

Examining Crowd Work and Gig Work Through The Historical Lens of Piecework

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May 10, 2017

Stanford University

Before We Get Started...



Crowd work Digitally mediated **information work**, like *image tagging, audio transcription, and data processing*

Kittur et al. (2013)

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On-demand work Crowd work and gig work, collectively

**On-demand work is a modern instantiation of a
much older phenomenon — piecework.**

**The historical arc of piecework can shed light on persistent questions in this
ongoing phenomenon of on-demand work.**

Old Wine in New Bottles



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Piecework Payment for output rather than for time

Payment for *output* rather than for *time*



Textiles



Automobiles



Metalwork



Payment for *output* rather than for *time*



Textiles



Automobiles



Metalwork



Crowd work



UBER

Gig Work



What will be the future of work?

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- How will **technology** affect the complexity of the work that on-demand workers do?

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- How will **technology** affect the complexity of the work that on-demand workers do?
- What are the **limits** of complexity in on-demand work?

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- How will **technology** affect the complexity of the work that on-demand workers do?
- What are the **limits** of complexity in on-demand work?

The answers to these questions may predict the *reach* of on-demand work

Thesis



This question — and others like it — has been asked before.

History can help us answer them today.

We'll reach into the history of **piecework** — of human computers, match stick makers, and metalworkers — and show how the **history** of their work can inform answers to questions about the **future** of digital work.

Introduction



We hope you come away with:

- An **ontological lens** for making sense of on-demand work as a resurgence of piecework
- A renewed interest in the use of **historical analysis** to make sense of contemporary phenomena

Comparative Historical Analysis



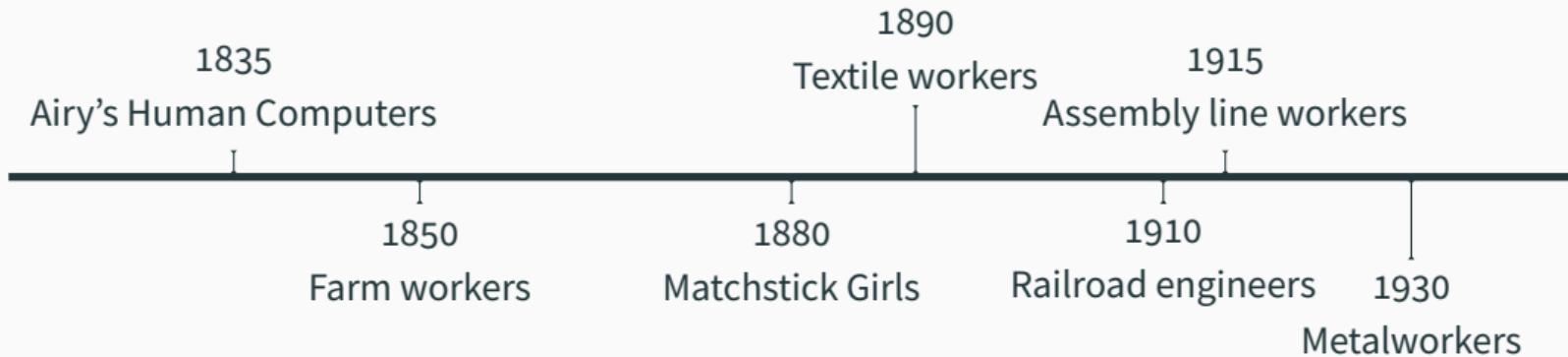
HCI researchers have used historical analysis in the past

Bødker (1993) and Wyche, Sengers, and Grinter (2006)

... But we haven't applied this method to make sense of on-demand work,
which is a missed opportunity to...

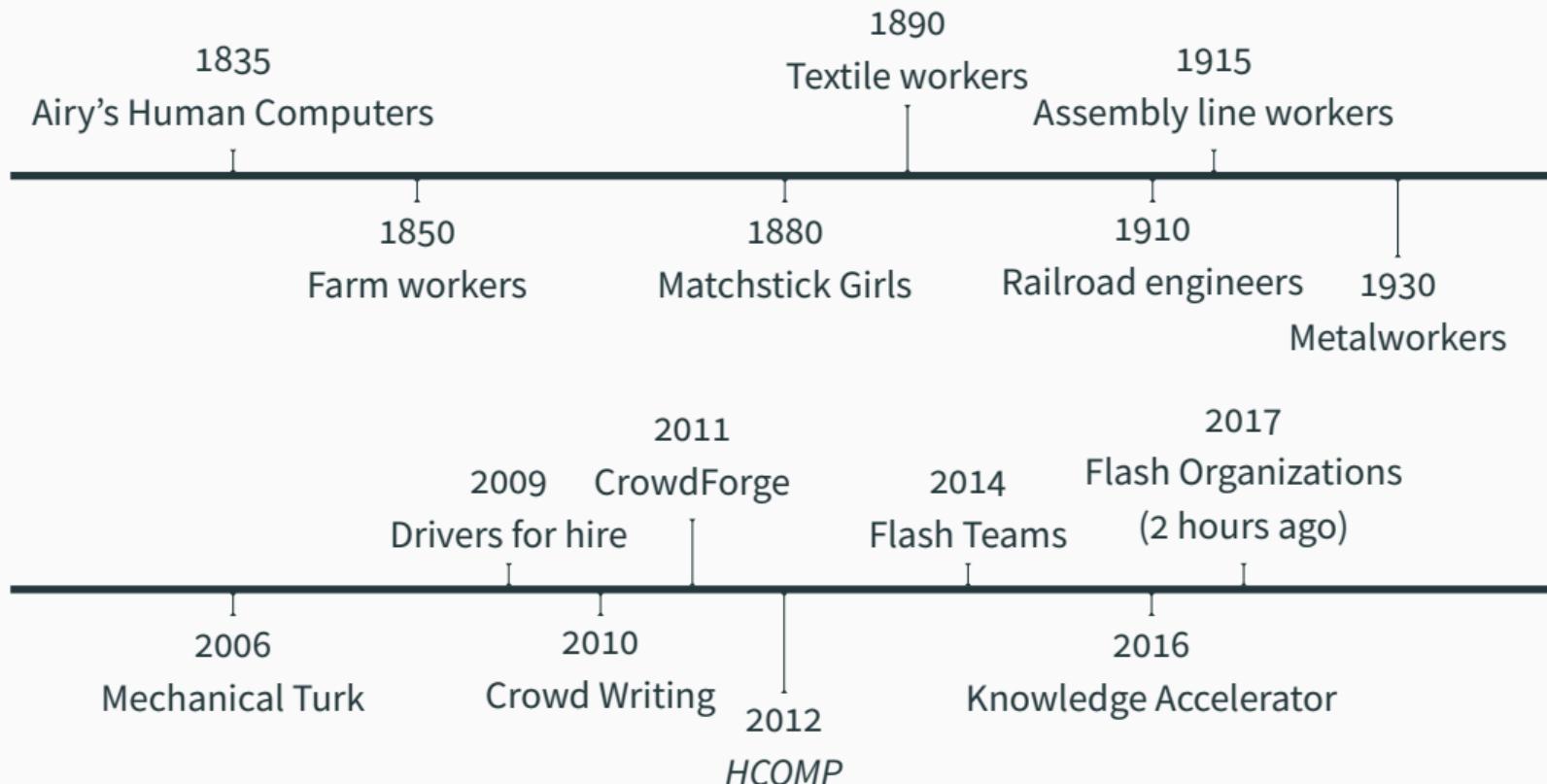
- Provide some basic framing for *ostensibly* new phenomena
- *Explicate* our theoretical grounding
- Flesh out *differences* and their implications

A Timeline of Piecework



On-Demand Work

A Timeline of Piecework



Ongoing Threads in Crowdsourcing Research



Complexity

Hahn et al. (2016), Kim and Monroy-Hernández (2016),
Kittur et al. (2011), Nebeling et al. (2016), Suzuki et al.
(2016), Yu, Kittur, and Kraut (2016), and Yuan et al. (2016)

Decomposition

Celis et al. (2016), Chang, Kittur, and Hahn (2016), Law et al.
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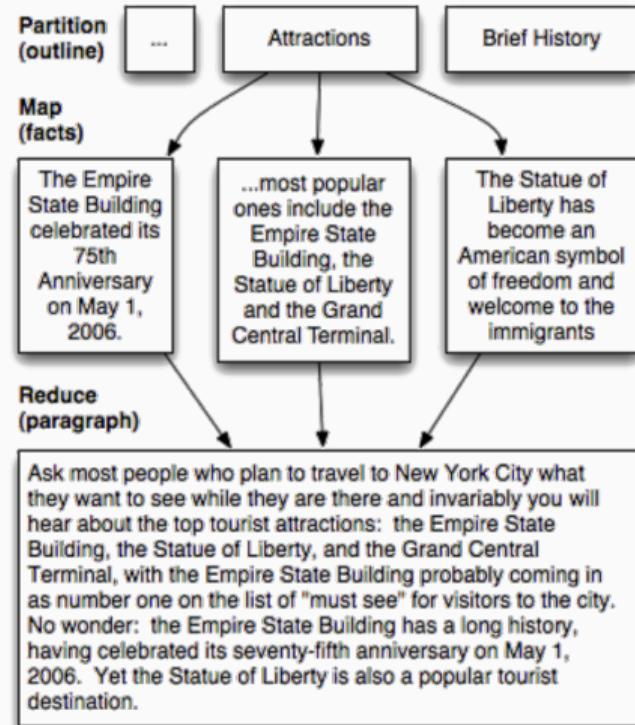
What Does On-Demand Work Say?



Build complexity into the process

- Apply CS methods to people

Kittur et al. (2011)

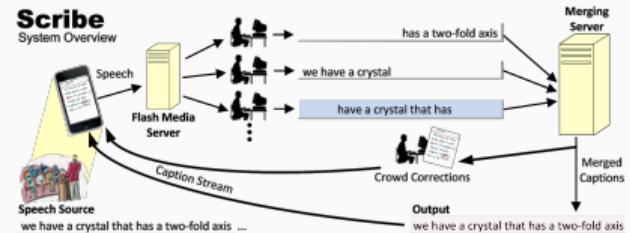


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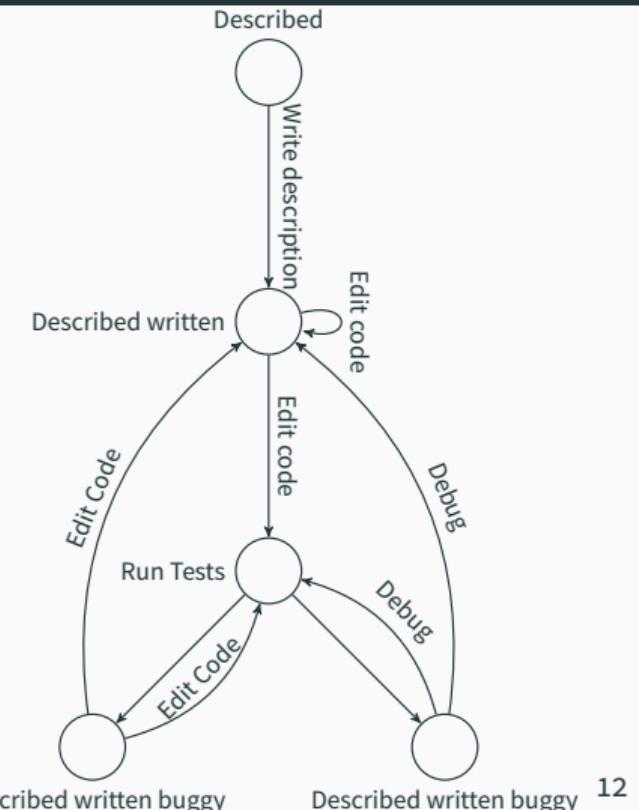


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Build complexity into the process

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- Humans as computational units
Lasecki, Kushalnagar, and Bigham (2014)
- Crowdsourcing workflows as function state machines
LaToza et al. (2014)



What Does Piecework Say?



What we'll find

- Building complexity into the processes

What Does Piecework Say?



What we'll find

- Building complexity into the processes
- Incremental advances until managers *tracked* and *standardized* workers and work

What Does Piecework Say?



What we'll find

- Building complexity into the processes
- Incremental advances until managers *tracked* and *standardized* workers and work
- Insights into task specialization

What Does Piecework Say?



George Airy (astronomer) used a very similar approach

Grier (2013)



- Employed computers
- 13–20 years old
- no particularly strong background in mathematics
- A basic understanding of logarithms, algebra, etc...

George Airy



Airy built complexity into the process, assigning *human computers* to calculate & verify the *right ascension* and *declination* of stars.

No. of Swings	Approximate Time (Astronomical Reckoning).	Number of Signals.	Mean of Times by SHELTON.	Mean of Times by EARNSHAW.	Interval by SHELTON.	Interval by EARNSHAW.	Rate EARNSHAW / SHELTON	Logarithm of EARNSHAW / SHELTON	Corrected Logarithm of EARNSHAW / SHELTON
1....	Oct. 1. 23	22	3 19 36.505	21 23 28.764	h m s	h m s	1.0010831	0.00047012	
2....	2. 3	21	7 19 59.605	1 24 7.486	...4 0 23.100	4 0 38.722	1.0011011	0.00047793	
3....	2. 7	21	11 18 21.257	5 22 44.886	...3 58 21.652	3 58 37.400	1.0010855	0.00047117	0.00047387
4....	2. 11	29	16 3 49.086	10 8 31.307	...4 45 27.829	4 45 46.421	1.0010827	0.00046995	
5....	2. 16	17	20 20 55.618	14 25 54.541	...4 17 6.532	4 17 23.234	1.0011116	0.00048249	
6....	2. 19	25	23 34 17.516	17 39 29.336	...3 13 21.898	3 13 34.795	1.0010994	0.00047720	0.00047990
7....	2. 23	31	3 24 0.019	21 29 26.990	...3 49 42.503	3 49 57.654	1.0010893	0.00047282	
8....	3. 3	21	7 19 2.090	1 24 44.423	...3 55 2.071	3 55 17.433	1.0010944	0.00047503	
9....	3. 7	25	11 21 43.600	5 27 41.868	...4 2 41.510	4 2 57.445	1.0010947	0.00047516	0.00046316
10....	3. 11	22	15 52 49.386	9 59 5.459	...4 31 5.786	4 31 23.591	1.0010888	0.00047260	
11....	3. 15	24	19 20 39.133	13 27 8.783	...3 27 49.747	3 28 3.324	1.0011049	0.00047959	
12....	3. 19	24	23 20 26.425	17 27 11.971	...3 59 47.292	4 0 3.188	1.0010686	0.00046384	0.00047194

Low Complexity



Farms



- Formalization of piecework:
payment for results
Chadwick ([1865](#))
- Dynamic piece rates

Low Complexity



Textiles



- Distributed workers

- Assuming common skills

Low Complexity



- Strict management
- Formalizing work methods

Matchstick Girls



Low Complexity



Farms



Textiles



Matchstick Girls



Planes, Trains, and Automobiles



Trains



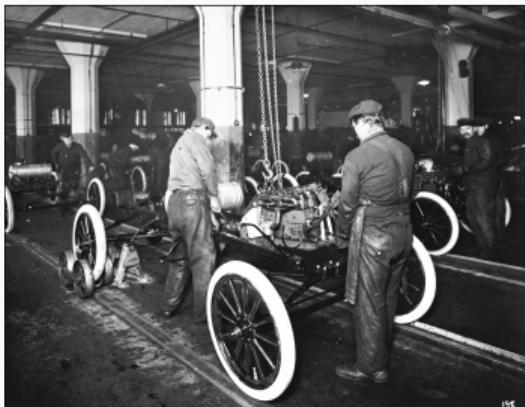
- “Efficiency experts” measured how long it would take to do various jobs
Cunningham ([1911](#))
- These measurements would be used to assign values for each specific task
Jewell ([1921](#))

Planes, Trains, and Automobiles



Automobiles

- Consolidating and training workers
(Fordism)
Schoenberger ([1988](#)) and Tolliday and Zeitlin ([1986](#))



- Measuring and evaluating workers by very carefully defined instructions
(Taylorism)
Taylor ([1911](#))

Planes, Trains, and Automobiles



Planes

- Men drafted during World War II
- Factories turned to a new workforce who had neither conventional training nor experience
- **Specialized training and assignment**



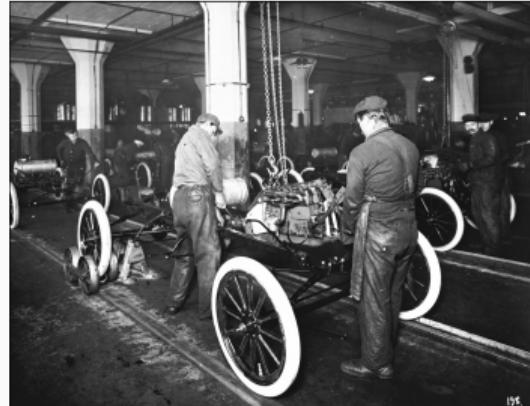
Planes, Trains, and Automobiles



Trains



Automobiles



Planes



Comparisons



- Building complexity into the processes
- Challenges dealing with flexibility
 - *Building planes versus fixing trains*

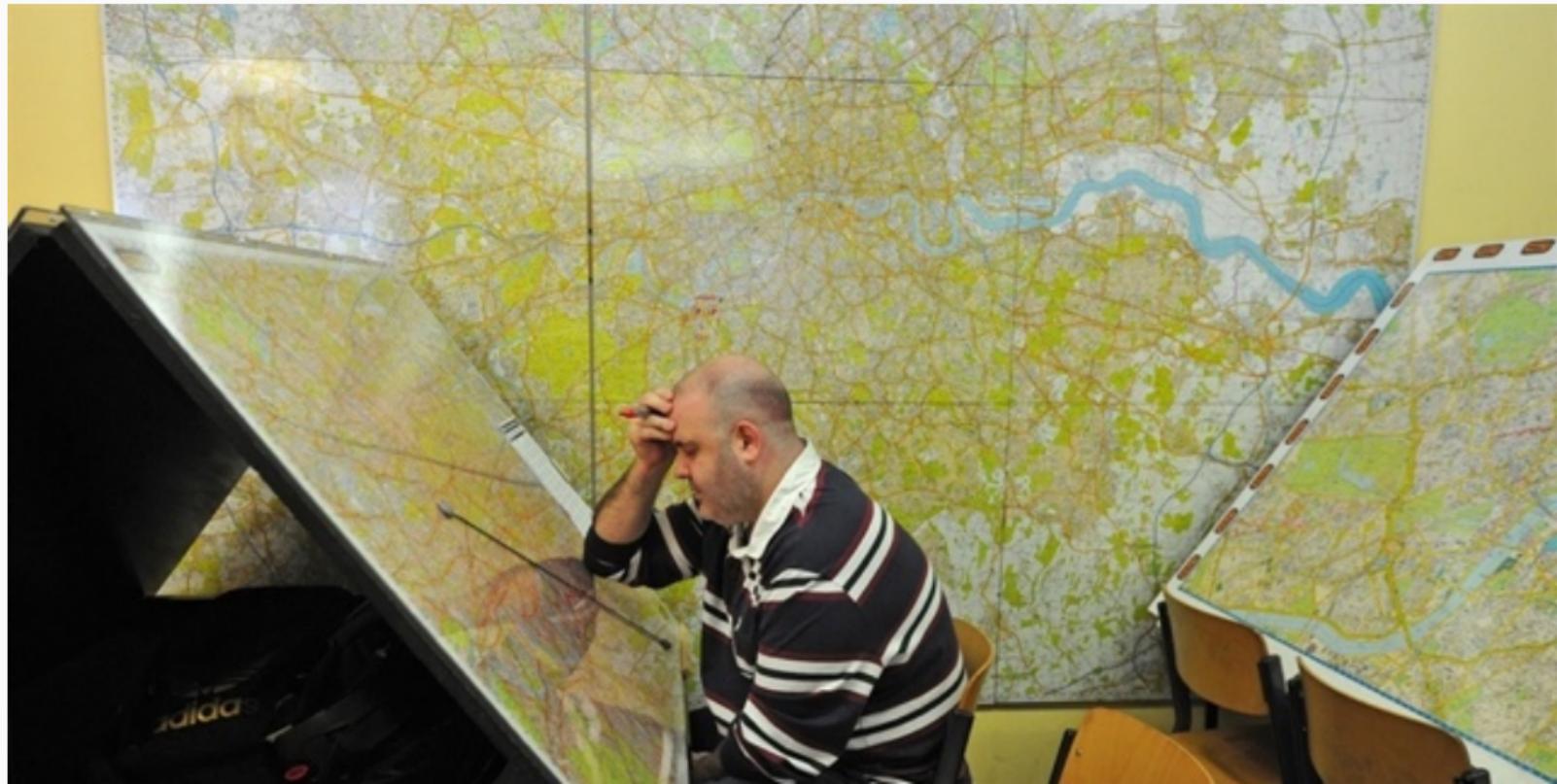
Implications for On-Demand Work



Has technology shifted on-demand work?

- Technology makes *some* complex tasks relatively trivial
- Measuring workers is easier than ever

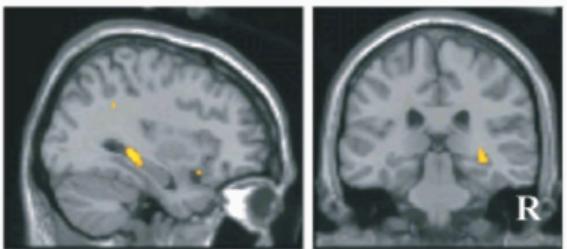
Enhanced Cognition



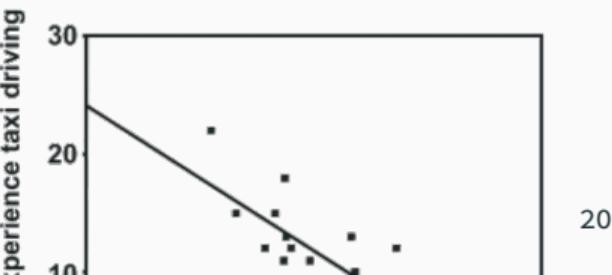
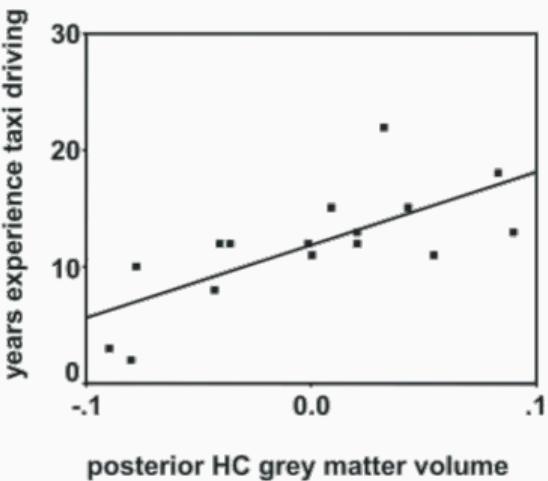
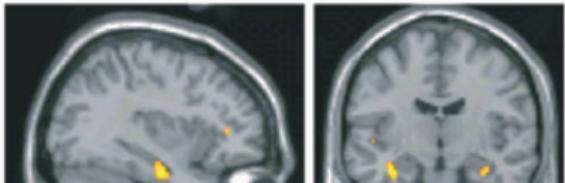
Enhanced Cognition



A



B



Enhanced Cognition



Tracking Work and Workers



[al2: Upwork's screen recording tool as a way to measure workers]

Takeaways



- We make stronger assumptions about workers' abilities thanks to technology
- Evaluation remains difficult, but we're trying to find stopgap solutions through decomposition
- We're still not solving the problems of inherently subjectively judged work

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Discussion



Several goals:

- Give some historical context to **on-demand work**
- Answer some questions that have been difficult to answer
- Recapture attention toward a valuable sense-making methodology

**On-demand work is a modern instantiation of a
much older phenomenon — piecework.**

**The historical arc of piecework can shed light on persistent questions in this
ongoing phenomenon of on-demand work.**

Thanks!



acknowledgements

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