

PRINT



BLOGS & STORIES

The Gig Economy

by *Tina Brown*

January 12, 2009 | 5:34am

Now that everyone has a project-to-project freelance career, everyone is a hustler.

No one I know has a job anymore. They've got Gigs.

Gigs: a bunch of free-floating projects, consultancies, and part-time bits and pieces they try and stitch together to make what they refer to wryly as “the Nut”—the sum that allows them to hang on to the apartment, the health-care policy, the baby sitter, and the school fees.

Gigs: They're all that's standing between them and...what? The outer-outer boroughs? Eating what's left of the 401(k)? Moving to Alaska? Out-and-out destitution?

To people I know in the bottom income brackets, living paycheck to paycheck, the Gig Economy has been old news for years. What's new is the way it's hit the demographic that used to assume that a college degree from an elite school was the passport to job security.



“With so many part-time people on—and not on—the job, corporate America has started to feel like it's on a permanent maternity leave.”

My own anecdotal evidence among friends is now borne out by [an exclusive poll](#) conducted last week by The Daily Beast and Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates. Five hundred employed U.S. citizens aged 18 and over were interviewed via the Internet on January 8 and 9.

A full one-third of our respondents are now working either freelance or in two jobs. And nearly one in two of them report taking on additional positions during the last six months.

Just as startling, these new alternative workers are not overwhelmingly low-income. They're college-educated Americans who earn more than \$75,000 a year.

Welcome to the age of Gigonomics.

The poll helps explain why it now takes a good ten minutes to get the answer to the once-breezy question, “So, what are you up to these days?”

As often as not, a dolorous monologue pours out. It usually goes something like this:

“Well, I'm doing two days a week, at, uh, this airline magazine, which is not bad because it allows me to still do my three days as, like, a consultant with my old company, where now you get, um, paid by the hour. Which works well, because you can even do that when you're traveling, which I have to do quite a bit of now because I'm also doing this speaker program for a tech company on the West Coast—well, was doing, because they're cutting back on their off-

site stuff because... " At which point you tune out. It's all too familiar. The white noise of the free fall.

For a while last year, the downsized people I know went around pretending they enjoyed the "freedom" and "variety" of doing "a whole lot of interesting things." Twelve months later, nobody bothers with that cover story anymore. Everyone knows what it actually feels like, this penny-ante slog of working three times as hard for the same amount of money (if you're lucky) or a lot less (if you're not). Minus benefits, of course.

"Among the upper class or college-educated," our pollsters [report](#), "the impacts felt are mostly the lack of a pay raise (40 percent) or the acquisition of more responsibilities at work without more compensation (35 percent)." As Christopher Hitchens replied the other day when I asked about the dress code for his Saturday night inauguration party: "Come as you were."

The managers of all these disintegrating companies tend to be mesmerized by the notion that everyone can now be hired cheap—that everyone is slave labor. Which, for them, should be great, right? What they don't take into account is that the Nut is the Nut. If your Gig with them can't pay it, you still have to make it—which means you've got all these other Gigs boiling along at the same time.

Doing three things badly is the name of the game. That's why the Gig Economy is no picnic for the flailing employer either. Every time the boss turns around asking for a key member of staff to join today's frantically convened cost-cutting strategy meeting the reply comes back, "It's not Sam's day to come in and he's the one working on it. Julia can come, though." "Julia? What she got to do with it?" "Yeah, well, we'll have to bring her up to speed."

With so many part-time people on—and not on—the job, corporate America has started to feel like it's on a permanent maternity leave. Colleagues are an amorphous, free-floating army of rotating waifs whose voicemails are clogged with plaintive requests from their own offices for missing information. I sometimes wonder what the impact of this will be on, say, patients in hospitals where job reducing is just as rampant as in media, or banking, or retail, or anywhere else. Are we about to see a rash of medical malfunctions as bad as the chronic surge in typographical errors in newspapers that just fired their entire copy desk?

I can think of two possible upsides to the tyranny of Gigocracy, one small and one big.

Small: the overdue demise of the hot-air agencies in the Internet world that have preyed on the budgets of fading big media behemoths. In the last few years, there has been a boom in these talk shops with multiple acronyms whose role has been to advise panicky managements on "how to think about the Internet space." The trouble is, space is all they've been offering to think about. Besides, thinking is the last thing a company hemorrhaging money wants to do.

The new big time-waster I can report is meetings about deals for which neither party wants to pay any money. It's a bit like one of those romantic comedy plots in which the gold digger pretending to be an heiress is hustling the billionaire who turns out to be a con man. *How much you got, pal?* is the mantra of the day. Forget the Perrier and the PowerPoints. Put up or shut up.

Big: As noted above, the folks at the bottom of the greasy pole have been living with the anxieties, uncertainties, and indignities of Gigwork (it used to be called piecework) for a long time. Now that people nearer the top are learning firsthand about the wonders of "individual initiative" and "self-reliance," a little more sympathy—maybe even solidarity—with those the meritocracy dismissed as losers may be in order. Maybe having to trade that first-class cabin for a smaller one without a porthole will alert some of the erstwhile winners to the fact that everyone's in the same boat.

To quote our Daily Beast poll, "The old picture of a hustler is a wizened guy standing on a street corner selling some assortment of unsavory goods. Today's hustler looks much swankier; with the economy in free fall, the American workplace is changing and now the top tiers are hustling."

I could go on. But, um, I have this, like, consulting thing to do and, er, this speech I'm supposed to be writing, and, um...

Gotta run!

Tina Brown is the founder and editor-in-chief of The Daily Beast. She is the author of the 2007 New York Times best seller [The Diana Chronicles](#). Brown is the former editor of Tatler, Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, and Talk magazines and host of CNBC's Topic A with Tina Brown. She has written for numerous publications, including The Times of London, The Spectator, and The Washington Post.

URL: <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2009-01-12/the-gig-economy/p/>

PRINT

Copyright 2008 The Daily Beast