses reported below come from an ongoing study where we are following US-based online freelancers to better understand their career paths, working strategies and approaches to work. This means we are studying an online phenomena; therefore, we have designed the study around the principles of digital ethnography (Burrell, 2009; Góral ska, 2020; Murthy, 2008; Ritter, 2021). For us this means that direct and sustained contact with the participants as they are situated in their social world is happening on and through digital mediation (e.g., Ritter, 2021). Being ‘there’ means being online with participants - to the extent that we are given access and are welcomed. Our approach also emphasizes that sustained engagement online will be episodic.

Current approaches to digital ethnography reflect 25 years of development and now encompass multiple techniques and principles (Pink et al., 2015). And, while the sociological and anthropological interests in digital technologies has been a subject of study for many decades, digitally-located fieldwork continues to draw criticism, despite clear evidence of the robustness and rigor of this approach (Ito, 1996; Nardi, 1996). For us this means that digital ethnography we practice unfolds differently than the lived experiences of many non-digital ethnographers. This also means we must be particularly attentive to be reflexive and open to unorthodox arrangements (per Pink et al., 2015).

Our data collection is based on a panel design and involves four separate but interrelated efforts: interviews, surveys, field notes and secondary trace data. We gather data using all four at each round of data collection. In each round, data collection is framed by the interview. The topics and questions on the interview are supported by a short survey that is designed to collect quantifiable data such as hours worked, gender, family and household arrangements, etc. (See Table 1 for an overview of themes for survey and interview questions). The secondary data collection - such as reviewing worker’s Upwork profiles, LinkedIn presence and other sources that they suggest for us - is done at the same time as the interview. And, the field notes are used as a means to reflect on the data effort, what is learned in the doing of these data collection efforts, and to highlight salient points.

In particular, our approach to digital ethnography centers on interviews using ethnographic techniques, per (Spradley, 2016). Spradley’s approach to interviewing centers on the primacy of the participant’s knowledge that is embedded in the norms, language patterns, and learned cultures that may not be evident to the interviewer. As such, the roles of words, the importance of open-ended

discourse, accommodating the non-linearity of these interviews relative to topics (e.g., using probes and careful listening), and the attention to the participant's 'positionality' or location in their larger social systems are critical considerations in designing the interview (See Table 1).

:INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE:

We use Slack¹ as a shared digital repository of field notes used by all research staff, so the source and location of our data is online, to allow shared access by all research team members. The field notes and surveys are all designed to complement the interviews. We also collect trace data from these worker's online presences (e.g., LinkedIn) - when allowed - and pursue sustained engagement with the participants between interviews and across the multiple years and rounds of data collection.

The recruitment and data collection efforts reflect our panel-based approach. As such, we are collecting data from the same participants across time. To wit, data collection for Round 1 ran from November 2019 to May 2020 with 75 original participants. Data collection for Round 2 ran from November 2020 to August 2021. During this round, we lost 24 participants, but added 20 Black, Latinx, and multi-racial workers to diversify our sample. Doing so allowed us to pursue new research questions related to racial differences in worker experience, reflecting what we were learning from the first round of the panel study. Recruitment and data collection for Round 3 ran from November 2021 to May 2022. Across these, we have now interacted with 95 unique US-based online freelancers, most twice, and many thrice (with 75 participants who were included since the first round, and the 20 new workers added in Round 2, see Table 3). In each round of data collection we had some drop off among participants, losing a total of 24 after Round 1 and 17 more after Round 2, meaning that there were times that only some respondents provided their views.

This combination of data sources, and our attention to situating the online freelancer in their larger social world as part of the study, reflects the realities that online work focuses attention to the networks of relations, sociotechnical interdependencies of work, digital technologies and platform-mediated online interactions. These realities are exactly why digital approaches to ethnographic scholarship are popular and useful.

Most currently published research on flexibility does not employ a digital ethnographic approach. Instead, much of this prior research investigates in-person freelance and platform labor at a specific moment in time. These studies draw on smaller samples, limited by job type, age, or location. The digital nature of our research allows for the longitudinal study of online freelancers who live in different locations, have different skill/education levels, pursue different occupations, and complete a variety of jobs. Without digital research techniques, it would prove extremely difficult to follow such a large number of non-homogeneous freelancers, let alone over the course of multiple years. The digital ethnographic approach our study utilizes allows for entirely remote interactions with freelancers, emulating the type of correspondence that online freelancers have with clients. Freelancers are classified into one of three groups based on the types of services they provide on Upwork²: administrative, technology, and creative jobs (see Table 2).

The interview and survey data were analyzed independently and then together, leveraging both grounded analysis and guidance from the extant literature. We used thematic analysis to find patterns and common themes within the interview data. Initially, transcripts were individually reviewed, and reports on common patterns were developed. Themes and supporting data were

¹ See <https://slack.com>, see also Ritter (2016) for his digital ethnography of Slack.

² Upwork sometimes changes their job categories, so this provides us a means to compare over time.

posted to a group channel and discussed during weekly research meetings to develop a shared understanding. The analyses were done using the text analysis software DeDoose, with interview transcripts serving as the corpus for this analysis. Field notes served to clarify transcripts and to seed our research discussions. Both *a priori* constructs (such as occupation and experience) and themes that emerged from the ground-up coding (e.g., flexibility) were coded. The survey and trace data were the sources of the descriptive statistics presented in Table 3.

:INSERT TABLE 2 AND 3 AROUND HERE:

Evidence: Flexibility's Different Meanings

We focus on what flexibility means to the workers we have been following, drawing on interviews, surveys, field notes, and secondary data. These data make clear the primary reason the online freelancers we are following pursue this form of work is the perceived flexibility it affords. These data also show that the flexibility these workers seek varies across several dimensions, including scheduling flexibility (control over when to work), task flexibility (control over the projects to work on), and spatial/location flexibility (control over where to work). Most of the workers we spoke to highlighted the importance of schedule flexibility, and the ability to work when they wanted. Many also mentioned the importance of this flexibility to accommodate their caregiving responsibilities (e.g., P01, P02, P06, P09, P15, P16, P18, P19, P23, P24, P26, P27, P28, P33, P46, P47, P52, P62; P64).

"The flexibility is excellent. I think that's the primary reason I was using [Upwork]...My son was in preschool at that time...It serves a purpose." (P28, Marketing Research)

"I have the flexibility. I love it...If my son is sick, then I can stay home with him and get work done while he's sleeping." (P02, Legal Analyst)

"I love the flexibility... it was great to be flexible, take care of other people in my family. Even though I had given up most of the work, I was still doing some things." (P18, Tutor)

"I have a young son. I'm not too far from DC, so the DC attorney life was kind of a rat race for me. I was gone a minimum 60 hours a week from my family every single week, traveling a lot. My son was struggling in school and there were all kinds of different effects on my home life that I wasn't OK with, and now I'm able to make, essentially, the same amount of money..." (P01, Data analyst)

The flexibility to work independent of a predefined schedule and location was important for: 1) those who find it challenging to secure work based on where they live (P06, P15); 2) those dealing with life transitions or other personal circumstances, such as illnesses or recovery (P10, P18); and 3) those pursuing specific lifestyle choices such as traveling (P18, P41, P63) and other non-standard arrangements, like seasonal farming (P13), working from a sailboat (P40), and those working across multiple locations (P24, P63).

"Some of my gig work can be done when I'm out of the house, which doesn't happen quite as much anymore. The other benefit of gig work is when I was going through cancer treatment and spent a lot of time in doctors' offices... I could work around cancer treatments." (P18, Tutoring)

"I have a lot of family in Mexico, and I have a place to stay and it's very cheap, so I spend a large part of the year there. But my official place of residence is New York, so, moving back and forth, as long as I have my laptop with me, and as long as I have a place with an internet

connection and relative quiet, I can always apportion a six-hour block of time when necessary to do some work. And fundamentally, that's the office, you know... And that's pretty mobile and modular and so on." (P63, Writer/Editor)

More themes emerged from the analysis and we report on three in this chapter: 1) the online freelancers whom we are following seem to prefer the stability and sustainability of full-time work over freelancing when both are offered as remote options; 2) full-time remote employment increases these worker's freelancing control and flexibility; 3) these workers keep freelance work options open even as they transition to more permanent full-time work arrangements. Each of these findings are discussed below.

Stability over flexibility: Workers prefer freelancing until securing full-time remote work

Because we have been able to gather data over time, we have the ability to gain insights into how these online freelance workers navigate changing career opportunities. In our latest round (Round 3) of interviews and data collection, participants made clear to us that their need for spatial flexibility (of where to work) was exacerbated at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, life circumstances led individuals to re-think their priorities in life, with many highlighting changes in how they viewed their careers and the need for more flexible working arrangements in order to better accommodate these priorities. One participant highlights this heightened awareness and importance of spatial flexibility, stating:

"The urgency to have options to work remote is greater... I think Covid has highlighted the importance of having options to generate money without needing to leave the home, and ultimately offer more flexibility." (P51, CAD, Drafter)

Data show that worker preferences and career arrangements have changed over the three years of the study (2019 to 2022). There is a decrease in the number of participants who report solely relying on income from freelancing. In our Round 1 survey (2019-20), 40 out of 75 (53%) of the freelancers in our sample reported freelancing as their primary source of work. A year later, in our Round 2 survey (2020-21), 20 out of 71 (28%) workers reported working solely as a freelancer. And, in our latest survey, Round 3 (2021-22), eight out of 54 (15%) workers reported working solely as a freelancer. Insights from the interviews also reflect the change in preference away from freelancing. This change appears to stem primarily from workers seeking more employment stability (e.g., P06, P07, P66, P48) and due to an increased availability of remote-work opportunities (e.g., P20, P37).

"Upwork used to be my full-time job, but I now use Upwork on a part-time basis to kind of supplement other things I'm doing. It's funny, because I was actually freelancing for a while, and now I work part-time at a coffee shop. So I can still freelance, but I just needed more income, and I've just found that at least with the work I'm doing, it's really hard just with the recession." (P07, Freelance Writer)

"I'm extremely lucky right now... I'm in a situation where I don't have to leave home and I still have full employment. In fact, they offered to convert me just recently from contractor to full-time status, so it's actually getting better for me in terms of stability of employment. This will probably mean, however, that there's going to be less freelancing in the future." (P66, Graphic Designer)

"My freelance work was going really well and everything. Sometime over the summer, a full-time position just landed in my lap. I took it in the fall, the end of September. But one of the conditions for that position that I negotiated into my contract was that I could continue

doing my freelance work as long as there were no conflicts of interest and time capacity, the ability to do the work.” (P37, Urban Planner)

Data show that many of the workers we have been following prefer the stability of traditional full-time work over freelancing (part or full-time), when both options are available remotely. This is the case for online freelancers who indicated that freelancing was their primary source of income or secondary source of income. Over the course of 2021-2022, 16 out of 50 workers (32%) interviewed in Round 3 had transitioned to new full-time employment, with all but one transitioning to a remote work arrangement.

While previous rounds of data collection made clear participants embraced the schedule flexibility of when to work, our latest round of data also makes clear that full-time remote options afford workers the spatial flexibility they seek while also providing work and income stability. Many workers have indicated that this balance is important to them. When faced with losing some schedule flexibility in exchange for more stable work arrangements with spatial flexibility, it was a calculation worth taking. Workers prefer full-time remote arrangements as they are able to access worker protections and benefits that full-time employment affords, such as health care and paid leave, which are unavailable to most freelancers (due to independent contractor status).

“My full time job is remote as well so I’m working from home either way. Probably I would have considered Upwork more if I had to go to work [physically]. Before the pandemic, less employers offered remote jobs. That’s why I was working mostly on Upwork. But now since a lot of employers, a lot of companies, are offering remote jobs, full time jobs, I prefer that. Because it’s more stable, and income is stable and you get paid leaves and all kinds of benefits of the full-time job that Upwork doesn’t provide.” (P48, Accountant)

“Back in 2019 when I started freelancing [remote work] was not something that most employers offered in traditional positions so I went to freelancing and to Upwork. However, of course, due to the pandemic a lot more employers are interested in offering either hybrid or fully remote opportunities. So once that taboo was kinda gone, especially in 2021, I was able to find a full-time position that offered fully remote, and of course offered more stable pay and also health benefits as well so that’s what I transitioned into.” (P41, Copy Editor)

“So now that I have a [full-time remote] job that is more promising, I feel more secure now, and I have benefits with the other job, too. That’s something I didn’t have when I was working with Upwork. I did enjoy the flexibility when I was a freelancer, but now that I have goals, I have more bills to pay, I actually appreciate that a company hired me.” (P12, Virtual Assistant)

Keeping options open: Situational arrangements in the contemporary workforce

Finally, even as we saw these workers' preferences about freelancing change, with some transitioning from freelancing to full-time employment, these workers did not leave freelancing. The online freelancers we are following who transitioned to full-time work kept their Upwork profile available as a back-up or alternative option. It was common for these workers to keep their Upwork profiles visible while taking on few-to-no projects. Some of the participants who transitioned to full-time traditional employment relied on clients reaching out to them with work opportunities. Both approaches make clear that continuing relationships with freelance clients lessens the risk these workers may feel as they transition to full-time work: freelancing is an alternative path as needed.

“My career changed, so now I mostly work my full-time job, and I put Upwork aside. I’m open to offers. I don’t seek clients, but I’m open to clients to find me and offer me some gigs. Also, I prefer doing fixed-budget tasks in Upwork more than hourly work, because currently my full-

time job is taking pretty much all of my time.” (P48, Accountant, Has full-time (FT) work and Upwork provides extra income)

“I’m not letting go of Upwork work or of freelancing, but I actually feel more secure now than when I was working as a contractor within Upwork.” (P12, Virtual Assistant, Has FT work and Upwork provides extra income)

I may be able to exert some extra time at certain points in my life and other points in time. If life gets a little too busy, I might not be able to dive into it as much, but I do think it’s something I could see myself doing, because it’s kind of at my will when I want to work and how much I want to work, so that’s really quite convenient. (P20, Administrative Data Entry, Has FT work and Upwork provides extra income)

Some of the workers we are following keep their Upwork accounts open in case they will need to return to freelancing in the future. For these workers, freelancing currently feels too unstable. When financial stability becomes more important than the flexibility of freelancing, many workers choose to secure traditional part-time or full-time work. For several workers, traditional employment may not be their ideal working arrangement, but instead a financial necessity. Some of these workers express interest in returning to freelance work in the future.

“With the cost of living as high as it is, without universal healthcare, being self-employed and having to pay the self-employment tax, isn’t sustainable for the long-term. I think I will ultimately, once ... [cuts out] ... a physical job, not a remote job. That’s my projection. I hope I’m wrong. If I could make this somehow enough for us, for example, maybe if I could have a physical job on the weekends and do freelance during the week, I would love to do that. But I can’t get my hopes up too high. It may be the reverse in the end. It may be that I need to do freelance on the weekends as an additional source of income. We will see.” (P39, Writer, Translator, Editor on Upwork and has another less-than-FT jobs)

“Upwork used to be my full-time job, but I now use Upwork on a part-time basis to kind of supplement other things I’m doing. It’s funny, because I was actually freelancing for a while, and now I work part-time at a coffee shop. So I can still freelance, but I just needed more income, and I’ve just found that at least with the work I’m doing, it’s really hard just with the recession... I’m planning on doing this for another few months, but this is definitely not long-term, sustainable, like freelancing was pre-Covid-19 for me.” (P07, Writer on Upwork and also has part-time (PT) work and is looking for FT work)

“I just looked at it as supplemental anyway. It’s not my main core competency; I look at it as a lead generation source, and for what it’s worth, I want to be independent of any third party getting the clients, and I want to track my own clients, and I’m working on that.” (P46, Analyst, has PT work and is looking for FT work)

Discussion: Flexibility, Work and the Future

As workers and organizations emerge from the lockdowns and pandemic-related changes of the past two years, it seems that remote work has moved from a discussion of possible futures to a common practice. Likewise, the increase in the availability of remote work has led workers to reconsider their career trajectories and working arrangements. This rethinking is evident in the significant number of voluntary separations recently, amounting to over 25% of the workforce (Tappe & CNN Business, 2022), and the steady rise of freelance and online employment options.

Indeed, it is now common for job ads to explicitly articulate if they are remote, in-person or some hybrid combination of these working arrangements (Anders, 2021). Our data make clear that online freelancers are aware of this when rethinking working arrangements. We also found that the online freelancers we have been following are picking alternate paths - trajectories that make sense to them. Furthermore, the diversity in motivation, career goals, skills and occupations demonstrates the heterogeneity in the online labor market. Despite this heterogeneity, a common thread across these workers is the emphasis placed on the importance of flexibility.

For years, scholars, pundits and workers have heralded “flexibility”, or the freedom to decide when to work, as the hallmark characteristic attracting workers to online freelancing (Chen, Chevalier, Rossi, & Oehlsen, 2019; Johns & Gratton, 2013; Katsnelson & Oberholzer-Gee, 2021; Kuek et al., 2015; Malone, 2004; Sundararajan, 2017; Wheatley, 2017; Wu et al., 2019). That is because this work offers “... a flexible working schedule [that] allows individuals to take better care of their families, continue to study, or start their own businesses while working and earning a salary” (Kuek et al., 2015).

Insights from our data challenge this view of flexibility - the freedom to decide when to work - as the hallmark characteristic attracting workers to freelancing. Our data show that being able to work remotely is particularly critical for individuals who have been choosing to pursue online freelance work. And while many of these workers note freelancing allows them to choose clients, projects, and schedules, data show that most individuals choose online freelancing based on the flexibility to choose where they will work. For example, many of the workers we have followed make clear their personal needs require them to seek a work-from-home arrangement, while others seek the ability to be able to work from anywhere as they travel. As such, the ability to work remotely is more important to them than task flexibility and scheduling flexibility.

Given that market forces dictate to a large extent what and how much work is available for online workers, freelancers tend to have less control over the clients and projects available at any given point in time. And, with work availability also varying by occupation, some workers are left to take on less than desirable jobs, pay, schedules and clients (Gershon, 2011). This means that even as they have little control over these factors, online freelancers can control where they work. As such, flexibility is as much about the ability to choose where to work as it is the ability to search for and complete work whenever one wants. So when there is an opportunity for a more standard work arrangement that allows an online freelancer to work remotely, many opt for this more stable and sustainable option, even if they are afforded less flexibility about when to work.

We further note implications of an increased reliance on working remotely as part of standard work arrangements to the 1) future of work, 2) future full-time workers and 3) online freelancers could be profound. First, in the past decade we have seen explosive growth in the online labor market. To this point, the global market for online labor has grown approximately 50% over the past three years, with an estimated 56 million online freelancers globally (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). These platform-mediated online labor markets provide opportunities for organizations to help absorb market shocks, and for workers to find project-based (or gig) work (Gray & Suri, 2019; Kalleberg, 2003; Lehdonvirta, Kässi, Hjorth, Barnard, & Graham, 2019).

What does the increase in the availability of remote work mean to the future of online labor markets? The answer likely depends on if the online labor market is distinct or complementary. If the market is distinct we would expect a smaller impact long term. That is, as a distinct labor market the fluctuation in the supply and demand in the primary labor market is mostly independent from the fluctuations in the online labor market. However, if the markets are complementary, changes in the primary labor market will have a more direct and long term impact. Our findings suggest that

the online labor market and the traditional labor market are complementary in the United States, but, we see value in the further interrogation of this question (see also, Stephany, Dunn, Sawyer, & Lehdonvirta, 2020). We also see the potential of examining this question through other analytical perspectives. For example, given the geographic variation in economic structures, labor laws, and labor market attributes, the interactions between the traditional and online labor market may differ.

Second, we found that workers in our study who shifted to full-time remote work continue to freelance in some capacity. The freelancers whom we have been speaking with for years are choosing to keep their online profiles visible and available should a client want to inquire about their services. We see this as a strategic career move, beyond the clear financial possibilities. Keeping their profile active and visible means keeping their options open. Should their new arrangement fall through or the terms change in ways that no longer serve them, they're able to resume their freelancing activity as before. We also surmise that workers keep their profiles open because should they choose to close, delete or deactivate their profile, they would lose all of their built up capital that is embedded into their profile on the platform. The capital includes their job ratings, job success score, client reviews, performance and activity badges, and other platform-driven metrics. Our respondents note high ratings, strong metrics and great reviews from clients help them secure more projects and ask for higher wages. The value of these platform-specific measures, metrics and scores disappear if a worker leaves the platform and deletes their profile: this social capital does not go with them. Thus, leaving their profile active means keeping their options open.

Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, it seems that online freelancers who keep their profile active even as they take on a more standard job have greater agency - despite the diminished flexibility of full-time remote work. With a stable income and benefits, workers who continue to freelance are better able to avoid taking on jobs, clients, or schedules which do not align as well with their needs. In particular, workers with remote full-time work feel they have the control to be more selective.

We found this increased control related to task flexibility. As workers have more stable income, they are more likely to pass up on work that is not aligned with their task preferences (e.g., P17, P34, P40, P58), including taking in consideration the project type, clients, and pay that is tied to a specific job, and the alignment with the freelancer's values and goals. So, while the work hasn't changed, the work is decidedly less precarious. And, while the control exerted by the platforms is well-documented (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Vallas & Schor, 2020), their employment situation moderates the platform's market-making control.

Conclusion

Looking forward, we offer two insights into navigating the future of work and reflect on the value of digital ethnography to provide insights unavailable via other means. Our first insight is that this approach to work continues to grow. This insight reflects the reality that as worker's and employer's expectations of employment continue to shift from careers to a greater focus on tasks rather than jobs, the demand for freelance workers will increase. Yet, many workers prefer the stability and the workplace protections afforded to full-time workers. As our findings show, online freelance workers will take remote full-time employment in lieu of freelancing, even if they have been committed to this path for some time. If organizations continue to seek independent workers, a sustainable arrangement needs to include social policies specifically focused on providing these workers with greater access to benefits and other workplace protections.

Second, we see the desire for remote work as one indicator that contemporary in-person workplace cultures are misaligned with the needs of 21st century workers - and the neologism of "the Great Resignation" serves as evidence of this misalignment. Our data make clear the workers we are following care deeply about the flexibility of choosing where they work (supporting Warren's (2021)

assertions). As our participants have noted, their choices for work arrangements were often made considering the broader context of life trajectories and finances while factoring in family needs and/or partners' interests. Our data also suggest online freelancer workers prize both flexibility (about when and where to do work) and stability (of work availability). Warren (2021) argues that current organizational strategies tend to focus too heavily on issues of time. Given what we are learning, it is no wonder that organizations pursuing a "business as usual" strategy of in-person work as the path forward face increased difficulty in hiring and retaining experienced workers. If what we see from the online freelancers we have been following reflects a larger trend, then the Great Resignation reflects a great realization - that the flexibility of where to work is the most important attribute of their work arrangement.

Finally, we note that pursuing digital ethnography has positioned us to observe the long-term impacts of the great realization on our online freelancers. This approach requires investing in relationship-building, puts a premium on selecting participants to maximize insight, and is resource-intensive relative to both the researcher needs and the time scales. Without the patience to track change over time, in the situations where this work happens, we would not be able to explain change or see trajectories. For this reason, more field-based studies like this are needed, so that we can learn more about the ways in which this and other possible futures of work are being realized.

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Table 1. Themes for Survey and Interview Questions³

Data Collection	Themes for Survey	Themes for Interview Questions
Round 1 - 75 surveys - 67 interviews	1) Work arrangements and experience overview; 2) Upwork efforts, benefits, and satisfaction 3) Value of education and experience; 4) Demographics (Gender, age, education, etc.)	1) Overview of work and the role of freelancing; 2) Labor market strategy; 3) Efforts for securing work and pay fairness; 4) Organizing for work; 5) Challenges in freelancing; 6) Closing questions and interest in future participation
Round 2 - 71 surveys - 69 interviews	1) Work arrangements and satisfaction; 2) Freelance efforts and financial security; 3) Freelance branding and LinkedIn	1) Household arrangements and work-life balance; 2) Reviewing changes to work arrangements; 3) Pricing and bidding strategies; 4) Online identity and social media branding; 5) Networks and community building; 6) Closing questions and interest in future participation
Round 3 - 54 surveys - 50 interviews	1) Work arrangements, satisfaction and predictability; 2) Freelance efforts and financial security; 3) Work set up, pricing arrangements and Upwork features	1) Reviewing changes to work arrangements; 2) Experiences with the platform/features; 3) Organizing for work 4) Networks and community building; 5) Closing questions and interest in future participation

Table 2. Freelancer Occupational Categorization

Freelancer Categories	Job Examples
Administrative	Data Entry, Virtual Assistant, Transcription
Technology	Data Science, Software Engineering, Information Security & Compliance
Creative	Blog Writing, Graphic Design, Photography

³This table provides an overview of the data collection efforts and themes. It shows the number of complete surveys and interviews per round, and while most participants complete both the interview and survey for the project, a few of the participants only completed the survey or only the interview portion, which means the number of survey and interview participants are not the same.

Table 3. Freelancer sample characteristics and total survey participants⁴

		Round 1 Nov 2019 - May 2020	Round 2 Nov 2020 - Mar 2021	Round 3 Nov 2021 - May 2022
Total participants (survey and/or interview)		(75 total)	(71 total)	(54 total)
Gender	Female	47 (63%)	39 (55%)	27 (50%)
	Male	27 (36%)	32 (45%)	27 (50%)
	N/A	1 (1%)	-	-
Job classification	Administrative	32 (43%)	29 (41%)	21 (39%)
	Technology	12 (16%)	12 (17%)	12 (22%)
	Creative	31 (41%)	30 (42%)	21 (39%)
Education	No college degree	8 (11%)	9 (13%)	5 (9%)
	Associates	3 (4%)	4 (6%)	4 (7%)
	Bachelors	33 (44%)	31 (44%)	23 (43%)
	Post-graduate degree	30 (40%)	27 (38%)	22 (41%)
	N/A	1 (1%)	-	-
Have children	Yes	36 (48%)	34 (48%)	25 (46%)
	No	39 (52%)	37 (52%)	29 (54%)
Marital Status	Never married	21 (28%)	22 (31%)	18 (33%)
	Married	47 (63%)	42 (59%)	31 (57%)
	Divorced/Separated	5 (7%)	7 (10%)	5 (9%)
	Widowed	1 (1%)	-	-
	N/A	1 (1%)	-	-
Race/Ethnicity	White (Non-Hispanic)	45 (60%)	34 (48%)	24 (44%)
	Black/African American	11 (15%)	14 (20%)	10 (19%)
	Asian	5 (7%)	5 (7%)	4 (7%)
	Multi-racial, More than one race	7 (9%)	6 (8%)	6 (11%)
	Hispanic	3 (4%)	10 (14%)	8 (15%)
	Other race	3 (4%)	2 (3%)	2 (4%)
	N/A	1 (1%)	-	-

⁴ This table highlights demographics from the survey participants. Due to the design of the panel study, participants in the study have participated for one, two or all three of the data collection rounds. The number of interview participants is not included in this table, see Table 1 for total number of interview participants.