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## Bring the Warriors Back Home – Contemplating How to Retain a Talented Workforce in Organisations

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### Abstract

The paper discusses the changing nature of careers today and how organisations ought best to respond to this scenario. The advantages of participating in the gig economy and how it impacts employees and organisations are discussed against a backdrop of signalling theory. Organisational practices addressing work-life balance issues, inclusion and diversity, job autonomy, flexibility, attractive compensation packages, and fostering an employability culture are all highlighted as positive signals. Conversely, negative signals, such as, in extreme cases, appearing to have a hire-to-fire policy, should be avoided. This paper highlights the need for further research into the factors influencing talented individuals' decisions to return to full-time work and the strategies organisations can use to attract them.

**Keywords:** talent management, signalling theory, gig workers, organisation policies

### 1. Setting the Scene

Careers nowadays are undergoing a massive overhaul. The fact that so many career theories have emerged over recent years, such as “protean” careers, “kaleidoscope”, and “sustainable” careers (to name but a few examples), indicates just what profound changes careers have undergone. One exciting outcome is that careers are becoming more employee-centric rather than organisation-centric nowadays. Studies emphasise the need to keep the anchor of one's career within one's self rather than depending on the organisation (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Given this shift, a big question that arises is whether this new situation continues to represent a “win-win” for the organisation and the employee if either one of the parties experiences a setback.

However, despite gig work, consulting, crowdsourcing, outsourcing, and moonlighting potentially providing employees with the slight advantage of not being dependent on an organisation for bread and butter, there are plenty of potential downsides to this, like wage theft, irregular work hours and payments, and above all, uncertainty. Nevertheless, there has been growing interest among millennial and Gen Z employees in pursuing flexible careers that give

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them ample time and energy to pursue leisure (serious leisure and casual leisure) and time with their family (work-life balance) (Donald & Nimmi, 2023).

Is this a passing trend, or something here to stay? Without disputing the many benefits of gig work, an organisation-centric career/work has its own charm. The many vicissitudes in the socio-economic environment suggest that relying on gig work will likely result in an unstable career. Scholars whose work is based on signalling theory in the labour market have raised concerns about the structural inadequacy of gig work to support the economic security of a nation (Noldeke & Van Damme, 1990).

To take an extreme example, to what extent is it good for organisations if they are run by experts who are only paid *pro rata* for their service? Moreover, what about the social setting and the other aspects that an employee receives along with a regular job, which helps him or her develop their professional network and social capital? Even though such connections could be developed in other spheres of life, social capital built through an employee's average vocation triples their chances for career development (Tyman & Stumpf, 2003; Wang, 2009). Moreover, employees develop a sense of belonging or connectedness by fully joining an organisation, which can lead to better social cohesion and well-being (Klein, 2013).

## 2. Why Gig Work

So, what factors deter potential employees from workspaces and prompt them to indulge in gig work preferably? Gig workers are mainly employees with huge potential and attractive skill sets who look for varied experiences and opportunities to explore the latest trends (Merriman et al., 2018). However, the reasons why employees often prefer not to engage in gig work could be organisation-specific, industry-specific, or personal. Moreover, the challenges of gig workers are many, like the inability to get quality projects, no employee benefits, exploitation, and no labour laws to protect them, and above all, the inability to find consistent work and payment protection (Roy & Shrivastava, 2020).

Awareness of these and many other psycho-social risks creates ambiguity in freelancers' minds. Finally, it may not always be feasible for organisations to rely on temporary workers due to data privacy issues. Practitioners and researchers have called for studies to look into the privacy issues that gig workers face, such as losing their privacy (Sannon & Cosley, 2019).

The question remains: How can organisations attract back this very potentially talented workforce? What factors can lure this talent pool back to organisation-centric careers? The signalling theory of Spence (1973) highlights the importance of quality signals from organisations that can stimulate talented workers to enter the mainstream labour market.

According to signalling theory, the signaller has valuable information for the receiver. This information is communicated through signals. In the absence of further public information regarding the signal, there is an impasse between what is known and unknown about the signal. The strength and quality of the signals are critical as they stimulate the receiver to decode and interpret the signal, ultimately leading to a perceived meaning.

The sender's reputation (or the sender's credibility) is also a prominent factor that will be considered while the recipient is processing the information. Signalling theory has been used to explain many employee performance issues like future uncertainty of performance, emotional exhaustion, and job performance. The framework has also been used to understand how

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employees perceive HR practices, which in turn helps HR managers devise better policies and communicate them effectively with employees. Based on the theoretical support of signalling theory and its reputation in human resource development practices, this work proposes to underline the importance of efforts taken by organisations/offices to attract talent to the workplace. Organisations could do worse than look into these aspects of their policies designed to retain and attract talent.

### **3. Negative signals and positive signals**

Although the theory of asymmetric information claims that the receiver might not have complete information on an organisation's functioning, some policies and practices, such as hiring, firing, and nepotism, might be risky to the organisation's reputation. However, positive signals can include the company's benefit programmes and the many CSR policies the board should try to communicate to the prospective stakeholders. Providing an ethical work climate, too, contributes to positive signals. These signals will stimulate talented workers to return to normal employment if they perceive it to be a better option. Here are some of the policies or practices that organisations should pay attention to:

- Do not adopt a “hire to fire” policy. The draconian policy of hiring to fire eventually reflects badly on a company's reputation, and potential talent may choose to stay away from applying to those organisations.
- Provide work-life balance to employees and practice inclusion-diversity and equity at work. Right the way down from corporate board rooms to blue-collar jobs, organisations should try to sincerely include skilled people from all walks of life, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or gender. The board shall not make distinctions based on ableism, sexism, or ageism when recruiting.
- If the employee is a protean talent, they look forward to a work environment that offers job autonomy and freedom.
- Flexibility at work – Most employees are inclined to engage in gig work rather than regular employment because they value flexibility regarding workload and work timing. If employee participation is ensured while deciding work allotment and work scheduling, this effect could be minimised to a certain degree.
- Offer attractive packages – Talented workers will value insurance/labour protection/paid vacation, aspects they miss out on in part-time and gig employment.
- Employability culture – Most freelancers dedicate significant time to upskilling themselves. They aim to keep abreast of the latest techniques and norms that will soon drive the business world. From an organisational perspective, it is imperative to create an employability culture within the organisation that can provide ample opportunities for employees to skill, upskill and re-skill and maintain their employability, both internally and externally.

### **4. Conclusion**

Overall, it is quite clear that organisations, as the senders of, at times, strong signals, should be careful to ensure that the appropriate message reaches the intended recipients. More research still needs to take place in this area, and it should look into the many factors that impact the decisions of talented workers to return to the regular workforce full-time, as well as the different strategies organisations can adopt to “bring the warriors back home”.

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