

Wanted: creative  
solutions to shape a  
workable future

[Life](#)



Seda is a Miami artist supplementing her small-business income by working as a human lab rat in well-compensated clinical trials.

Ramona is a 61-year-old advertising copywriter, laid off a few years shy of retirement, making a living off of UpWork.

Ed is a recovering alcoholic just out of rehab, using his marketing and branding skills to prosper as a drag queen Lyft driver in a pink and leopard print car.

Clara is an MBA dissatisfied with the financial services industry who sets a monthly goal of earning \$10, 000 through jobs on Catalant (formerly HourlyNerd).

These are the varied and vibrant faces of the on-demand economy. They are also pioneers molding work to the reality of their lives in new and meaningful ways. The trails these pioneers blaze will have an indelible impact on the workforce for decades to come.

## **Writing the code.**

Politicians, the media, and think tanks have spent a lot of time recently exploring the future of work and its implications. But the fact is, the contours of that future already are being defined by a new breed of workers who are tapping into algorithmic matching platforms to turn their skills (and spare time) into new income streams. In doing so, they are building a completely new operating system for the world of work.

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The code for this new operating system is not complete, and the algorithms are not perfect. But this is not bad thing, because it gives us an opportunity to mold the system so it ensures a workable future for all.

## **Studying the future.**

The first step in shaping the future is to gain a deep understanding of the experiences and practices of its pioneers. The human lab rat, Lyft driver and other individuals personify seven archetypes of the on-demand economy, as outlined in a new report out from Institute for the Future. The Institute, a non-profit research organization where I'm executive director, has been studying the future of work for nearly 50 years. Never have we seen such a dramatic transformation on the horizon.

We synthesized our latest research to personify seven archetypes of the on-demand economy, as outlined in a new report, titled *Voices of Workable Futures: People Transforming Work in the Platform Economy*.

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## **Naming the archetypes.**

- *The Part-Time Pragmatist* doesn't see online platforms vs. conventional employment as a fork-in-the-road decision, but adds platform opportunities to traditional work.
- *The Savvy Consultants* are previous white-collar workers who see growth and opportunity, as well as freedom, in the on-demand economy.

- *The Freelancer* wants the luxury of choice in weaving together assignments based on personal values.
- *The Full-Time Gig Worker* maximizes efficiency by focusing on a single app -- the closest thing to employees in the on-demand world.
- *The Re-Entry Worker* uses platform work as a tool of resilience to ease them back into earning income while taking care of their health and well-being.
- *The Entrepreneur* looks to incorporate a platform into their own entrepreneurial vision and desire for growth.
- *The Hustler* doesn't fit the mold of a full-time job -- whether it's due to a criminal past, a career aspiration or a temperament. The Hustler searches for alternative income streams that fit into a flexible, unscheduled lifestyle.

In talking to these workers, we learned that we risk having the wrong conversation about the future of work if we try to shoehorn these new ways of working into old systems and rules for employment.

### **Defying expectations.**

For example, there are loud, ongoing debates about whether this new category of workers should be classified as either 1099 or W2 employees, but our report shows that they do not comfortably fit into either one. Many work on multiple, sometimes competing, platforms (many Uber drivers also drive for Lyft). What's more, we found money isn't always the primary motivation for these workers.

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Often, decisions are made based on flexibility or convenience. Savvy consultants told us they value being able to make almost as much money as they did at a big firm, but doing so by working late at night so they have more time with their kids. Some, particularly artists and musicians, decide to work for a few months and then take a break and focus on their creative pursuits.

How does the old 1099 vs W-2 framework accommodate these desires and motivations? It can't. Yet we need to ensure that this new category of workers has fair wages and the benefits of the social safety net.

### **Shaping work.**

This is a threshold moment when policymakers, platform designers and workers themselves all have a hand in shaping our collective future experiences to maximize gains and losses. After all, the new work platforms are not pre-ordained. Humans design them, and humans can shape how they work, with the goals of opportunity, equity and fair play in mind.

If an artist can make ends meet as a human lab rat and an MBA can prosper as a financial nerd-for-hire, why can't we as a society make the bold and creative platform design choices, and policy and regulatory frameworks, to ensure a future of work that not only provides a profitable return on investments but also a dignified and sustainable livelihood for participants?