

HRD Research Project Proposal

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EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCE OF CONTINGENT WORKERS

Abstract

In the recent years, the number of contingent workers has increased. As organizations rely on contingent workers to get their work done, the organizations need to ensure that everyone feels part of an inclusive environment. This research proposal aims at examining the experience of contingent workers through the lens of workplace inclusivity.

Keywords: HRD Research, contingent workers, inclusion, alternate workforce

Examining the experience of contingent workers through the lens of workplace inclusivity

Introduction

The market has grown vastly competitive and worldwide the companies are looking for different options to reduce overhead cost while still maintaining the revenue. As we experience VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity), one of the ways in which organizations have been able to maintain quality and keep prices under control is by hiring contractors or contingent workers. [Kalleberg](#) (2000) noted that, contingent work may be defined as any job in which an individual does not have an implicit or explicit contract for long term employment or one in which the minimum hours worked can vary in a non-systematic way.

There are four different kinds of contingent workers (i) Contingent workforce hired through an agency (ii) direct hires (iii) independent contractors who sell their services to the client on a fixed term basis and (iv) seasonal workers employed for a short term. According to a report from the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2017 there were about six million contingent workers in the United States the ([U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 2017). This has also given rise to gig economy where a worker gets paid for the specific project through technology based apps. ([NACO](#), 2015)

For many years contract/contingent workers had being considered as an alternate workforce. Today, they represent one of the dominant constituents of an organization. There are many reasons why organizations prefer hiring contract workers. Typically the contract workers

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bring a wealth of skill and experience with them, which supports the lean business model.

Compared to full time employees, the contract workers only get paid for their work and hence they provide a direct tangible benefit to the company.

My objective in this research project is to examine the experiences of contingent workers through the lens of workplace inclusivity. Does the workplace make a contingent worker feel included, valued? Does a contingent worker working on temporary contracts have similar or different experiences than permanently employed professionals?

Context and significance

This research project proposal has a personal connection. After being employed as a full time Geophysicist for almost 10 years, I took maternity leave during 2015. This was also the time when the oil industry went through a severe downturn ([2016 downturn](#)). Soon enough, I was fortunate to land into a new position as a contract employee. But working as a contractor/contingent worker was a new experience. As I navigated through the role of being a contingent worker, I realized contingent workers may not experience onboarding, may not have explicit roles and responsibilities, may not have a formal/informal performance review and might be excluded from several organizational initiatives.

Literature review

Extrinsic features of contingent work

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The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics has published a summary of the key statistics associated with contingent work ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017](#)). The report highlighted several key features of contingent work: overall contingent workers are less likely to have health insurance from their employer, and earn less per week than non-contingent workers. The study reported that there are 33% more contingent workers employed in the education & healthcare industry compared to any other industries. The study also showed that men and women are equally likely to be a contingent worker, although Asian and Hispanics are more likely to be contingent workers than any other races.

Intrinsic features of contingent work

Several researchers have examined the experience of contingent workers. For the purpose of this research proposal, I summarized the experience of contingent workers in the light of nature of work, psychological experience, and access to organizational resources.

According to [Bears and Edwards](#) (1995), the nature of work performed by the contingent and non-contingent workers are almost the same. The contingent workers perform tasks that are essentially performed by the other core members of the organization. However as there is no explicit promise of a long term position, contingent workers are more prone to go through anxiety related to job security, predictability and control of their job. In terms of contingent workers are being perceived by their co-workers, [Pearce](#) (1993) stated that in organizations where both the standard workers and contingent workers work together, standard workers might have a negative attitude towards contingent workers as the latter might not go through formal training and onboarding. In the recent years, [Friedman](#) (2014) reported that that the gig economy

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can create isolated individuals living from job to job without lasting social connection to the workplace. This can bring a detrimental effect on the well-being of the workers.

How does power and relationship comes in to play for contingent workers? Contingent jobs are often characterized by asymmetrical power relations where the employer makes all the decisions about the task performed and remuneration ([Polivka and Nardone](#), 1995). Thus the relationship of contingent workers with their employers can tend to be more in the transactional role. [Lapalme](#) et al (2011) asserted that contingent workers are often involved in a multiple agency relationship - one with a hiring agency and one with client organization. A breach in the psychological contract by either the staffing agency or the client organization negatively affects the workers attitude and behavior at the client site.

Does training temporary workers help to promote affective commitment and reduce burn-out at workplace? [Chambel and Castanheira](#) (2012) examined the role of training on temporary workers' attitude and wellbeing. The authors reported that training was positively associated with psychological contract fulfillment which in turn was positively associated with affective commitment towards the organization. In a similar note [Cooper-Thomas](#) et al. (2005) concluded that onboarding practices help to reduce uncertainty and provide explicit knowledge to the newcomer to become fully functional. However there is very scanty literature on what specific practices (onboarding, continuous teaching) are being conducted to help the contingent workers to adjust successfully in a new work environment.

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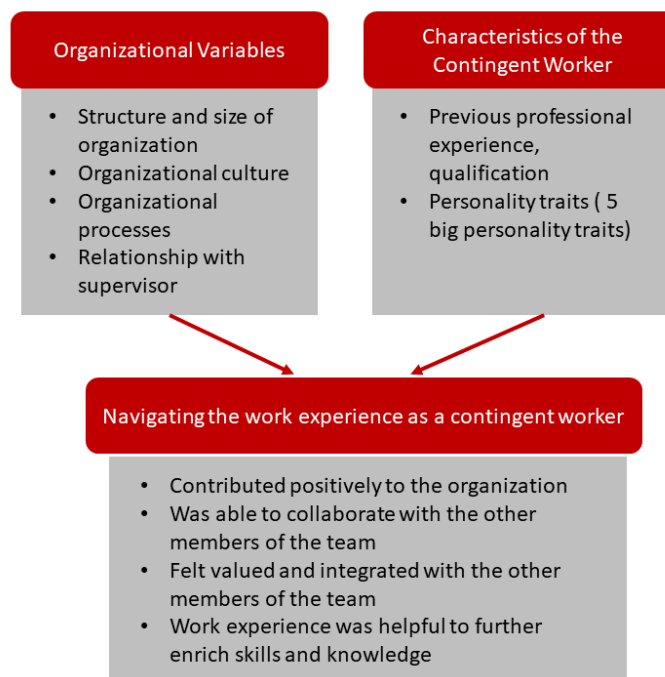
There have been a significant number of research studies on how an organization can align its core elements - people, process, and technology to enhance productivity. Raising awareness about promoting diversity and inclusiveness at the workplace is one such dominant organizational initiative. According to [Sharma](#) (2016), diversity is being defined as any significant difference amongst individuals such as race, religion, functional, profession, sexual orientation, geographic origin, and lifestyle. However contingent workers are sometimes being overlooked as another facet of diversity.

Contingent workers are disadvantaged when it comes to learning, development and feeling included. There is very little research on why and how contingent workers can be effectively integrated or blended with the core team. Many of the traditional organization system aim to keep the contingent workers out of the system instead of integrating them. In a contemporary capitalistic business model, organizations favor keeping contingent workers out of onboarding or learning opportunities thereby saving money ([Desouza](#), 2006). It is intriguing to note that, [Poon](#) (2019) stated that managers like to employ contingent workers in positions that require highly specialized talent, brings knowledge and innovation from outside to the organization and helps companies become more proactive in handling challenges. In another study by [Zadik](#) et al. (2019), the researchers found that one of the main personal characteristics of a freelance or contingent worker, as expected by their supervisor, is the ability to adjust and integrate within the existing organizational system. It is quite clear that in today's world, nobody can work alone, collaborative team work and integrated thinking is quite critical to organizational success.

However the organizations fail to understand every employee, be a standard worker or a contingent worker needs to be adjusted to the new environment. As the organizations strive to

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deliver everything at a faster pace, efficient onboarding is very crucial. An effective onboarding program can help the employee to understand their role and expectations, make a sense of the overall organizational environment, and understand where to seek the organizational resources available to them. Onboarding can assist contingent workers to deliver at a faster rate. As the contingent workers navigate their work space, I want to examine their work experience through the lens of workplace inclusivity and, workplace sustainability.



Research Question # 1 How do contingent workers navigate and adjust to their new role?

Research Question # 2 How to elevate the experience of contingent workers through the lens of workspace equality?

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Methodology

This research project is primarily aimed to increase the depth of knowledge about the experience of contingent workers. The primary audience for this project would be research scholars, academicians, HR practitioners, and the HR community at large. For this project, I will primarily use qualitative methodology consisting of in-depth interviews to understand the experiences of contingent workers.

Participants

I will be doing purposeful sampling as suggested by [Patton](#) (2002). According to Patton purposeful sampling are “*information rich and illuminative that is they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest*” (p.40). I will interview 3-4 participants who work in the field of learning and development. Preferably, the participants will be professionals with experience working as contractors for over a year. I will contact the participants personally, explain the purpose of this interview, and get their consent before the interview. In order to honor and protect privacy, participants' identities will be kept confidential. I will record the interviews with prior permission from the participants. I also plan to map my own experiences to examine the patterns.

Data collection

I will collect the data through in-depth interviews. I will design a 10-question interview protocol and create an interview guide ([Appendix -A](#)) to facilitate the data collection process. I will also design a consent form to inform participants about confidentiality. The questions will

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be open ended aimed at understanding participants' experiences. In order to do cross comparison analysis I would interview someone in a similar role but in a permanent position ([Appendix –B](#)). According to [Patton](#) (2002) cross case and comparative analysis “have the capacity to open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed and concrete description of people and places in such a way that we can understand the phenomenon studied and draw our own interpretation about meanings and significance (p.438)

Data analysis

The interview will primarily focus on participants' experience as a contingent worker. Data from each interview will be primarily categorized as a response to understanding context, job experience, personal motivation, hurdles in the job and how they navigated in the workspace. The interview transcript will be thematically analyzed to see if there are any emerging patterns. In order to validate the data, I would send my interview analysis to the participants for their review.

Expected results

After analyzing the interviews, I hope to capture several dominant themes and sub themes emerging out of the narratives. This will help me to answer questions like if there is formal or informal onboarding with the contingent workers. In the absence of onboarding, how do these contingent workers adjust to their new role? As a HR practitioner, I would like to report to examine how an organization can create an inclusive environment for contingent workers.

Implication

The future of the workspace is going to be very different from what it is today. According to a study by [Deloitte \(2017\)](#), emergence of new technology, changing demographics and with the growth of alternative work arrangements, the world of employment is not going to be the same again. As the framework for human capital takes a new shape, organizations need to provide the right developmental resources to its employees. Contingent workers is one of the under studied populations in social sciences. As our everyday world experience changes, we realize that the proportion of contingent workers will be on the rise. Every employee experience is lays on the foundation of relationship with others, regardless of the employment type. Instead of treating contingent workers just as a commodity, organizations should have plan to create a sustainable development and inclusion plan for everyone.

Appendix -A

Interview questions to contingent workers

Understanding context

1. Could you please tell me your educational background?
2. What is your previous professional history?
3. What was your story to join this temporary project?
 - Were you hired through an agency or an independent worker?
4. Please describe your work environment - do you work on site/ remotely?
5. What are some of your core values which you deeply care about - about yourself, nature of your work? (*to understand whether their expectations about professional/financial/personal growth were bring fulfilled through this employment*)
6. How did you find this position?

Understanding experience:

Research Question 1: How do contingent workers navigate and adjust to their new role?

7. How long have you been working with this client?
8. Please describe your first week with this client
 - Is there any induction program in the organization?
 - Were you ever given any
 - Formal/informal onboarding at your workplace?
 - Tour of the office, tour of the workspace

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- Overview of the organization/division/work team
 - Access to other resources - like employee resource group
9. Describe briefly the current project you are working on. What do you like the most about it? What about the least?
 10. On an average how many hours do you spend at work?
 11. How often and in what ways do you engage with the other members in your organization? (*Listen for what ways they engage to socialize, formal and informal learning*)
 12. What kind of resources do you have available for your daily work?
 13. How integrated are you with your department life? Please share an example?
 - Do you go to department meetings?
 14. How do you perceive the client's commitment towards you? (*as a professional contractor*)
 15. How often do you perform a "check-in" with your supervisor?
 16. How would you rate your relationship with your supervisor?
 17. How satisfied are you with your department in terms of support and collegiality?
 18. What do you consider as a career highlight at this client site? (*Listen for what KSA helped them?*)
 19. What is the most challenging aspect of your job? Why?
 20. To what extent has this job affected your career trajectory?

Research Question 2: How to elevate the experience?

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21. What three wishes would you make to restrengthen your experience at this organization?
22. What could your department do to create a more inclusive environment?
23. What should I have asked you that I didn't think to ask?
24. What advice would you give to someone who is going to start in the similar position?

Appendix -B

Interview questions to permanent workers

Understanding context

1. Could you please tell me your educational background?
2. What is your previous professional history?
3. Please describe your work environment - do you work on site/ remotely?

Understanding experience:

Research Question 1:

4. How long have you been working in this organization?
5. Please describe your first week in this organization
 - Is there any induction program in the organization?
 - Were you ever given any
 - Formal/informal onboarding at your workplace?
 - Tour of the office, tour of the workspace

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- Overview of the organization/division/work team
- Access to other resources - like employee resource group

6. Describe briefly the current project you are working on. What do you like the most about it? What about the least?7. On an average how many hours do you spend at work?8. How often and in what ways do you engage with the other members in your organization? (*Listen for what ways they engage to socialize, formal and informal learning*)9. What kind of resources do you have available for your daily work?10. How often do you have departmental activities? Please share an example

- What kind of activities?
- Who gets invited?

11. How do you perceive your supervisor's commitment towards you? Please share an example.12. How often do you perform a "check-in" with your supervisor?13. How would you rate your relationship with your supervisor?14. What do you consider as some of the achievements in your current position? What factors helped you to succeed?15. What are some of the most challenging aspect of your job? Why?

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