Guest editorial: A different world of work: the sharing economy and (in)equity, identity and rewards

Introduction

The world of work has significantly changed in recent years. For a long period of time, the focus has been on more conventional forms, such as full-time factory and office-based forms with their contractual relationships and management. However, there have always been work that are labelled as "non-traditional" forms of work. To describe the changing nature of work, a range of terms are increasingly used, often interchangeably, in not only common parlance and the media, but also academia. These include gig, on-demand, freelance, contract or otherwise non-permanent work.

The concept of the sharing economy, defined as the sharing of goods and services for commercial and non-commercial purposes via digital platforms without the transfer of ownership (Acquier *et al.*, 2017; Benoit *et al.*, 2017; Klarin and Suseno, 2021), has been considered as an umbrella term of these "non-traditional" forms of work. This covers the sharing of goods and services in areas ranging from accommodation, transportation, travel, durables and consumer goods to professional and personal services. The key element of the sharing economy is a shift from owning goods and resources to sharing them (Belk, 2014; Gerwe and Silva, 2020). The sharing economy has essentially created a new business model that enables individuals to collaboratively utilise "idle" assets and services and facilitates a wide range of exchanges around the world (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015).

Scholars have drawn attention to how the sharing economy fosters innovations (Weber *et al.*, 2019) and enables peer-to-peer sharing which gives users access to services and "owners" offering those services (Benjaafar *et al.*, 2019). Studies on the sharing economy have also highlighted that the new type of economy lowers transaction costs for users and providers (Lamberton and Rose, 2012; Munger, 2018) and promotes flexible working arrangements (De Stefano, 2015; Sundararajan, 2016). The rapid development and spread of ubiquitous and cheap technologies mean the pervasiveness of non-traditional work has broadened in scope and reach. One early example was "Mechanical Turk", a website owned and operated by Amazon since its creation in 2005. The name comes from an 18th century chess-playing device where challengers competed against the Turk, believing they were competing against a mechanised, automated machine. However, it was an illusion as in fact challengers competed against a person hidden inside. The platform was intended to exploit the fact that humans can easily perform certain tasks that were difficult for computers by connecting those who wanted research done with those who were willing to do it. Technology has undoubtedly served as the intermediary, in the form of a platform, acting as a bridge between providers and users (Kumar *et al.*, 2018). This business model was popularised by two Silicon Valley start-ups, Airbnb in 2007 and Uber in 2009, with now a lot more platform providers and participants in the sharing economy.

The concept of the sharing economy, which includes gig work, has not only been covered by the media, but it has also permeated popular lexicon and culture, such as films. A good example of this is "Sorry We Missed You" from Ken Loach in 2019. This is a vivid portrayal about family life in the gig economy with a parcel delivery company and care provider.

Personnel Review
Vol. 52 No. 3, 2023
pp. 445-453

0048-3486
DOI 10.1108/PR-04-2023-915

The delivery company uses nothing but independent contractors. Yet, the recruitment interview empowerment lexicon was the typical "smoke and mirrors", emphasising being an "owner-driver" not an employee, paid "fees" not wages, not working "for" but "with" the company and not "hired" but asked to "come on board". The reality is drivers are self-employed and financially responsible for the parcels they carry and under pressure to meet impossible deadlines with no margins for errors, sickness or family emergencies.

While the benefits of the sharing economy have been widely covered in the literature, such as economic benefits in terms of earning money by renting out idle resources (Belk, 2014) and flexible work arrangements and benefits to the participants in terms of freely choosing what to share, when and how to share (Hall and Krueger, 2018), the sharing economy has fundamentally changed the nature of work and presented a number of challenges, particularly regarding employment status (Sundararajan, 2016; Wood *et al.*, 2019). The traditional full-time, permanent work is changing to one that is more temporary, freelance or ad hoc without a standard employment contract (Acquier *et al.*, 2017). From the standpoint of the labour market, the sharing economy has also enabled individuals or groups of individuals who might not otherwise be able to find permanent employment to work (Gleim *et al.*, 2019; Newlands *et al.*, 2018).

Despite the fact that the work arrangement provides flexibility and freedom for the independent contractors (Cherry, 2016; Hall and Krueger, 2018; Newlands *et al.*, 2018), the transitory, freelance work in the sharing economy ultimately creates contingent and precarious forms of employment which can lead to social challenges and risks (Kuhn and Maleki, 2017). Firms engaged in the sharing economy often classify their "workers" as independent contractors, masking their obligation to provide employment benefits to employees like annual leave (Geissinger *et al.*, 2022; Sundararajan, 2016). Geissinger *et al.* (2021) emphasised the public concern in relation to the working conditions of "employees" in the sharing economy.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to raising awareness of such work and its workers. This was partly because of the exponential increase in the use and prevalence of gig workers to perform functions essential to society such as food deliveries or other on-demand services. For some of these workers, they are no longer turning to the sharing economy to supplement their income but depend on these "side hustles" as their main social safety net (Ravenelle *et al.*, 2021).

This Special Section was designed to stimulate considerations and discussions on the broad implications of the sharing economy. The variety of methodological frameworks and contexts used reflects the diversity of papers included in the Special Section. The collection of papers in this Special Section also offers a broad research agenda and future research directions to further examine the sharing economy as the changing and evolving world of work.

The sharing economy: equity, identity and rewards

The impact of the sharing economy on wages and working conditions has been the subject of debate in the media and academic research. While sharing economy platforms promote social interaction and social capital (Suseno, 2018), Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) pointed out that there is growing evidence that these platforms are also facilitating racial prejudice and discrimination. For instance, they discovered that some hosts reject guests who are people of colour. The findings are corroborated by Edelman *et al.* (2017), who found that guests for Airbnb short-term rental properties with clearly African American names are 16% less likely to be accepted than applicants with distinctly white names. Other minorities are also discriminated against when it comes to accessing goods and services offered on the sharing economy platforms – for example, Ameri *et al.* (2020) discovered that people with disabilities, such as those with conditions of blindness, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injury or dwarfism, are less likely to get preapproved to rent a short-term accommodation than people without disabilities.

The sharing economy not only enables discrimination and inequity for users, but it also perpetuates discrimination for the service providers. Some contend that the providers or "workers" who participate in the sharing economy should be classified as "partners" because they are entrepreneurs who work when it suits them. However, Ahsan (2020) pointed out that such assertions are problematic because the relationship actually results in income inequality rather fostering a partnership. Burtch *et al.* (2018) indicated that the sharing economy reduces entrepreneurship by providing the unemployed and underemployed with stable employment. The inequity results because the majority of risks are shifted from the firms to the providers that participate on the sharing economy platforms, brought about by the unregulated workplace and insecure working circumstances. The classification of these providers as independent contractors has also raised legal concerns as the firms are not obligated to provide them with employment benefits (Aloisi, 2016; Sundararajan, 2016). In fact, the way platform providers organise digital work for its workers has drawn criticism for the working conditions as well as boycotts and protests (Geissinger *et al.*, 2022).

Additionally, providers are given feedback on their "performance" by users or consumers. This signals trust, quality and reputation on the one hand, but it also promotes discrimination on the other. Research has shown that platforms utilise users' ratings of a provider's "performance" as justification for "deactivating" a particular provider, and that this evaluation system might be based on implicit biases and preferences on grounds such as race or ethnicity (Liebe and Beyer, 2021; Yu and Margolin, 2022). In fact, white hosts appear to acquire higher aggregate ratings and more favourable reviews in comparison to Asian or Black hosts (Yu and Margolin, 2022). The rating system can thus perpetuate workplace discrimination and prejudice by the companies, particularly as there is lack of clarity of what is being measured (Rosenblat *et al.*, 2017). The sharing economy has indeed created moral conundrums because neither users nor workers are protected – users are not protected from issues such as consumer safety, and workers are not protected from unfair labour practices (Goldkind and McNutt, 2019).

Studies have also highlighted several factors that drive providers and consumers to engage in the sharing economy. One of the key factors is the identity of community belonging for both providers and consumers (Närvänen *et al.*, 2013). Wilhelms *et al.* (2017) found that while financial gain and flexibility are the primary drivers for sharing economy participation, those who engage in peer-to-peer cars haring are also motivated by the prospect of helping others with their mobility needs. Lin *et al.* (2020) found that the meaning of work for workers – in their case, food delivery workers – increases their level of engagement at work and level of commitment to their work.

Several platform providers have also been effective in building a sense of community where, for instance, drivers may gather to chat, share stories and even help one another, creating a feeling of belonging and social capital (Suseno, 2018). This sense of identity is particularly established through Internet-based communities that enable these workers to share information and support each other (Wood *et al.*, 2018). Yet, in contrast to those who hold full-time jobs with financial stability and security, these workers may also struggle to maintain a strong sense of identity in their work. They are more prone to feel isolated, especially gig workers who provide data services (i.e. MTurkers) because they frequently work via virtual platforms and have less interactions with co-workers, clients and supervisors (Watson *et al.*, 2021). Thus, the sharing economy has brought attention to the issue of identity.

For consumers or users of the sharing economy, accessing goods and services through the sharing economy benefits them in that it gives them more options, lower prices and promotes social connections between users and providers in a timely manner (Calo and Rosenblat, 2017; Cherry and Pidgeon, 2018; Zhang *et al.*, 2019). By sharing resources that might otherwise only be used for personal consumption (Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017), they are more likely to develop a sense of community (Belk, 2007; Schor and Attwood-Charles, 2017). This is especially true for those who prefer to "consume" through sharing-based platforms, such as booking accommodation through Couchsurfing rather than a hotel, as such a stay affords some opportunity for socialisation (Davidson *et al.*, 2018). In fact, consumers who engage in shared consumption tend to see sharing more favourably and are more considerate of others (Roos and Rüdiger, 2017). Consumers interact, develop new relationships and connect with providers and other users, which can further foster their sense of identity of community belonging (Cherry and Pidgeon, 2018).

In relation to the rewards in the sharing economy, the findings are mixed. Some research has noted that providers participating in the sharing economy are driven by financial rewards (Lamberton and Rose, 2012). According to a case study of Uber in the US, drivers make at least as much money as taxi drivers (Hall and Krueger, 2018). However, a recent report by Murphy (2022) highlighted that, after accounting for all the myriad costs associated with being an Uber driver, Australian Uber drivers on average earned very close to the minimum wage. Ravenelle *et al.* (2021) also found that those who participate in the sharing economy are increasingly relying on this as their only source of income and their financial safety net. In another context, rewards are also dependent on gender. For example, Davidson and Gleim (2022) pointed out that male hosts on Airbnb earn more money than female hosts because they charge more, generate more stays and accommodate more guests for each stay.

Thus, the rewards for participating in the sharing economy are not evenly or equitably distributed. Schor and Attwood-Charles (2017) noted that those who already possess human capital or physical assets reap greater rewards in comparison to those less privileged individuals. Ahsan (2020, p. 28) further argued that the sharing economy "masks actual exploitation and the deep polarization of power in the digital economy". Platform providers such as Uber set their algorithms where they control the price of the ride and how the drivers do their jobs, and the algorithms of the platform can also provide calculative asymmetries that may reduce the drivers' autonomy (Shapiro, 2020).

The developments and trends of the sharing economy have important and difficult implications for human resource (HR) professionals and HR management (HRM) in terms of applicable, coherent and consistent policies and practices. This is not least because of the very different ways to manage – recruit, monitor, motivate and reward – such workers and their expectations, careers, commitment and even loyalty. In turn, the relevant expertise, skills and ways of thinking of managers and leaders will be challenged. Studies have increasingly looked at applying traditional HRM concepts and theories to the new work arrangements brought by the sharing economy but in order to fully comprehend how the world of work is changing and evolving, it is important to further explore the issues about equity, identity and rewards that the sharing economy undeniably poses.

Special section overview

This Special Section covers important aspects of the sharing economy and related topics within it. These range from the more macro and conceptual to micro and empirical. The idea of a spectrum of sharing, ranging from worker equity to exploitation, is detailed in the papers within the Special Issue. The coverage of this Special Section is based on the following categories.

First, in terms of themes, the following are covered: equitable work relations, career identity, organisational identification, career networking behaviour, extraversion and collectivism as personality traits, and self-employability and entrepreneurship. Second, in terms of theories, a range is used: social exchange theory, social identity theory, skills deterioration theory and signalling theory. Third, the papers within the Special Section use a range of examples, from professional workers in terms of their career identity and organisational identification, to mothers in terms of their self-perceived self-employability, as well as aspects from equitable work relations to exploitative HRM. Finally, a number of industry and regional contexts are explored.

We now present overviews of each of the contributions to this Special Issue. The first contribution is a systematic literature review concerned with the varied levels of worker equity and exploitation across types of organisations in the sharing economy (Le Brocq *et al.*, 2023). This uses a "moral economy" lens to examine how different types of gig firm ownership structure shape the nature and degree of sharing and influence worker treatment and HRM. The moral economy lens, which draws on social exchange theory, focuses on the ways economic activities are influenced by moral-political norms. The framework for analysis examines the tensions between self-interest versus calls for greater wellbeing and justice. The degree of sharing influences the balance between worker equity-exploitation; nature and quality of HRM practices (transactional to relational); and socio-economic relations between organisations and gig workers.

A major – and useful – result of this contribution is in terms of the development of a useful integrated conceptual spectrum of sharing and HRM practice in the gig economy. This ranges from ownership that varies from being an "investor" (and hence more exploitative and focused on profit maximising) to more "collaborative" sharing (and more equitable). These concepts are built from a trio of elements on a range from more or less transactional and exploitative versus relational and equitable. These elements are (1) "Sharing and HR promises" (pay, justice, trust, decision-making); (2) "Gig work relations" (economic and social transactions, social interactions, power sharing, support and guidance) and (3) "Moral and ethical HRM concerns" (legal protection, worker resistance, training and development, platform control, worker cooperation, co-worker relationships).

The second article, on career identity and organisational identification, explores the indirect relationship between professionals' career identities and their organisational identification with on-demand work, through the process of career networking behaviour (Yang *et al.*, 2023). Drawing on social identity theory, the study utilised multi-source and time-lagged data with Chinese accountants, to extend the traditional identification framework to the gig economy.

The findings of this research show that on-demand professionals can form identification with the on-demand work, even if the relationship can largely be described as being based on short-term contracts. The career identity of these professionals motivates them to have career networking behaviours that reinforces their organisational identification with the on-demand organisation they work for. The findings of the study, which also take into account personality traits, show that extraversion strengthens the relationship between career identity and career networking behaviours. On-demand professionals with stronger collectivism orientation were also more inclined to identify with the on-demand organisations.

The third article focuses on how the sharing economy enables self-employability and entrepreneurial opportunities of mothers (Seet *et al.*, 2023). The argument of the research builds on the opportunities presented by the sharing economy platforms in overcoming the shortcomings of the labour market and helping mothers to maintain employability. The study is based on the responses from a sample of mothers using a mobile digital platform in Australia to explore how the mobile platform can facilitate employment for mothers. The focus on mothers in this study is important given that they experience high rates of skill deterioration as they are usually employed on a casual part time basis; they often struggle to juggle family and work; and they have concerns about their future employment opportunities to balance dual "carer-earner" roles.

The study suggests that technologies used as part of the sharing economy platforms can reduce skill deterioration and improve signalling. The majority of respondents cited the use of mobile digital platforms to deliver a range of employability and support services, including services related to health and wellbeing, personal development and help with children. The findings also point to some barriers to using mobile digital platforms in terms of trust and security, impersonality, lack of time, age-related factors and mismatch in service expectations and offerings. The article shows how the sharing economy can offer the means to overcome issues of signalling and skills deterioration in relation to the human capital of mothers and how social interactions can serve as a foundation for improving future self-employment and employability of mothers.

Conclusion

The sharing, rather than owning, of goods and services for commercial/non-commercial purposes via digital technologies across a spectrum of sectors has forged a new business model that enables individuals to collaboratively utilise "idle" assets and services and facilitates a wide range of exchanges around the world (Eckhardt and Bardhi, 2015). This has radical implications for traditional notions of the world of work and how it is managed.

This Special Section contributes to the literature on the sharing economy in several important ways. This is in terms of not just the disparate themes covered and range of theories brought to bear on the field, but also the range of less researched sectors and countries covered. While each contribution is obviously constrained by their own context, the issues raised herein are important more widely. As such, we hope that this Special Section acts as a clarion call for further research, not only for its own sake but also research that has practical relevance that can help and guide in managing the changing nature of employment.

Yuliani Suseno
School of Management, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, and
Chris Rowley
Kellogg College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

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