THRIVING IN THE GIG ECONOMY

HOW SUCCESSFUL FREELANCERS MANAGE THE UNCERTAINTY

BY GIANPIERO PETRIGLIERI, SUSAN ASHFORD, AND AMY WRZESNIEWSKI

"Have you ever been on a trapeze?" That's how Martha, an independent consultant, responded when we asked her to describe her work in the five years since she'd left a global consulting firm to set out on her own. She had recently tried the art, which she saw as a good metaphor for her life: the void she felt when between assignments; the exhilaration of landing the next engagement; the discipline, concentration, and grace that mastering her profession required. Trapeze artists seem to take huge risks, she explained, but a safety system—including nets, equipment, and fellow performers—supports them: "They appear to be on their own, but they're not."

Martha (whose name, like others in this article, has been changed) is part of a burgeoning segment of the workforce loosely known as the gig economy. Approximately 150 million workers in North America and Western Europe have left the relatively stable routines of organizational life—sometimes by choice, sometimes not—to work as independent contractors. Some of this growth reflects the emergence of ride-hailing and task-oriented service platforms, but a recent report by McKinsey found that knowledge-intensive industries and creative occupations are the largest and fastest-growing segments of the freelance economy.

To learn what it takes to be successful in independent work, we recently completed an in-depth study of 65 gig workers. We found remarkably similar sentiments across generations and occupations: All those we studied acknowledged that they felt a host of personal, social, and economic anxieties without the cover and support of a traditional employer—but they also claimed that their independence was a choice and that they would not give up the benefits that came with it. Although they worried about unpredictable schedules and finances, they also felt they had mustered more courage and were leading richer lives than their corporate counterparts.

We discovered that the most effective independent workers navigate this tension with common strategies. They cultivate four types of connections—to *place, routines, purpose,* and *people*—that help them endure the emotional ups and downs of their work and gain energy and inspiration from their freedom. As the gig economy grows worldwide, these strategies are increasingly relevant. Indeed, we believe they may also be helpful to any corporate employees who are working more autonomously, from home or a remote office, or who feel they might one day want—or need—to jump into a freelance career.

PRODUCE OR PERISH

The first thing we realized when we began interviewing independent consultants and artists was that the stakes of independent work are enormously high—not just financially but also existentially. Unshackled from managers and corporate norms, people can choose assignments that make the most of their talents and reflect their true interests. They feel ownership over what they produce and over their entire professional lives. One study participant told us, "I can be the most I've ever been myself in any job."

However, the price of such freedom is a precariousness that seems not to subside over time. Even the most successful, well-established freelancers we interviewed still worry about money and reputation and sometimes feel that their identity is at stake. You can't keep calling yourself a consultant, for example, if clients stop asking for your services. A well-published writer told us, "You become your work. If you write a good book...it's really great, and when you don't achieve it, you have to accept...that failure might define who you are to yourself." An artist agreed: "There's no arriving. That's a myth."

For this reason, productivity is an intense preoccupation for everyone we interviewed. It provides self-expression and an antidote to precariousness. Interestingly, however, the people we talked with aren't just focusing on getting things done and sold. They care about both being *at work*—having the discipline to regularly generate products or services that find a market—and being *into their work:* having the courage to stay fully invested in the process and output of that labor.

INDEPENDENT WORKERS SPEND A GREAT DEAL OF TIME DEVELOPING A "HOLDING ENVIRONMENT"—A PHYSICAL, SOCIAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SPACE FOR THEIR WORK.

Sustaining productivity is a constant struggle. Distress and distractions can erode it, and both impediments abound in people's working lives. One executive coach gave a poignant description of an unproductive day: "It's when there is so much to do that I'm disorganized and can't get my act together. [In the evening,] the same e-mails I opened in the morning are still open. The documents I wanted to get done are not done. I got distracted and feel like I wasted time." A day like that, he said, leaves him full of self-doubt.

When we asked interviewees the secret to getting through such days and ultimately sustaining productivity as they defined it, we discovered a paradox at the heart of their answers. They all want to preserve their independence and, in many cases, even their unsettledness (which one consultant described as the key to continued learning and "keeping my edge"), but they also spend a great deal of time developing a "holding environment"—a physical, social, and psychological space for their work.

This concept—first used by the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott to describe how attentive caregivers facilitate children's development by buffering them against distress and creating room for experimentation—has since been employed in the field of adult development to refer to conditions in which people can be their best and grow. Corporate employees, of course, can find them with a good boss in a solid organization. But for independent workers, a holding environment is less a gift than an accomplishment; it must be cultivated, and it can be lost.

So they create these environments for themselves by establishing and maintaining what we call "liberating connections"—because they both *free* people up to be individually creative and *bind* them to work so that their output doesn't wane.

THE FOUR CONNECTIONS

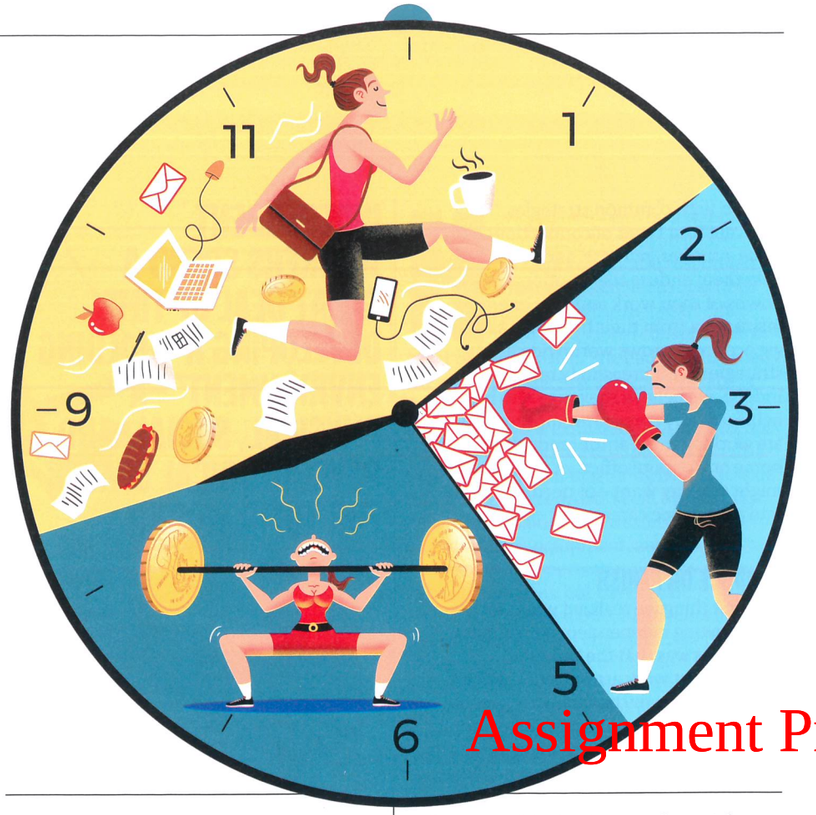
Place. Disconnected from a corporate office, the people we interviewed find

places to work that protect them from outside distractions and pressures and help them avoid feeling rootless. Though many claimed their work was portable, they all still seemed to have somewhere to retreat. One writer told us, "People fail because they don't create a space and time to do whatever it is they need to do."

We visited many of these spaces in person and noticed several similarities among them. They feel confined—almost uncomfortably so in the case of some artists. They are used consistently for all substantive work. They allow easy access to the tools of the owner's trade and to little else. And they're dedicated to work; people usually leave them once their daily tasks are done. One software engineer, whose home office has all these features, described it as a "fighter pilot cockpit," where everything he needs is within arm's reach. "Sometimes it's claustrophobic," he explained, but "when I'm there, the open space is in my mind."

Despite these commonalities, each workspace is also unique, with a location, furniture, supplies, and decorations that reflect the idiosyncrasy of its owner's work. These places are not just protective cocoons for the working self—they evoke it, too. Karla, an independent consultant who initially told us she could do work "wherever I show up and am doing something that has positive impact in the world," eventually admitted that her home office is where she goes to avoid distraction and find inspiration, literally surrounded by her current and potential projects, arranged in visible and accessible piles. "When I walk through that door, I step into a space that embraces all the different aspects of myself," she told us. "I feel at home in there." Without that place and the space it gives her, Karla explained, she would probably be too sensitive to external demands and thus less focused and free.

Routines. In organizations, routines are often associated with safety or boring bureaucracy. However, a growing body of research has shown that elite athletes, scientific geniuses, popular artists, and even everyday workers use routines to enhance focus and performance. The professionals we spoke with tend to rely on them in the same way.



Some routines improve people's workflow: keeping a schedule; following a to-do list; beginning the day with the most challenging work or with a client call; leaving a sentence incomplete in an unfinished manuscript to make an easy start the next day; sweeping the studio floor while reflecting on a new piece. Other routines, usually involving sleep, meditation, nutrition, or exercise, incorporate personal care into people's working lives. Both kinds often have a ritual element that enhances people's sense of order and control in uncertain circumstances.

One consultant we interviewed takes a bath every morning and visualizes what she wants to accomplish while she soaks. Another consultant, Matthew, who specializes in helping boards focus on innovation, keeps a strict daily schedule: "I'm up at 6:00 and there's exercise. I pack my wife's lunch. We pray. She's out the door around 8:00. I'm in my office by 8:30, and I do work where there's deeper thought required—design or writing—in the morning. That's when I'm at my best. Then in the afternoon I schedule phone calls, more of the business or financial things that need to be done." This discipline even extends to his wardrobe: "I always get dressed for the office. Most days in summer I wear shorts when I'm not on the road, but still I shower and shave as if I were going to a workplace separate from home."

That may sound rigid, but it helps Matthew pour himself into his work. He and other successful independent workers seem to follow the advice of the French novelist Gustave Flaubert: "Be regular and orderly in your life...so that you may be violent and original in your work."

Purpose. For most people in our study, striking out on their own initially involved doing whatever work would allow them to find a footing in the market. But they were adamant that succeeding means taking only work that clearly connects to a broader purpose. All could articulate why their work, or at least their best work—be it to empower women through film, expose harmful marketing practices, sustain the American folk music tradition, or help corporate leaders succeed with integrity—is more than a means of earning a living. Purpose creates a bridge between their personal interests and motivations and a need in the world. Matthew, for example, said that although at first he felt "a certain desperation around having clients and making an income," over time his view of success shifted "to one that is a lot about living a life of service to others and making the planet a better place."

An executive coach we interviewed told us that purpose keeps her steady, inspired, and inspiring. "A big distinction between successful independents and the ones who aren't or go back [to corporate jobs] is getting to that place of knowing what you're meant to do. That gives me resilience for the ups and downs. It gives me the strength to decline work that isn't in alignment. It gives me a quality of authenticity and confidence that clients are drawn to. It's helpful to building or maintaining the business and serving the people I am here to serve."

We found that purpose, like the other connections, both binds and frees people by orienting and elevating their work.

People. Humans are social creatures. Studies in corporate settings have long demonstrated how important other people are to our careers—as role models who show us who we might become, and as peers who help us progress by sharing our path. Researchers have also warned about a "relational epidemic" hitting the workplace, for which independent workers can certainly be at even greater risk.

But those we interviewed are keenly aware of the dangers of social isolation and strive to avoid it. Though many are ambivalent about formal peer groups, which they often see as insipid substitutes for collegiality, all reported having people they turn to for reassurance and encouragement. Sometimes these are direct role models or supportive collaborators; in other cases they're family members, friends, or contacts in similar fields, who can't always offer specific work advice but nevertheless help our study participants push through challenging times and embolden them to take the risks their work entails.

Matthew, for example, noted that reaching out to people in his inner circle helps calm his anxiety: "If I were just left on my own, I could sit here in the office and go down a rat hole. You're left to your own inner voice, and it spirals down into ruminating." Karla told us that she, too, regularly turns to a handful of peers with whom she's close. "All the work I do in the independent economy comes through these connections," she said. But their help goes well beyond referrals. "My ability to process, develop, and grow as a human being and understand who I am in the work I'm doing comes from the conversations that I have with these folks," she explained. "These people are how I know what I'm supposed to be doing."

REDEFINING SUCCESS

In popular management tales, career success usually comes with security and equanimity. For independent workers, however, both are ultimately elusive. And yet most of those we studied told us they feel successful.

PEOPLE IN THE GIG ECONOMY MUST PURSUE A DIFFERENT KIND OF SUCCESS—ONE THAT COMES FROM FINDING A BALANCE BETWEEN PREDICTABILITY AND POSSIBILITY, BETWEEN VIABILITY AND VITALITY.

Our conclusion is that people in the gig economy must pursue a different kind of success—one that comes from finding a balance between predictability and possibility, between viability (the promise of continued work) and vitality (feeling present, authentic, and alive in one's work). Those we interviewed do so by building holding environments around place, routines, purpose, and people, which help them sustain productivity, endure their anxieties, and even turn those feelings into sources of creativity and growth. "There's a sense of confidence that comes from a career as a self-employed person," one consultant told us. "You can feel that no matter how bad it gets, I can overcome this. I can change it. I can operate more from a place of choice as opposed to a place of need."

Many we spoke to believe they wouldn't be able to find the same mental space or strength in a traditional workplace. Martha, the consultant who compared herself to a trapeze artist, recalled that she became "much more successful professionally" and "much more comfortable in my identity personally" when a trusted counselor helped her reframe—and own—her struggle, rather than seek ways to evade it. "She helped me understand that I could think of myself, which I now do, as a pioneer. I don't fit in any categories that exist in organizations, and it's more effective for me to be independent." Seen this way, discomfort and uncertainty were not just tolerable but affirming—signs that she was just where she needed to be.

When we spoke, she portrayed employment as no longer an anchor she missed but a shackle she'd been fortunate enough to break. "I don't know that I would frame [my new life] as precariousness anymore," she concluded. "I would frame it as really living."

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