

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

ABSTRACT

[al2: I want to do a substantial revision of this. We haven't touched it much throughout the whole paper's revision process, and now I'm not so sure that this abstract is as clear or focused on precisely what the paper contributes.]

The internet is empowering the rise of crowd work, gig work, and other forms of on-demand labor. A large and growing body of scholarship has attempted to predict the socio-technical outcomes of this shift, especially addressing three questions: 1) ???, 2) ???, and 3) ??? In this paper, we look to the historical scholarship on piecework — a similar trend of work decomposition, distribution, and payment that was popular at the turn of the 20th century — to understand how these questions might play out with modern on-demand work. We identify the mechanisms that enabled and limited piecework historically, and identify whether on-demand work faces the same pitfalls or might differentiate itself. This approach introduces theoretical grounding that can help address some of the most persistent questions in crowd work, and suggests design interventions that learn from history rather than repeat it.