



Building the future of work together

Is portfolio working the future of work?

By Denis Pennel

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The labour market is experiencing a diversification of working conditions. Around the world the way that work is arranged is changing and today people are employed in a wide variety of forms. The full-time, open-ended contract that reached its zenith in the 1960's is making way for greater agency work and flexible work with a vast array of different employment contracts from fixed-term through to part-time and apprentice contracts. Some countries such as France and Italy operate over 30 different types of contract.

A number of influences are at play in driving this trend. One is the changing demands on business. The on-demand economy requires significant flexibility from both organisations and workers. The employment relationship of full time earners, working a nine to five, five-day week is no longer fit for the 21st century economy. In the new economic reality organisations need to be much more agile and responsive. They need a workforce that provides this flexibility and a human resource that they can scale up and down to meet the ebb and flow of demand and the expectations of customers.

The older generation, understandably, finds this somewhat unsettling. The established way of working is changing and they need to adopt a different mindset and move with the times. Younger workers on the other hand embrace this new way of working far more readily. They want greater fulfilment from their work with a role more tailored to their interests and skills. At the same time they place significant value on achieving work/life balance. The younger generation wants to work to live, not live to work.

Linked to this is the fact that people are increasingly looking for more autonomy in their working lives. They are more individualist, fed-up of the command and control management model and relish the freedom that comes with self-employment and working as an independent contractor. This way they are free to work when they like, on projects that interest them and with people that they enjoy working alongside.

Essentially, the result of independent working and portfolio working is that while people may have a lot of work, they don't necessarily have a job. This decoupling of jobs and work is set to

grow in the future. In many ways it is reminiscent of the pre-industrial revolution days when most workers were effectively self-employed craftsmen who ‘sold’ their services to the local community and undertook work for a wide variety of people and organisations – ‘employers’. They too were free to choose when and where they worked. Much of their work was done at home, from their own workshops, and they were paid for each piece of work they undertook.

In many respects the rise of portfolio working offers enormous opportunities. It gives people freedom to manage their working lives and provides an appealing way for people to gain fulfilment and income from work, whatever their age or stage in life. In a world where many regions are facing the challenge of aging demographics, it allows older workers to ‘keep their hand in’ and stay busy, rather than stopping work completely.

Nevertheless, people cannot be expected to navigate this new way of work all on their own. They will need intermediaries to help them find work and establish a portfolio of jobs. This is where employment agencies and other go-betweens come in. We can identify work, match job supply with demand and train people with the skills they need, ensuring that they are constantly employed. Online networks such as LinkedIn also support this new way of working and put workers in touch with work. The rise of online portals such as Task Rabbit and Service Central offer the same matching service and are set to grow in the coming years. Indeed in many ways they are a revival of the old-style professional guilds, where people with a certain set of skills form a loose affiliation and offer their services online to potential customers.

However, this new way of working cannot be sustainable without a reform of our social security systems to ensure that workers receive rights and protections throughout their working lives - including into retirement and allowing for periods of unemployment or under employment. We need to modernise the system so that rights and entitlements lie with the individual, not the employer. They need to be portable from job to job so that workers carry health benefits, pension rights, holiday entitlements etc with them – from task to task.

By reconciling our social security system with the new reality of work organisation we can allow both organisations and workers to embrace portfolio working, safe in the knowledge that their social rights and protections are still upheld.

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