

On the Gig Economy

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

On the subject of the [June PMWJ Editorial on Five Disruptive Trends](#) and “the gig economy”

25 June 2017

Dear Editor

I enjoyed your editorial last edition on disruptive trends. As one who has lived a gig life with over a hundred and fifty gigs in the past two decades, I can assure you, as also Charles Handy writes, a gig life is pretty disruptive, and it is a trend. Forty years ago I was an exception amongst my friends, as I was one of the few who lived on contracts. My friends asked me why I was always changing jobs, and I would reply that I was always coming to the end of work. But twenty years ago the average length of a contract that I was being offered dropped dramatically, and many longer contracts were broken into gigs. In the last year my longest contract has been ten days.

Most gigs come through middlemen, companies that bid for projects with teams in their proposals. Being the best man for the job does not guarantee the position; belonging to the selected team does. My friends who put gig-proposals together for consulting firms estimate they win one job in four or five bids. My experience with applying to consulting firms for a position in their bid is that I get selected for a team about one in three applications. If I was dependent on this standard selection process, I would end up on one gig in fifteen that I apply for. Not good business for me! And if it is not good for most of those playing the gigs, it is not good for the economy.

Fortunately most of my gigs by far have come by other means. And these gigs have provided me with experience that few others have had, and for that I have no complaint, only thanks. These have been the ones that have enabled me to help Indonesia face major challenges, and the ones that changed me the most as well. Sometimes they have been offered to me directly, without even applying. Many have been pro bono. A few times I applied for a job and was not selected, but later when the selected person failed so badly they got sacked, I was asked to salvage the situation. That gives one a good feeling, but shows that selection processes are imperfect.

So here is one of the challenges facing the gig economy. How does it work best if businesses, governments and development partners insist on traditional selection processes? Do they need to change the way they put teams together, and what are the options?

I wish you well on looking further at disruptive trends. Some disruptions of course do not come in trends - Tsunamis and Trump. At least we hope and pray they are not trends. And we must say the tsunami did bring peace to Aceh. So regardless of whether they are trends or not, how can we apply risk reduction to the economies and livelihoods of those who work on gigs within them?

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