EDITORIAL

Organizational Behavior in the Gig Economy: Contributions, Challenges, and New Directions

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ABSTRACT

The rise of gig work—flexible, short-term, task-based labor, often mediated by digital platforms—has significantly reshaped the employment landscape. This special issue presents five articles that investigate gig work through the lens of organizational behavior (OB), offering new theoretical perspectives and practical insights into this rapidly growing labor segment. The articles examine a range of psychological processes central to gig work, including identity regulation, flow experience, psychological detachment, safety and risk assessments, and algorithmic management. Taken together, they demonstrate that gig work represents more than just a novel context for applying existing theories; it also provides opportunities to rethink foundational OB constructs such as autonomy, motivation, emotional well-being, and managerial control. This special issue illustrates how distinctive features of gig work—algorithmic oversight, precariousness, and limited organizational attachment—challenge traditional assumptions embedded in existing OB theories. Furthermore, it highlights methodological challenges and opportunities unique to gig research. By showcasing gig work's theoretical richness and methodological distinctiveness, we aim to stimulate future research that positions gig work not as peripheral, but as a central domain in the evolution of OB.

1 | Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of employment has undergone substantial transformation, significantly driven by the rapid growth of the gig economy—an economic system that leverages digital platforms to connect workers with consumers (Duggan et al. 2020). *Gig work*, defined as "labor contracted and compensated on a short-term basis to organizations or to individual clients through an external labor market" (Cropanzano et al. 2023, 494), typically involves flexible, task-based arrangements coordinated by digital labor platforms. In these settings, algorithms often replace human supervisors in assigning tasks, monitoring performance, and managing compensation, thereby reshaping traditional employment relationships (Kellogg et al. 2020; Vallas and Schor 2020). Gig platforms such as Uber, Lyft, Fiverr, and Upwork exemplify this model, spanning diverse sectors from transportation and food delivery to creative and technical services. In the United States, for example, gig workers comprise approximately 10% of the total labor force (Tanzi 2024), and a recent survey by TransUnion (2024) indicated that 37% of U.S. adults rely on gig work as their primary source of income.

The rapid expansion of gig work reflects diverse participation patterns and motivations. While some workers pursue gig work as their primary form of employment, many others engage in it while also employed in traditional jobs—a phenomenon often referred to as *side hustling* (e.g., Sessions et al. 2021). Gig workers face distinctive challenges, including heightened job insecurity, limited advancement opportunities, social isolation, and continuous customer evaluation—all

in the absence of the protective structures that typically characterize formal employment (Ashford et al. 2018; Kuhn and Galloway 2019).

Despite the growing prevalence of gig work, academic research in organizational behavior (OB) has lagged. Most of the early research on gig work has been fragmented across multiple disciplines such as sociology, economics, information systems, law, and marketing (Friedman 2014; Vallas and Schor 2020). Such interdisciplinary research has primarily focused on consumer interactions, platform governance, and algorithmic management systems. Far less attention has been paid to the psychological experiences of workers themselves or to how core OB constructs—such as motivation, identity, affect, and behavior—function in platform-mediated environments. Where such work exists, it has often been fragmented and descriptive, with limited theoretical integration. Meanwhile, foundational OB theories, developed primarily for traditional employment contexts, may require meaningful adaptation to capture the dynamics of gig work.

We conceived this special issue to help close that gap. Our goal here was to promote theoretically grounded research that emphasized the lived experiences of gig workers and side hustlers. Our call for papers encouraged contributors to critically engage with and extend OB theories in ways that account for the structural and psychological distinctiveness of gig work—such as algorithmic oversight, fragmented employment relationships, and the absence of formal support systems. Around the same time, Wu and Huang (2024) conducted an integrative review of gig work through an OB lens, proposing an input–process–output framework that maps the field's emerging contours across motivation, cognition, social exchange, and affect. They envisioned gig work research as a proving ground for expanding and reimagining OB theory, emphasizing the need for greater conceptual clarity and integration in a literature that had grown rapidly, but unevenly. That review concluded with a call for more inductive, worker-centered research and stronger theoretical linkages between gig work phenomena and foundational OB constructs. Their review and this special issue reflect a shared recognition: Gig work is not a marginal topic, but a central challenge for contemporary OB theory. The five articles featured in this issue respond directly to that challenge, offering fresh empirical insights and advancing conceptual understanding of how gig workers navigate autonomy, instability, identity, and interpersonal dynamics in platform-mediated environments.

In what follows, we first introduce the five articles included in this special issue, organizing them around key psychological constructs to showcase their diverse, yet complementary contributions to understanding gig work. Next, we engage in a critical reflection on the current state of the literature, illuminating how gig work challenges, extends, and reframes foundational OB constructs. We then offer specific suggestions for future research, drawing on underdeveloped themes and unanswered questions exposed by the special issue. Finally, we consider the broader implications of this body of work for the future of OB research, particularly in light of evolving work arrangements and the increasing relevance of platform-mediated labor.

2 | Summary of Articles in This Special Issue

2.1 | Identity and Self-Regulation

Van Fossen et al. (2025) investigate how platform-based gig drivers maintain a positive work identity in the absence of traditional organizational structures. Drawing on self-regulation theory, the authors propose a model in which workers translate abstract identity goals into concrete task efforts through the pursuit of personalized career success goals. Based on qualitative data from focus groups of gig drivers, the study shows how identity is sustained through individual agency and prioritization—workers pursue autonomy, financial gain, or task mastery depending on what is most accessible and identity-affirming. This work deepens our understanding of how positive identity is constructed within flexible, yet fragmented work contexts.

2.2 | Motivation and Flow

Zhang et al. (2025) examine how gig workers respond to algorithmic evaluations of their performance, and how those responses translate into service outcomes. By integrating flow theory with conservation of resources theory, the study finds that perceived algorithmic evaluation enhances gig workers' experience of flow—a highly focused and rewarding mental state—which in turn improves their service performance. This motivational benefit, however, is significantly weakened when workers face viability challenges, such as financial insecurity or unstable work schedules. Based on a combination of interviews and survey data, the article contributes a nuanced view of algorithmic systems as both enabling and constraining worker performance, depending on the broader resource context.

2.3 | Stress and Detachment

Liang et al. (2025) examined the emotional and psychological consequences gig workers experience in response to negative customer feedback. By grounding their work in conservation of resources theory, the authors propose that negative feedback acts as a resource threat, hindering workers' ability to psychologically detach from work. Across two complementary studies—a daily experience sampling design and a recall-based survey—the authors demonstrate that impaired psychological detachment negatively affects next-day performance and well-being. Job security and the time spent handling customer feedback further moderate these effects. This study highlights the psychological toll of negative client feedback in a context where workers lack organizational buffering or support.

2.4 | Safety and Risk

J. Zhang et al. (2025) examine a central dilemma facing food delivery workers: the tension between financial need and personal safety. Applying paradox theory, the authors conceptualize a "finance–safety paradox" in which daily customer demands simultaneously elevate workers' financial concerns and safety concerns, producing conflicting behavioral tendencies. Through a 14-day diary study of food delivery workers in China, the study

finds that perceptions of algorithmic supervision increase safety motivation and promote compliance, while perceptions of algorithmic errors diminish safety-oriented behavior. This research advances the literature by identifying customer and algorithmic influences as key antecedents of safety decisions in high-pressure, high-autonomy gig work environments.

2.5 | System-Level Review and Integration

Kadolkar et al. (2025) present a systematic review that integrates research on algorithmic management across multiple disciplines including management, computer science, sociology, and law. Using natural language processing–based topic modeling, they identify 12 core research topics and organize them within an input–process–output framework. The review defines algorithmic management as a multidimensional system through which platforms automate task assignment, performance evaluation, and behavioral regulation. It clarifies conceptual ambiguities present in the literature and maps how specific features of algorithmic management shape worker-related outcomes such as well-being, performance, and resistance. This foundational article offers a theoretical roadmap for future OB research on the technological infrastructure of gig work.

3 | Theoretical Contributions: Reframing OB Constructs Through the Gig Work Lens

Taken together, the five papers in this special issue illuminate how gig work functions as a generative context for revisiting and extending foundational theories in OB. Rather than slotting gig workers into traditional models, these studies collectively reveal underdeveloped dimensions within OB research, particularly in how it has historically addressed motivation, identity, emotion, risk, and control—especially under conditions of precariousness, limited institutional support, and algorithmic governance.

One clear theme across these papers is the need to rethink agency and autonomy in OB theory. While autonomy has long been understood as a core psychological need (Deci and Ryan 1987) and a motivational resource in OB literature (e.g., Hackman and Oldham 1976), the gig context complicates this assumption. In gig-work contexts, autonomy is not uniformly beneficial; it is instead filtered through unpredictable customer demands, opaque algorithmic feedback, and performance-contingent earnings. Gig workers may experience freedom—however illusory—from direct supervision, but they also operate under constant self-monitoring and economic pressure. This suggests that autonomy in this context may be better theorized as conditional, strategic, and sometimes burdensome (Cameron 2024).

A second theme concerns the fragmentation of work identity and relationships. Without sustained interaction with coworkers or supervisors, gig workers tend to construct and maintain work-related identities largely in isolation from each other. Across the studies included in the current special issue, we see gig workers relying on personal values, self-concept clarity, and customer feedback to navigate their roles. This challenges the existing relational models of identity construction, which often assume embeddedness within a stable organizational context. Gig-work

contexts push OB scholars to consider how identities are formed and regulated when organizational affiliation is minimal or entirely absent (Petriglieri et al. 2019).

A third contribution emerges in the domain of emotional labor and recovery. Traditional theories assume the presence of organizational mechanisms—breaks, social support, or formal grievance procedures—can help employees regulate affective strain (e.g., Diefendorff et al. 2005; Grandey 2000). In contrast, the current papers suggest that gig workers must often absorb emotional shocks, such as customer mistreatment or safety threats, without institutional recourse. This prompts a theoretical shift: regulating emotions in gig work is not solely a matter of personal ability or coping style, but also a reflection of how structurally unsupported and institutionally invisible the worker is.

Finally, the special issue highlights algorithmic management not simply as a novel control system, but as a theoretical disruption. Across papers, platforms emerge as entities that coordinate labor through predictive analytics, incentive design, and oftentimes opaque rule enforcement. This challenges long-standing OB distinctions between formal and informal control, supervisor and subordinate, or even organization and employee. The platform becomes both the manager and the workplace, raising foundational questions about accountability, fairness, and perceived legitimacy.

Together, these studies do not just simply apply OB theories to a new context—they provoke a rethinking of the theories themselves. Gig work, in its fluidity and asymmetry, uncovers latent assumptions embedded in how OB has conceptualized worker motivation, identity, emotion, and structure. As the gig economy becomes more entrenched in labor markets around the world, OB scholars are called not just to study it—but to let it reshape the field's theoretical architecture and prompt a broader reexamination of how foundational OB constructs apply in other flexible, decentralized, or technology-mediated work environments.

4 | Methodological Challenges in Gig Work Research

Studying gig workers poses a distinct set of methodological challenges that differ in both kind and degree from traditional organizational research. Gig workers are not housed within organizations, do not share a common employer or job title, and frequently lack a stable work environment or defined schedule. As a result, traditional sampling strategies and research designs—especially those based on organizational access or employer cooperation—are often infeasible or inappropriate for this population.

One key challenge is the heterogeneity of the gig workforce. Gig work spans a wide array of occupations, from ridesharing and food delivery to freelance design, tutoring, and online customer service. Workers differ not only in what they do, but also in how and why they engage in gig work: Some rely on it as a full-time income, others as a side hustle, and still others as an interim stop between traditional jobs. This diversity complicates both sampling and generalizability. Many existing studies focus on workers from a single platform

(e.g., Uber or MTurk), limiting the range of experiences captured and potentially skewing findings toward platform-specific dynamics, thus undermining the generalizability of one's findings. Moreover, relatively limited recent research addresses non-platform gig workers—such as contract-based professionals, part-time educators, and hourly caregivers—who operate outside algorithmic systems but still experience economic precariousness, high autonomy, and organizational detachment. Although the present special issue emphasizes platform-mediated gig work, this reflects the nature of the submissions we received rather than a theoretical exclusion. Future research should examine how OB constructs translate across this broader spectrum of nonstandard work arrangements, helping to clarify which insights are specific to digital platforms and which are generalizable across the contingent labor landscape.

In addition, traditional research designs face notable limitations in the gig context. The absence of shared workplaces makes it difficult to observe worker-client interactions from a third-party perspective, such as that of a coworker or supervisor. This feature limits a researcher's ability to collect data from impartial informants. Longitudinal designs can also be difficult to sustain, as gig workers may switch platforms and exit the labor market unpredictably, leading to high attrition. Moreover, some gig workers may treat study participation as just another gig, adopting a transactional mindset that increases the risk of insufficient effort responding (Huang et al. 2012), thus raising broader concerns about response validity.

The gig context also presents unique methodological opportunities. Thanks to algorithmic management, many digital labor platforms generate abundant objective performance data—such as customer ratings, delivery times, task completion rates, and earnings trajectories—that are rarely available in traditional employment settings. Although direct access to these data is typically restricted, researchers can leverage app-based tools (e.g., self-tracking apps, screen capture, or log file analysis) or collaborate with platforms to obtain behavioral measures. Moreover, the episodic and variable nature of gig work lends itself well to experience sampling and short-duration intensive longitudinal methods, which can capture intraindividual variability and changes in motivation, affect, and behavior with greater temporal precision.

5 | Applying Existing Concepts and Theories to Gig Work

A central question facing scholars of gig work is whether existing OB theories can be directly applied to this emerging context—or whether gig work demands a new conceptual framework altogether. The answer, as with many questions in theory-building, is a familiar one: It depends. Some foundational OB theories remain highly applicable because they are grounded in basic psychological principles. Others require conceptual refinement to accommodate the unique characteristics of gig work. Still others may be insufficient for capturing the novel dynamics introduced by gig work—particularly those related to algorithmic control, fragmented employment relationships, and invisible organizational boundaries.

5.1 | Applying Existing Concepts and Theories: When the Fit Is Strong

Some OB theories transfer well across contexts, including into the gig economy. The concept of global job satisfaction (Spector 2022), the tenets of goal-setting theory (Locke and Latham 2002), and the basic human needs identified by self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000), for example, are anchored in universal human needs and motivational processes. Their foundational logic is not tied to a particular employment structure and can be meaningfully applied to gig workers, even in the absence of stable organizational structure and hierarchy. Indeed, the relevance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the psychological needs at the heart of self-determination theory—may be heightened in gig contexts where workers must independently regulate effort, define success, and seek meaning in often-isolated work environments.

5.2 | Adapting Existing Models: When Theories Need Recalibration

Other OB theories may remain useful but require adaptation. Consider counterproductive work behavior (CWB) models. Traditional CWB frameworks (e.g., Bennett and Robinson 2000; Spector et al. 2006) are based on assumptions about social workplaces, hierarchical oversight, and shared norms—assumptions that may not hold in gig settings. CWB categories such as interpersonal deviance (e.g., verbal aggression toward coworkers), for example, are largely irrelevant for food delivery workers who operate independently. At the same time, gig workers may engage in customer-directed or algorithm-targeted deviance (e.g., manipulating app settings, tampering with deliveries), behaviors rarely addressed in current models. Rather than discarding these frameworks, researchers should revisit their underlying assumptions and adapt them to reflect the distinct dynamics of gig work.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau et al. 1975) offers another example of a traditional OB framework that likely requires adaptation to gig-work contexts. LMX theory posits that leaders differentiate among subordinates, forming high-quality relationships with some ("in-group") and low-quality relationships with others ("out-group"), which in turn influence support, trust, and access to resources. However, several revisions may be needed to make LMX theory applicable to gig-work contexts. Gig workers do not interact with human supervisors, nor do they form social comparisons with peer workers in a shared team environment. Instead, their primary point of interaction is oftentimes with an algorithmic management system. A revised theory could, for example, address how gig workers relate to such a system (i.e., a non-human "supervisor") and whether they form mental models of the algorithm as a supervisor-like entity—perceiving themselves as being "favored" or "marginalized" by it. It should also account for the absence of peer interaction, as gig workers are unlikely to directly interact with other gig workers. At the same time, public ratings and reviews offer visible performance comparisons. This creates a notably different dynamic from traditional work settings, where subordinates frequently interact with both in-group and out-group members

under the same supervisor to infer relationship quality and differential treatment.

5.3 | Building New Concepts: When Gig Work Challenges Existing Theories

In some instances, gig work introduces novel forms of interactions that are not easily accommodated by traditional OB theories. A prominent context-specific concept is algorithmic management—the automation of task assignment, evaluation, and compensation via digital systems (Kellogg et al. 2020; Vallas and Schor 2020). The logic of algorithmic management challenges the interpersonal foundations of many OB theories, replacing human judgment with opaque, data-driven decision rules. Gig workers must often infer how algorithmic systems work, adjust their behavior accordingly, and sometimes "game" the system to optimize outcomes. These dynamics fall outside the explanatory scope of existing theories of supervision, leadership, or feedback. New conceptual work is needed to account for how workers make sense of, respond to, and resist algorithmic control—and what such interactions reveal about autonomy, justice, and performance in digital labor environments.

A similar theoretical gap arises in the domain of social support. In conventional OB frameworks, social support is typically defined as a resource exchanged through structured relationships within teams, workgroups, or hierarchical organizations. But in gig work—where workers are organizationally untethered and often socially isolated—these traditional pathways are largely unavailable. Nevertheless, gig workers actively construct alternative sources of support, turning to online communities, platform-specific forums, or informal networks to share information and emotional reinforcement. In some cases, physical infrastructures have emerged to meet these social needs, such as dedicated rest stations for food delivery workers that offer not only shelter and amenities but also space for peer interaction and validation (CBS News 2023). These developments point to the need for new ways of conceptualizing social support—ones that account for worker-initiated, platform-enabled, and community-based forms of connection that exist outside the boundaries of formal employment but remain central to worker well-being and resilience.

5.4 | Research Agenda: Theory Transportability and Boundary Conditions

We call for research that systematically examines which OB theories are best suited to gig contexts and why. As a guiding principle, we propose that theories grounded in basic psychological needs and mechanisms are more likely to generalize across work settings, including gig work. However, theories that assume organizational embeddedness, stable employment relationships, or sustained interpersonal interaction may require revision or reconceptualization. Importantly, we also encourage researchers to consider how emergent gig-specific concepts—such as platform fairness and inclusivity—can enrich and extend mainstream OB frameworks. Future work, for example, might investigate how theories of organizational justice apply when the "organization" is an app and the "manager" is an algorithm.

6 | Charting the Next Frontier of Gig Work Research

This special issue represents an important step forward in expanding OB research into the gig economy, yet much work remains. Here we outline four key directions for future research.

First, side hustling and multiple job holding in the gig economy remain underexamined. None of the articles included in this special issue explicitly address side hustling, despite its growing prevalence. Although research on multiple jobholding has a long history, the digitalization of work has made it easier than ever to engage in supplemental income-generating activities. According to the International Labour Organization (Berg et al. 2018), nearly one-third of gig workers on digital labor platforms use gig work to supplement income from other jobs. The boundaries between primary employment and side gigs are increasingly fluid, especially as gig work becomes more accessible across skill levels and time frames. Workers may engage in gig tasks before, after, or even during traditional work hours. This raises important questions for organizations—particularly in hybrid or remote work contexts—about employee engagement, productivity, and time theft (Harold et al. 2022). As side hustling becomes more normative, research should examine how it reshapes work–nonwork boundaries, job performance, and managerial control.

Second, gig work is no longer only external to organizations; it is also becoming internal (Cowgill et al. 2023). Recent labor market trends suggest a shift toward skill-based hiring and project-based work within traditional firms. The adoption of skill-based hiring has been on the rise in recent years (TestGorilla 2024), while the proportion of job postings requiring a college degree has declined in recent years (Stahle 2024), reflecting organizations' interest in capabilities over credentials. At the same time, the rise of generative AI has prompted firms to redesign work around more flexible, task-oriented arrangements (Shook and Daugherty 2024). Internal talent marketplaces—where employees bid for short-term assignments or rotating projects—mirror the logic of external gig platforms and offer a promising organizational application of gig principles (Dlugos and Keller 2021; Jooss et al. 2024). Yet research has not kept pace with these developments. More research is needed to understand how internal gig work affects organizational commitment, learning, performance management, and equity. In short, gig work should be seen not only as an employment trend, but also as a work design innovation within firms.

Third, algorithmic management presents rich opportunities for intervention-based research. Although algorithmic management is now well-established as a defining feature of platform work (e.g., Rosenblat and Stark 2016), most studies—including those in this issue—examine it descriptively or retrospectively. Far fewer studies take a proactive or experimental approach. This is understandable: algorithms are platforms' core intellectual property and are often inaccessible to external researchers. Regulatory oversight remains vague, and platform transparency is limited. Nevertheless, intervention research—such as modifying interface features, feedback mechanisms, or worker control parameters—could yield important insights about how algorithmic design shapes work experiences and outcomes (Hsieh et al. 2023; Parent-Rocheleau and

Parker 2022). We encourage researchers to pursue collaborations with platforms or organizations using algorithmic systems to test how algorithmic modifications can support well-being, fairness, and motivation.

Finally, we call for more research on the long-term implications of gig work. Prior research on the career consequences of gig employment has primarily focused on high-skilled workers—such as technology contractors and film production professionals (e.g., Csillag 2021; O'Mahony and Bechky 2006), freelance songwriters (Lee and Gargiulo 2022), and MBA alumni (Anderson and Bidwell 2019). In contrast, most gig work today—especially the gig work mediated through digital labor platforms—is concentrated in lower-skill, lower-control service sectors such as delivery and rideshare (International Labour Organisation 2021). Researchers currently know little about how sustained participation in such work shapes career progression, identity development, skill acquisition, and long-term employability. The boundaryless career perspective suggests that workers increasingly assume responsibility for managing their own career development (Forrier et al. 2009), and gig work offers a timely context for examining such self-directed career paths. We encourage future research to investigate how gig work shapes careers across labor segments, especially for those without access to traditional advancement structures. Addressing this issue is also essential for understanding the persistent career path uncertainty associated with gig work (Caza et al. 2022).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed here.

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