**COVID-19 Rapid Response Grant Application Cover Sheet**

**Project Information**

Please provide the following information.

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| --- | --- |
| **Project Title** | Revisited Precarity: A Comparative Study of Independent Contractors in Seattle’s Gig-Economy |
| **Budget Request from Initiative** | $8874 |
| **Budget Match (if applicable)** | $7685 |
| **Total Project Budget** | $16, 559 |

**Applicant Information**

Please provide the following information for each member of the project team:

* Nicholas Weber (PI), Meg Young
* Information School
* [nmweber@uw.edu](mailto:nmweber@uw.edu), [megyong@uw.edu](mailto:megyong@uw.edu)

Name and email address of the finance point-of-contact for that investigator’s department:

* Jenn Moore, [jmoore6@uw.edu](mailto:jmoore6@uw.edu)

**Abstract**

The viral outbreak of Covid-19 has drawn increased attention to the precarious working conditions for independent contractors (gig workers) in an on-demand app-based economy. In the Fall of 2019 our team interviewed over 100 Seattle-based ‘gig workers’ on their experiences as an unprotected labor class. This research was sponsored by and informed ongoing policy development by the City of Seattle Office of Labor Standards (OLS). We have a unique opportunity to re-interview these research subjects - to understand how Covid-19 has created new precarious working conditions, the behavior of app companies during the pandemic, and their feelings towards being protected by labor laws as independent contractors. While informal reports of gig workers defying quarantine, being recruited for new precarious tasks, and being manipulated by app tipping have appeared in the press - there is a need to better understand specific mental and physical health circumstances of delivery and app-based work in Seattle during this pandemic.

This project will recruit previous participants from a completed Fall 2019 study, as well as new participants, and compensate them $50 for an hour-long interview. Our research protocol will include a mix of questions asked in previous interviews (e.g. feelings towards labor protection law and organizing practices) as well as new questions about how Covid-19 has impacted working conditions. Results from this work will add needed context to the precarity of independent contractors working in Seattle during Covid-19 and provide valuable data to decision makers in Seattle.

**Description of Problem**: The current global public health pandemic has exposed the precarity of an economy built upon service sector employment (Guerrieri et al, 2019). A lack of financial and physical security for workers during this pandemic is exacerbated when employment classifications limit claims for legal protections, such as insurance benefits and paid sick leave (Howard, 2017; Nica, 2018). Globally, one in six service workers are self-employed, and one in eight are hired through temporary contracts (OECD, 2018). Gig-workers – individuals who use application-based platforms to perform paid tasks – are particularly vulnerable in this environment (Smith, 2020). These employees often have limited savings (Farrell & Greig, 2016), high rates of personal debt (Sullivan, Warren & Westbrook, 2020), lack access to reliable medical care (Bajwa et al., 2018), and regularly encounter workplace safety harms (Tran & Sokas, 2017). In King County, gig workers also earn less than half ($27K) of the county average income ($58K) (Phair, 2016). Further, these risks and harms are not distributed equally: African-American and LatinX populations represent 29% of the overall workforce, but are over-represented, at 42%, of workers classified as independent contractors (CPSS, 2018).

In previous research (Fall 2019), our team has investigated the precarity of app-based gig workers in the Seattle area. Through focus group interviews with over 100 gig-workers we sought to better understand the lived reality of working, earning income, and maintaining mental and physical well-being while performing on-demand tasks. Our work focused specifically on health disparities, revealing preferences for workplace protections and desired interventions from county and city policies. This work was sponsored by, and informed policy under consideration by the City of Seattle Office for Labor Standards (OLS). Our work confirms many previous studies about financial security and workplace safety (e.g. Nica, 2018) , but also demonstrates that immigrant populations within the Seattle region are particularly vulnerable to mental health disparities as a result of their working second, third, and fourth jobs in the gig economy (Weber et al, in-review).

**Project Aims:** The broad goal of this work is to collect new data which will enable a comparative analysis of working conditions for independent contractors before and during the Covid-19 outbreak in Seattle. We have the unique opportunity to re-interview participants from our original study to understand how working conditions and health outcomes have been impacted during the current pandemic. By using Covid-19 as an event that has significantly worsened working conditions, we also have the opportunity to measure change in preferences around legal protections. Further, this work can document and surface what have been anecdotal reports of manipulation of gig-workers during the pandemic – such as the removal of tips after delivery (O’brien & Yurieff, 2020) and the limiting of task allocations when a worker uses multiple apps simultaneously (Pardes, 2020).

**Design:** Drawing upon our previous study we will re-recruit previous participants to engage in a follow-up interview with our research team (n = ~50). We will also recruit a new cohort of participants (n = ~25) that were not part of the original study. By recruiting two distinct groups of gig-workers – previous and new participants – we will be able to conduct both within and between case, as well as pre- and during-pandemic comparisons. This comparative design allows our research team to reliably report on the impacts of Covid-19 and, through categorical responses to interview questions (described below), measure changes in attitude towards legal protections.

**Method:** Remote interviews will be conducted via Zoom. A semi-structured questionnaire will be developed to guide interviews. The interview instrument will include ten categorical response questions from our previous 2019 study. We will also add new questions asking how workers are managing their personal and family health, the financial impact of conducting app-based work during a pandemic, and their preferences for employment classification. Interviews will be transcribed by our research team, and analyzed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) using a modified codebook from the previous 2019 study. In advance of collecting data we will pre-register this study on the Open Science Framework. At the conclusion of this project we will also de-anonymize all data and archive the transcripts, research instruments, and a pre-print of findings with the Qualitative Data Repository.

**Evaluation Plan**

The following questions should be specifically addressed to explain how you will evaluate whether your project was successful.

1. What are your measures of success for this project?
   1. Surfacing, contextualizing, and measuring attitudinal changes of a precarious class of workers will enable us to advance advocacy for changes to labor laws in Seattle, and provide empirical evidence for our ongoing engagement with the Office of Labor Standards. We will measure this outcome by producing and presenting a policy brief to the City of Seattle’s Office of Labor Standards (OLS) Platform Justice Working Group. Their acceptance and use of our findings in crafting future policy will be the intended successful outcome of this research.
2. How are you planning to utilize the results of your work once the four-month project is complete?
   1. Data collected in this project will contribute to the ongoing research of both Weber and Young into the governance of platforms, and the legal protections afforded to gig-workers.
   2. The results of this work will be synthesized with previous research findings to produce a peer-reviewed journal article to be submitted in Fall 2020.

**Project Timeline:** The proposed research project will require three steps. In the ordered list below, we briefly describe each research step and the date when proposed tasks will be completed.

1. ***Preparation for Data Collection*** *(Present-May)* 
   * Revision to existing IRB and Research Instrument Modification: May 1
   * Research Protocol [pre-registered on the Open Science Framework](https://osf.io/prereg/): May 8
2. ***Recruitment and Data Collection*** *(May-July)*
   * Re-contact research subjects, and recruit new participants: May 10-June 15
   * Interview participants via Zoom: May 10 – July 15
3. ***Data Analysis and Archiving*** *(June-September)*
   * Transcribe Interviews: June 1-August 1
   * Thematically Analyze Interview Data: July1 - August 10
   * Produce White Paper of findings. Publish pre-print to [SocArXiv](https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv) and present findings to the OLS Platform Justice Working Group: Sept 1.
   * Data de-anonymized published for reuse at the [Qualitative Data Repository](https://qdr.syr.edu/): Sept. 1

**Biographies**

* **[Nic Weber](http://nicweber.info/)** is an Assistant Professor in the Information School, founder of the [Civic User Testing](https://openseattle.org/cutgroup/) group, the Technical Director of the Qualitative Data Repository, and a member of both the [DataLab](https://datalab.ischool.uw.edu/about) and [Technology and Social Change](https://tascha.uw.edu/) (TASCHA) research group at UW. His research focuses on the design, governance, and sustainability of public interest technologies. He is an expert in qualitative and mixed methods field research.
* [**Meg Young**](https://sites.uw.edu/megyoung/) is a PhD Candidate in the Information School, co-founder of the [Critical Platform Studies](https://sites.uw.edu/critplat/) research group, and currently working as an intern at Microsoft Research in the FAIR group. Her research engages local government and community stakeholders in technology policy research, with a focus on data governance for data-intensive systems.

**Project Budget**

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Requested from Initiative** | **Funding Match** |
| **Salaries** |  |  |
| Faculty | 0 | 0 |
| Staff | 0 | 0 |
| Student | 4228 | 6341 |
| **Benefits**  Based on Payroll Load Rate in Effect | 896 | 1344 |
| **Supplies and Materials**  Supplies, Equipment Under $2,000, etc. | 0 | 0 |
| **Equipment**  Equipment Over $2,000 | 0 | 0 |
| **Tuition** | 0 | 0 |
| **Compensation for Human Participants** | 3750 | 0 |
| **Total Direct Costs**  (PHI-requested funding cannot exceed $20K) | 8874 | 7685 |

**Budget Justification**

The Information School is providing matching funds from two sources: $2000 will be provided from an iSchool department SEED fund to support early-career faculty research. The PI, Dr. Weber, is contributing $5685 from his startup funds as an assistant professor. The total matching fund from the Information School is $7685. An email from the Information School Dean, Dr. Anind Dey, confirming this matching support is included as a PDF.

Justification:

A PhD student will be hired to help recruit participants, conduct interviews, and perform analysis of interview transcripts. The student will be instrumental in completing the proposed work in a short time span, and will receive benefit of exposure to qualitative research methods and the practice of conducting open qualitative social science research. The total cost to PHI and Information School matching funds supporting the student is $12,089. This funding will support the student for 150 hours of work on the grant.

Participants will be compensated with an electronic gift ($50) for a one-hour interview with a member of our research team. We aim to recruit 75 participants for this study. The total cost for participant support to PHI will be $3750. We believe that this amount of participant compensation is justified for time that may be spent with our interview team, and for supporting participation from a vulnerable class of employees.

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