

CONTINGENT EMPLOYMENT OF INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES: KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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A Nation of Contingent Workers

- Transformation in work arrangements in United States: Increasingly a nation of contractors and freelancers
- What is “contingent employment?” Definitions vary:
 - Lack of attachment between employer and worker
 - Reliance upon conditional factor for employment: fixed, limited period of time or specific job to be done
 - Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS): contingent workers as those without “an explicit or implicit contract for long-term employment”

Implications for Individuals with Disabilities

- Complex, to say the least
 - Positive – Entry into workforce; opportunities to counter unemployment and underemployment; flexibility that standard employment may not offer
 - Negative – Potential for lower pay and few benefits; no provisions for workplace accommodations; undermine goals of full employment
- Truth is, we know very little...
 - Schur (2003) – Health needs and flexibility as drivers
 - Kennedy and Olney (2006) – Implications of SSDI benefits on work
 - Zyskowski et al. (2015) – Participation in so-called “gig economy”

A Major Research Gap Remains

- Actual participation and experiences of individuals with disabilities in contingent work remains understudied
 - Prevalence or incidence of contingent work among this group
 - Individual and environmental factors associated with efficacious outcomes
- Purpose of project (Field Initiated Project on Contingent Employment of Individuals with Disabilities, FIP-CE)
 1. Qualitative research to identify variables associated with practices and experiences
 2. Produce and test survey that operationalizes key concepts
 3. Establish a preliminary, generalizable evidence base

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Key findings and considerations from Year 1 FIP-CE
narrative interviews

Participant Demographics (N=22)

Variable	
Gender	Male - 8 Female - 14
Race/Ethnicity	White, Not Hispanic - 14 White, Latino - 2 Black / African American - 4 Asian - 2
Highest Level of Education	Master's or Doctorate - 8 Bachelor's degree - 9 Associate's Degree - 3 Some College - 2
Total Personal Income (including benefits)	\$100,000 or higher - 2 \$75,000 - \$99,999 - 3 \$50,000 - \$69,999 - 5 \$35,000 - \$49,999 - 3 \$25,000 - \$34,999 - 2 \$15,000 - \$24,999 - 3 Less than \$15,000 - 1

Participant Demographics (continued)

Variable	
Age	Range: 25-75 years old Mean: 44.6 years old (SD \pm 13.8 years) Median: 43.8 years old
Functional Limitations or Conditions (N=32; 8 respondents reporting complex disabilities or comorbid conditions)	Sensory Total Blindness (no light perception) - 2 Low Vision/Legally Blind – 6 Deafness - 2 Hearing Impairment - 5 Mobility Spinal Cord Injury - 4 Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) – 3 Psychiatric Schizoaffective Disorder – 1 Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) - 2 Genetic and Chronic Conditions Genetic Disorder - 3 Fibromyalgia - 1 Chronic Fatigue Syndrome - 3

Qualitative Research Overview

- Exploratory in nature; they tease out the complexity of a person's experiences and choices regarding non-traditional employment
- Data can generate categories and themes that can be operationalized to build quantitative research instruments, such as self-reports
- Analysis of 60-90 minute telephone interviews, which were taped, transcribed verbatim. Data were entered into NVivo for content analysis
- Findings presented here as “**personas**,” a composite character representing the behaviors, needs, goals, and attitudes described in participants' interviews

Persona #1 - David

- 45-year-old, male, White, Latino origin.
- Spinal cord injury (T-11) resulting from a bicycle accident nearly 4 years ago, paraplegic, manual wheelchair user, able to drive a car.
- Previously, David worked in the hoteling industry as a bartender. Since the accident he has been unable to find full-time employment.
- David's main recreational activity and passion is scuba diving, and he has developed strong friendships with other divers through a local scuba shop.
- He makes ends meet by working at the dive shop repairing scuba equipment. He charges a flat rate for a specific repair and has an informal agreement to invoice the shop owner for a percentage of the fee (i.e. piece rate work).
- Before his accident, David's income was approximately \$50,000. Currently, he earns approximately \$15,000 a year. Together with SSDI and his savings, he has been able to make ends meet, but full-time employment remains a goal.

Persona #2 - Angela

- 24-year-old, female, born with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA).
- Angela has a BA in English literature and earns approximately \$28,000 a year.
- She freelances as a copy editor and reviewer for various online publications. Work is on a contract basis (a flat rate per review).
- Angela uses assistive technology: a power wheelchair, leg and wrist braces, Dragon Dictate. She also has a paid attendant who is hired when she travels between home and one of her jobs.
- She commutes 4 hours once a week to a paid internship in a theater focusing on inclusivity and diversity themes. The internship is to learn about managing and supporting theater operations.
- Angela also volunteers to edit and review for a number of online disability periodicals and websites, and uses her expanding social network to increase her employment opportunities.

Persona #3 - Jackie

- 45-year-old, female, African American.
- Deaf since birth; predominantly an ASL speaker with some basic English proficiency.
- Jackie has worked for many years as a "secret shopper": contract work to measure quality of service, or observe compliance with regulations, or gather specific information about products or services.
- Some of Jackie's jobs involve a mobile phone app that will offer her "microtask" jobs (taking a photo of a product display at a local drug store).
- Other jobs include a contract with a pharmaceutical company to periodically audit doctors' offices and ensure that doctors' samples are being dispensed appropriately.
- She views her primary work as the contract jobs she enjoys and has relied on for income most of her working life. Although her income has varied over the years, she currently earns approximately \$75,000 a year.

Persona #4 - Jimmy

- 56-year-old male, born in Brazil and adopted, has spent most of life in Kansas City. Blind with no light perception since birth.
- Completed a bachelor's degree in communications; held numerous contract-based call center jobs after college, first in debt collections and then telemarketing.
- Eventually worked for a major computer firm and a leading accessibility software manufacturer, all of which was part-time, contract-based, and done remotely.
- Based on his computer expertise and knowledge of accessibility, would accept “jobs” to visit clients with blindness and low vision around the country to help them set-up and use screen reading software.
- Worked as a paid musician to make ends meet, occasionally doing call-based work while on the road.
- Recently accepted a full-time, permanent position as an Assistive Technology Professional and relocated to another state.

Discussion

- Role of disability benefits (e.g. SSDI) in contingent work decisions
 - Critical to surviving financially but concerns about going over limits
 - Difficulties in understanding policies
 - Strategies for addressing caps
- Flexibility and life-work balance
 - Contingent work for addressing health needs, such as pain and fatigue, that permanent work cannot
 - Individuals with disabilities rearing children with serious disabilities
- Role of Technology
 - Self-accommodation regarding accessibility of computers and other ICTs
 - Importance of assistive technologies and provision through Vocational Rehabilitation and State AT Act projects
 - Emerging “gig economy” participation made possible through apps

Discussion (continued)

- Role of personal and professional networks
 - Volunteering as a deliberate strategy for employment opportunities
 - Pastimes, hobbies as a basis for income
- Diverse practices and experiences challenge definitions and data collection
- Archetypes of contingent employment among individuals with disabilities:
 1. Means to or strategy in career development
 2. Goal in itself that combines flexibility with life-work balance
 3. Transitional or experimental approach to employment after a disability is acquired.

Conclusion and Next Steps

- *Contingent Employment Practices Survey (CEPS)*
 - Currently in development; testing later this year and deployment next year
 - Will include items that categorize and describe contingent employment.
 - Survey will be designed to be administered in both a web-based and telephone format, intended to standardize and expedite data collection
- Objectives
 - Evidence on contingent employment practices, including relationship to community participation and social inclusion.
 - Inform future efforts to document the incidence or prevalence of contingent employment arrangements by people with disabilities.
 - Support policymaking and efforts to improve employment of individuals with disabilities through tools and evidence

Thank you

- For questions or a copy of this presentation, please e-mail: nathan.moon@gatech.edu or frances.harris@design.gatech.edu
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