Another New Frontier: Gig Work in Today's America

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The interest in working a series of gig jobs instead of traditional employment is certainly taking America by storm. Many articles and studies are exploring this trend as if it is a brand new adventure. A recent survey by HR staffing provider, Randstad, indicates a preference by younger workers (Gen Z and Millennials) to work in a more flexible work environment. The same survey included 1,500 HR and C-suite executives across the U.S., finding that 75% of the executives agree the majority of their workforce will be employed in an alternative work arrangement by 2025.

History buffs may be interested in comparing new-age gig workers with our American founders who broke new ground in the rugged frontier of wild and unknown territories. Those pioneers wanted something different than tyranny and policies of their past, yet something that would fulfill their entrepreneurial spirit. They were determined and innovative as they found solutions to coping with unchartered, often hostile environments to feed their families and climb the economic ladder of the time. Through perseverance and strength of body and mind, they forged a new path with an unknown future. There was no guarantee of success and there was certainly no such thing as medical benefits or a steady paycheck. Yet these individuals found a way, even with hardship and casualties along the way.

Like our industrious ancestors, gig workers are breaking new ground and carving sustenance out of an ill-defined and unstructured environment. They must create a new sense of normal with the same perseverance and strength as the pioneers of the past without assurance of what tomorrow will bring. Even the companies providing gig platforms are in unchartered territory and combat hostile resistance to their achievement. Instead of dense forests, rivers, and extreme weather conditions, today's difficult environment includes court challenges, antiquated employment laws and policies, and a lack of portable benefits for workers.

Perhaps we can learn something from our past to help us rise above today's barriers to success for this new frontier. Instead of clinging to past practices that bog down innovation, we should embrace the positive virtues that made the United States an economic powerhouse. Policy changes take time, but just like the old steam locomotive, once headed in a direction, it will be unstoppable.

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