

Working in the gig economy and beyond

My brother-in-law is an Uber driver in Springfield, Ill. My nephew uses specialized software to do part-time legal work in Washington, D.C. My son has rented out a room in his New York City apartment through AirBnB. I submit freelance articles over the internet to editors I have never met.

One way or another, we are almost all participating in the gig economy, or trying to. We are trading the benefits of independent work — setting our hours, choosing our assignments — against downsides like the lack of access to retirement benefits or coffee-machine gossip. We took



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on our side hustles to supplement our incomes, stay busy in retirement or, in the case of some Uber and Lyft drivers I've met, get out of the house.

But about one-third of this independent workforce depends on the gig economy because other wage-earning options are not available — or are not enough. This was particularly true in the wake of the Great Recession, when a temporary spike in the independent workforce evidently made the gig economy look bigger than it really was.

The exact size of that economy is difficult to know, partly because the Labor Department doesn't measure it. The consulting firm McKinsey figured in 2016 that 20 percent to 30 percent of the working age population has spent time in independent jobs. The National Bureau of Economic Research found that 94 percent of net new employment between 2005 and 2015 came from alternative work arrangements — everything from gig to freelance to contract work.

The trend is not likely to go away. Many workers want to be in control of their time and to do work that suits their interests. Companies like the situation, too, figuring that their off-site, independent-minded contributors are not only cheaper than permanent employees, but also can add different perspectives to corporate group think.

At the same time, the world of work is undergoing an even more radical shift, thanks to automation and artificial intelligence. Fears about robots taking jobs, while hardly new, appear to be coming true: computerized machines (along with foreign competition and changing markets) have been responsible for the loss of about 7.5 million manufacturing jobs since 1980. A report from the consultancy Bain & Co. forecasts that 20 percent to 25 percent of all existing jobs will be gone by 2030.

Even jobs that survive will be transformed. Manufacturers will be less likely to hire blue collar workers — already an endangered species — and more likely to prefer engineering and technology specialists, who can program, maintain and upgrade those increasingly intelligent machines.

The future of work in the United States is not, however, about manufacturing. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that most job growth over the next five years will come from the service sector, where the gig economy was born. Even these jobs can be affected by automation. There won't be as many Uber jockeys when self-drive cars dominate the roadways; algorithms already write post-game stories for sports websites; automated trading moves markets. Even gardeners will see robot lawn mowers taking over some of the landscaping.

So where will the jobs be? Some are obvious. Creative types will continue to dance, sing, write novels, perform in plays and create great art. The aging population will need all kinds of health care workers, from doctors to home health aides — though elderly Japanese seem to be happy with their caregiving robots.

Scientists, engineers and mathematicians will be in even more demand, especially those who can navigate the interface between man and machine. Managers, civil servants and, yes, politicians, will still have jobs. Lawyers, accountants and real estate agents who deal personally with clients will have work, taking advantage of artificial intelligence to expand their reach and offer more sophisticated information to clients.

Perhaps the most exciting opportunities lie in fields not yet created. Uber, after all, is only 10 years old. Innovation needs people who are open to new ideas and are passionate about executing them.

The most important job of the future could well be an old one: educator. In fact, that BLS survey cited above predicts that educational services will be the second largest job-generator, after health care, in coming years. It's the teachers, trainers and mentors who can prepare Americans of all ages for flexible, productive, fulfilling lives on the job — and even lives without one.

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