

The GIG is up

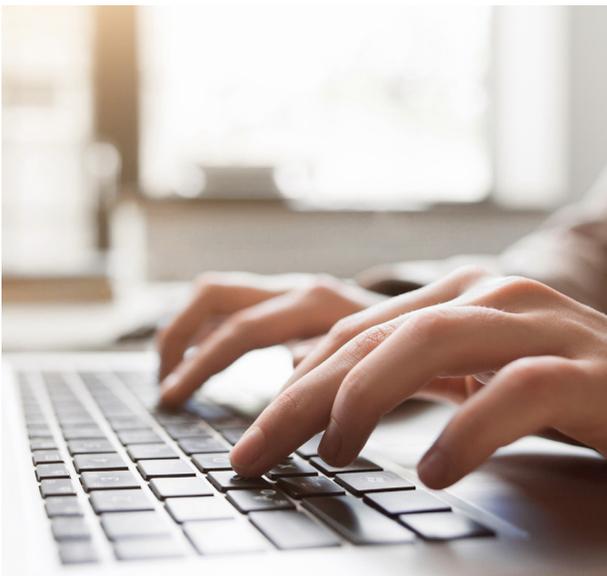


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The gig economy is here to stay as freelance workers' ranks swell.

Whether from desire or necessity, gig workers, those defined as independent contractors, freelancers or part-time jobbers, continue to fill gaps or take ongoing work to meet employer's needs in an evolving workforce landscape.

"We're seeing a lot of clients utilizing gig workers for short term or one-off assignments, and I'm seeing that growing," said Jeffrey Stewart, an attorney at White and Williams LLP in Upper Saucon Township, who specializes in employment and labor law.

Companies will tap freelancers for almost any task.

"Companies use them to put together presentations, where [the company] has the substance, but they want it to [have] a certain level of professionalism with creative and design," Stewart said.

The website smallbizgenius.com reports that about 36 percent of workers are involved in the gig economy – from full-time employment to side-hustles – and indicators show this employment trend is on the rise.

In 2018, freelancers made a roughly \$1.28 trillion contribution to the U.S. economy, the report said.

David Black, president and CEO of Harrisburg Regional Chamber & CREDC said quality of life and controlling one's workday and career path were top motivators for those opting to pursue freelance working options.

"We saw it at the end of the recession in 2008 when people were doing it out of necessity," he said. "Now, lifestyle is a big reason."

In the past, companies did a hiring analysis to justify adding a full-time position by tallying up the cost of wages, health and medical benefits, taxes and paid time off against the amount of work to be done. If they couldn't justify the hire, they did without.

"Now there is this middle step," Stewart said. "We have work that needs to get done, or we have a busy season."

Bringing in a freelancer to address a particular project gets the work done without the additional cost of on-boarding a full-time employee.

By definition, gig or freelance workers do not receive employment benefits.

Flexibility and freedom

Finding freelance talent is easier today with websites designed to connect employers with workers. Word-of-mouth referrals remain the top matchmaker, Stewart said.

"If I have an IT project I might be able to use someone in Sioux City, Iowa, and the internet has allowed this," he said. But he noted many companies in the Lehigh Valley still prefer to work from a local talent pool.

Experts interviewed for this article agreed technology was the key factor in providing a platform for freelance, virtual and remote workers to thrive. Technology has not only supported freelance or gig workers and enabled them to serve many clients, it has opened up the workforce.

In 2017, Tom Newmaster, a partner of FORCE pkg in Lancaster, began his firm fueled entirely by freelance talent. FORCE is a packaging design and brand development company. The design and branding agency now employs five full-time staff members, but still uses freelancers.

"I have a freelancer in Colorado [Mountain Time], and because they are earlier we can stretch the workday to get a project done," he said.

The flexibility and freedom of the freelance model optimizes his business, Newmaster said. Younger workers have increased the size of the gig-worker community, because they are used to being able to work with a laptop or smartphone from virtually anywhere.

"Accessibility [through technology] and flexibility, as well as a generational mind-set" moves the gig workforce forward, he said.

While younger workers choose freelancing as a work lifestyle because of technology, older workers never had those options, until now. And many are discovering they can earn a good living by developing a client base and relationships—much in the same way any traditional company becomes successful, said Black, of Greater Harrisburg Chamber.

Becoming mainstream

In the past few years, talent and recruiting firms are paying attention to the way they can bridge the connection between freelancers and companies, too.

Lindsay Watson, co-founder of FIA NYC LLC Employment Services in Allentown, said her company has been placing freelancers with firms for about three years with the niche tied to growing mainstream trends. "Maybe two years ago we were looking at 10 percent [of placements] and now we're looking at about 30 percent and growing."

She attributed the shift to greater awareness of the value of gig workers, a more mainstream acceptance of their legitimacy and the financial benefit to only paying for work specified in a contract.

And, the number and variety of jobs can be handled remotely or during "off hours" is increasing, Watson said. Pay-per-click or SEO advertising experience are skill sets that might set a traditional marketing hire apart – and be hired on an as-needed basis.

"With the gig economy you're able to monetize your skills," Watson said.

Software development, finance and web development, website or content creative and design services, and IT are other types of jobs gig workers are often hired to do on a short or long-term contracting basis.