

MORE THAN TEMPORAL CONTROL: FORMS OF AGENCY THAT MATTER TO HIGH-SKILLED INDEPENDENT WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

Nearly one third of U.S. workers today are self-employed or independent contractors. Autonomy has long been identified as a driving motivation for independent workers, but it remains unclear how these workers experience this component of their work in their day-to-day lives. In an interview and diary study with high-skilled independent workers, we find that autonomy is not a monolithic or unidimensional experience; rather, it encompasses multiple agentic facets (particularly, temporal, operational, environmental, and holistic agency) that workers value and describe as core to their choice to engage in independent work.

INTRODUCTION

Independent work has been on the rise for decades (Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007). A large portion of independent workers are high-skilled contract workers or self-employed professionals who could often choose to work in traditional organizations, securing health benefits and regular pay (Lim, Miller, Risch, & Wilking, 2019). What draws these people to independent arrangements and motivates them to continue in these roles is not fully understood.

Current scholarship argues that the primary draw for such high-skilled independent workers centers around temporal flexibility (Richter & Richter, 2020; Shibata, 2020) or “the ability to determine which and how many hours one works” (Evans, Kunda, & Barley, 2004: 2). Recent work on independent knowledge workers indicates that such work does involve a high degree of temporal flexibility (Erickson, Menezes, Raheja, & Shetty, 2019), yet a study of high-skilled software contractors demonstrated that while workers had theoretical control over their time, they rarely “choose” to take time off (Evans et al., 2004). Similarly, while developments in information technology now allow for high-skilled knowledge workers to control when and where they work, scholarship shows that independent workers often build and blur the boundaries between their home-lives and work-lives often necessitating moment-by-moment context management (Ciolfi & Lockley, 2018). Thus, while the ability to

manage time and space is valued by workers, it is clear that this is only one aspect of a complex matrix of agencies, trade offs, and burdens experienced by these workers.

Autonomy as an attribute of work has long been a focus in the organizational literature (Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Langfred, 2005; Spector, 1986). In particular, it has been recognized as a critical component to the execution of high-skilled work that is technically complex and variable because it affords workers control over the ways in which tasks can be performed (Bailyn, 1985; Haug & Sussman, 1969; Meiksins & Watson, 1989). Notable in these studies is the assertion that worker autonomy is often perceived as an oppositional force to organizational control (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). Indeed, most studies of autonomy in the workplace examine it as a scalar object—something that can be, to a degree, given or taken away—prompting a recent move by scholars to re-examine autonomy as a practice (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2013).

In this paper, we build on this call for re-examination by decomposing and delineating a set of “agencies” that high-skilled independent workers practice or seek to practice when embracing the inherent autonomy of their work. In so doing, we not only shed light on the implicit promises and challenges of independent working arrangements, but progress organizational discourse on autonomy beyond issues of organizational control or task independence. Understanding the motivations and lived experience of high-skilled independent workers is a first step toward thinking critically about the future of work in what many see as a future of distributed, virtual, and flexible work arrangements (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

To explore how high-skilled independent workers experience agency, we designed a multi-stage study to collect data via a survey, an initial onboarding interview, 7 contiguous days of diary entries in response to prompts, and a final closing interview between September and November 2020. Our participants (N=25, see Table 1) classified themselves as contract workers, freelancers, or independent workers and had been working independently in the United States before the onset of the pandemic in March, 2020. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview and diary data aimed initially on inductively identifying factors that led participants to engage in independent work. Subsequent analysis deepened these themes in relation to a freedom or agency the participant felt independent work provided. Finally, we investigated how participants felt about their work in relation to the current pandemic.

Table 1 about here

FINDINGS

In addition to a high degree of control over when and how long to work (temporal agency), participants described three other forms of agency that they either currently experienced or had experienced prior to COVID 19 (See Table 2). They also described the ways in which the agencies they experienced through independent work arrangements had been affected by the economic, social, and political environment of 2020.

Table 2 about here

Environmental Agency

Workers appreciated their ability to customize and change their immediate work environments. The agency to move around is experienced as valuable in both day-to-day and long-term scenarios. Nearly all of our workers experienced dramatic changes to their environmental agency in the pandemic. For those who enjoyed working in coffee shops or libraries, COVID stripped their ability to cultivate a desirable work space outside the home. Once everyone in a living space was forced to stay home, it became more difficult for some participants to craft a productive work space at home. Many workers responded to the pandemic by changing their living situation. For example, some independent workers were looking to increase their domestic space, while others sought to experience a new part of the country or return to a more supportive community. Nearly half of our participants moved as a direct result of the pandemic and more were considering moving at the time of our interviews..

Operational Agency

Participants also repeatedly emphasized the benefits of having agency over how they went about completing their work, particularly what aspects of the job they wanted to focus on and which specific jobs or clients they chose to engage with. Operational agency in this sense includes being able to pursue new directions and facets of the job as well as being able to offload or avoid aspects of the work they find less rewarding. Workers appreciated the *choice* in how broadly they defined their work. The pandemic dramatically affected either the amount of work available or the pressure on workers to take on new jobs. Whereas before, workers were able to prioritize jobs in tandem with their personal lives, the pandemic caused workers who did have work to feel like these choices were no longer possible. In contrast, many of the independent workers in this study who initially suffered from a loss of work were able to leverage operational agencies in order to successfully pivot into new forms of work.

Holistic Agency

Holistic agency is the ability to navigate and integrate personal and professional values into everyday choices. This enabled workers to strive to be their “authentic selves” across domains. Holistic agency is especially valued by parents of young children who saw independent work as granting them the opportunity to have a purpose beyond parenting. This form of agency was particularly impacted by the pandemic. Many workers lost access to their friends, neighbors, and coworkers, which impacted their ability to integrate disparate roles holistically. Parents also expressed challenges in finding the balance necessitated by holistic agency during COVID.

DISCUSSION

These findings extend current literature that explores the role of autonomy and experienced agency in high-skilled independent work. Beyond the appeal of temporal agency,

which has been the cornerstone of scholarship in this area, we identify three additional forms of agency that high-skilled independent workers experience: *environmental agency*, *operational agency*, and *holistic agency*. Our data suggest that these agencies are deeply valued by high-skilled independent workers and may act as a buffer against the inherent uncertainty that accompanies high-skilled independent work. Even as that uncertainty expounded exponentially during a global pandemic, the substantial majority of our participants expressed a dedication to their independent work practices and were committed to maintaining this arrangement as long as it was even somewhat economically viable. Ultimately, this framework helps to identify what high-skilled workers find valuable in their work: control over their time, space, work practices, and individual values.

These insights problematize the very notion of “job satisfaction” by suggesting that even tension filled lives where people are facing incredible uncertainty and pulls on their time might be preferable to the traditional forms of work. Our data suggests that key to that decision matrix are the multiple forms of agency that people enjoy in independent working arrangements. Future scholarship would benefit from a deeper understanding of the boundary conditions that enable some people to engage in high-skilled independent work arrangements. Understanding the structural, occupational, and financial conditions that both make it possible for people to enjoy the agencies of high-skilled independent work and buffer these people during times of extreme uncertainty is critical to understanding the sustainability of alternative work arrangements.

Further, our findings complicate mainstream narratives that laud flexible schedules as the pinnacle of worker agency. Such narratives tend to focus on piecemeal gig work and position temporal agency as the key benefit of independent work. Much of the current scholarship on the gig economy questions whether temporal autonomy is enough of a “benefit” and focuses on the precariousness of this work, arguing that gig workers deserve fair wages and traditional workers benefits (Gray & Suri, 2019). We do not disagree with these insights. However, we bring a different angle to this conversation. Putting aside the question of whether or not temporal agency justifies precarious and often unethical working conditions, our findings suggest that scholarship in both high-skilled independent work and gig-work should take into account the various forms of agency possible in alternative working arrangements. It would be worth exploring if and how operational and holistic autonomy figure into the experience of low-skilled gig workers.

CONCLUSION

Current literature suggests that the primary benefit of independent work centers around temporal and environmental agency—the ability to work when and where one chooses. Our work confirms that these forms of agency are highly valued by independent workers. However, it is far from the only benefit. Independent workers also find their work structures enable agency over their work practices and the values they perform while working. Although many workers found themselves in precarious situations during the pandemic, they maintained that the agencies gained through working independently were still more valuable than the sense of security a traditional workforce might provide. This broader framework of agency helps shed light on the various values individuals hope to enact on a daily basis. A continued exploration of these values will help our understanding of the future of work, particularly as it relates to how, when, in what ways, and for whom workers choose to work.

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Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants

Race	Age	Household	Housing
White 15	18-24 2	Lives with Child/children and	No move post
White/Jewish 2	25-34 9	Romantic Partner 5	pandemic 11
Hispanic 3	35-44 11	Lives with Romantic Partner 4	Moved post
Black 2	45-54 3	Lives with Non-Familial	pandemic 14
Asian 1	Total 25	Roommate(s) 3	Total 25
Native		Lives with sibling(s) 1	
Hawaiian 1		Lives with parents + sibling(s) 1	
Other 1		Lives alone 11	
Total 25		Total 25	

Table 2: Forms of agency experienced by independent workers

Agency	Definition	Examples
Temporal	Agency to decide when and/or how much to work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Scheduling one's day · Taking vacations · Working in short or long chunks
Environmental	Agency to decide where, (spatially and geographically) to work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Choosing location of work (e.g., couch, office) · Agency to change working environments · Agency to design or craft one's work space · Agency to make a semi-permanent geographic move without threatening work
Operational	Agency to craft work task(s) and choose between available jobs and clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Agency to engage in work in desired way · Agency to focus on a new aspect of the job/industry in order to enhance skill(s) or deciding to offload unwanted tasks on hired help · Agency to choose jobs in order to earn more money, learn a new skill, explore a new niche, or avoid working with unpleasant clients
Holistic	Agency to manage & integrate personal and professional values into everyday choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Agency to engage in activities aligned with different roles and values without censure (e.g., parent and professional) · Agency to work in line with one's core values (e.g., working sustainably in a wasteful industry)