

# Reexamining Crowd Work: A Historical Framing of On-Demand Labor as Piecework

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## ABSTRACT

With growing attention toward on-demand labor — ranging from the “sharing economy” to information work — scholars have made connections to various frameworks and mechanisms such as worker advocacy, empowerment, and Taylorism, to make sense of our observations of on-demand work and the workers that power this movement. We argue that the literature surrounding “piecework” informs and even predicts both the contributions [] that have been made toward the development of on-demand labor and crowd work as well as the fallout among workers and researchers with regard to the disillusionment and alienation of work.

After evaluating this framing through a series of case studies, we look to the future to identify worthwhile questions and points of inquiry, such as the movement toward factories, that researchers in social computing should consider as we attempt to anticipate and perhaps shape the future of work.

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## INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a flourishing of on-demand work where the statuses of workers have become so fleeting that these workers (known colloquially as “Turkers”) have been described as “transient” [19, 33, 26]. The realization that tasks can be accomplished by directing and managing this crowd of workers has spurred the research and industry communities to flock to sites of labor like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (AMT) to explore the limits of this distributed, seemingly ephemeral labor force. Researchers in particular have taken to the space in earnest, finding opportunities to enable new forms

of work as well as using Turkers as representative populations of the public [2, 46, 37].

The many sites of work replicating and extending on the general style of labor popularized by AMT have predominantly involved work done on a computer or involving the human processing of data, leading many to call this “information work” [17, 42, 18, 36]. Howe defined “crowdsourcing” in 2008 as “taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call” [14].

In the years since, scholars have generated taxonomies for the work done by many distributed workers in an attempt to better categorize and reason about the many forms of work done on information work platforms such as AMT, oDesk, etc... [51, 10, 38]. We add that, under Howe’s constraints, even *more* new forms of work fall squarely under the metaphorical umbrella we collectively call “crowdsourcing”.

Indeed, this on-demand workforce has sparked interest across industries ranging from livery (driving for hire, for example Uber), house-cleaning (Handy), and generalized services (TaskRabbit) [48, 13, 47]. Today, a rapidly growing transient workforce is forming, itself assembling piece-by-piece as industries and researchers find yet more unexpected ways to benefit from a latent pool of previously vetted workers [44].

Researchers have made efforts to understand the people that have gravitated toward crowdsourcing platforms since its emergence and popularization, but as the form of work has grown and changed, so too have the demographics of workers [40, 43]. Some of this research has been motivated by the realization of the sociality of gig work, and the frustration and disenfranchisement that these systems embody [17, 41]. Other work has focused on the outcomes of work, reflecting on the resistance workers express against digitally mediated labor markets [28].

From various perspectives and with an eye toward myriad stakeholders, this body of work has ostensibly sought to answer one overarching question: What does the future hold for work and those that do it? To give several key examples, the driving motivation behind much of the research in this space has led us to ask, at a high level, three important questions:

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1. What are the limits of crowdsourcing? Perhaps more tightly constrained, what can and cannot be done by crowd workers? [39, 45, 21, 50, 49, 23, 34, 12];
2. What forms of work design, and worker management and arrangement, are viable? [2, 6, 31, 24, 27, 5, 7, 35]; and
3. What will work and the place of work look like for the workers? [17, 16, 41, 11, 4, 32].

### **Piecework as a lens to understand crowdsourcing**

This large and growing body of research has conversed to varying degrees with labor scholarship, but has not offered a persuasive framing for holistically explaining the developments in worker processes that researchers have developed, or the phenomena in social environments we have observed; nor has any research, to our knowledge, gone as far as predict future developments.

We offer a framing for crowd work spanning the aforementioned industries collectively as a contemporary instantiation of “piecework”. Piecework as a metaphor for the type of work at hand is not new. Indeed, Kittur et al. in 2013 referenced crowd work as “piecework” briefly as a loose analogy to the form of work emerging at the time [22].

But more than this, the framing of on-demand labor as piecework (re-instantiated) allows us to attempt to make sense of the broader research on this new form of work by evaluating this work through a much more refined lens. More concretely, by looking at task-based or “gig” work as an instantiation (or even a continuation) of piecework, and by looking for patterns of behavior that the corresponding literature predicts on this basis, we can 1) make sense of the phenomena so far as part of a much larger series of interrelated events; 2) bring into focus the ongoing work among workers, system-designers, and researchers in this space; and finally, 3) offer predictions of what social computing researchers, and workers themselves, should expect to see on the horizon of on-demand work.

We’ll look at a broad range of cases under a number of major themes we propose as broadly describing the types of research being done in crowd work and more generally in what we argue is contemporary piecework. After validating this lens as a way of reasoning about on-demand labor, we’ll attempt to use this perspective to suggest areas of research worth anticipating, and developments we should expect to see in the maturation of digitally mediated work. Finally, we will offer design implications based on this research. . .

## **MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

### **THE BLEAK FUTURE OF CROWD WORK**

We’ve traced a path from piecework itself through the processes that describe the design and implementation of piece work and crowd work as part of the same thread; in tracing this process, we touched on the relationships between decomposition, work & worker abstraction, flexibility, and followed through both the general fallout of crowd work in the research community as well as the fallout between workers and the managers and other external parties — including researchers.

Throughout these case studies, we have pointed out the parallels between the contemporary research in on-demand labor

and the much larger body of research constituting our understanding of topics such as piecework, factory work, and laborer relations. If we agree that this framing is useful and informative, then several topics emerge as relatively open questions in the study of crowd work and on-demand labor. Two of the most pressing questions are 1) the beginnings of factories, and 2) the decline of relevance of worker advocacy organizations. We will discuss those questions here.

### **The beginnings of factories**

We established earlier that abstracted work and low wages tend to result in variable outcomes, which presents problems for employers. Historically, this is what led to factories; by employing a cohort of known workers, we can be reasonably assured that the quality of the work will be better than random. Furthermore, we can invest more resources in training workers and get workers to do more complex work with more context.

Some research already looks at research such as investing in workers, and informally, we know that this happens among industry requesters [15, 8]. AMT, meanwhile, offers requesters the ability to create tasks which are not just hidden from unqualified workers by default, but completely. Requesters have taken to using lists of worker IDs which reference workers who have proven their reliability, representing a sort of proto-organization of loosely connected workers.

This, then, suggests that the beginning of the regularization of workforces — a sort of coalescence of factories — is already happening. If our framing of on-demand labor is accurately describing an underlying relationship with piecework, then we should watch for the emergence and popularization of persistent teams of workers.

### **The decline of advocacy organizations**

The rise of labor unions in the 20th century seems to have been precipitated by severely unjust conditions imposed on workers in factories and elsewhere [9]. Incidents broadly describing this dynamic can be found in research on AMT [17, 41]. If these are prototypical labor advocacy organizations of contemporary on-demand work, the next question we should look to is if — and indeed *how* — these institutions might face challenges in the future.

For insight on this, we return to Levi et al.’s study of labor unions, and identify that “Scholars who evaluate union governance by procedural criteria generally find that oligarchy tends to arise and persist even when democratic procedures are in place” [30]. This perception already appears to be emerging in digitally mediated peer-governed organizations, as Keegan and Gergle and others have illustratively documented [3, 20]. If these organizations and others are to avoid the same fate that labor unions faced, they should take care to study this phenomenon and attempt to avoid it.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN**

If it’s agreed that the major topics we’ve discussed thus far are related and — at least to *some* extent — precipitated in the fashion we argue, then we have a rare opportunity as researchers, and as agents of change in the communities we

study, to affect change on the dynamics of crowd and on-demand work as they continue to develop.

Without claiming to have easy, cut-and-dry solutions to these problems, we can nevertheless bring to attention a number of critical opportunities to learn from historical parallels in piecework and factory labor, and make informed decisions regarding whether (or indeed how) we may want to influence outcomes. The challenges we bring to attention here are as follows: 1) codifying investment toward collective goods into the designs of systems; 2) (re-)decentralizing the internet; and 3) enabling reputation transferral.

### Codify the common good

As Lessig points out in his book, digital media give designers the opportunity to design and build into the systems policies and practices to contribute to the collective benefit of the people therein [29]. Historically, the confluence of forces Lessig describes would ultimately result in outcomes such as benefits for workers, funds for sick leave and vacation, and other conveniences. The transient nature of on-demand work would seem to problematize this arrangement, but we can discuss and explore the viability of building into systems the mechanisms necessary to save a portion of payment from every gig, record taxable income, or myriad other generally administrative tasks automatically.

### Decentralize the internet — again

Digitally mediated on-demand labor markets have historically been insular and incompatible with one another, forcing workers either to choose one or juggle participation in these markets with great difficulty. An “API” for on-demand labor markets could make it possible for any person or organization to instantiate their own marketplace and inter-operate with. This can be changed, and indeed must, if we are to realize the hopes of early researchers who advocated the democratizing nature and power of the internet [1, 25].

### Deal with reputation

Reputation systems in on-demand labor markets are fundamentally broken. To say nothing of the fact that information workers (such as those on AMT) can’t transfer their reputations to qualitatively different forms of labor like driving-for-hire (e.g. Uber), even within the same industry it’s currently not feasible for workers to transfer their reputations or other information from one place to another. This affects more than the reputation and trustworthiness of workers; accounting for things such as taxes, benefits, etc. . . is all but left to the individual workers, who struggle with myriad bureaucratic obstacles. We can design systems that facilitate the aggregation and, more importantly, the transferral of reputation, income, and other features of work.

### DISCUSSION

We’ve discussed a number of aspects of on-demand work that offer parallels with historical piecework. Perhaps more importantly, we’ve hopefully demonstrated that the dynamics we observe in on-demand work are interrelated and follow from one another just as necessarily as they did in the development and maturation of piecework and factory work through the

20th century. This framing on on-demand work should, we hope, provide us with the necessary historical context to make better-informed design decisions about how we want “the future of crowd work” to look.

### CONCLUSION

Kittur et al. discussed many of the challenges and problems in crowd work in 2013, but didn’t necessarily situate the notion of crowd work in a broader context. This paper attempts to fill that gap, and in doing so hopes to give the research community theoretical grounding to work with and within on-demand labor more successfully. But more than that, we hope to have addressed important questions to inform how we actually might make crowd work a career in which we want our children to work.

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