How can we prepare students for the gig economy?

Abstract

Our students are entering a world of work that is significantly different from the one reflected in most management curricula. The nature of work is changing and work-based organizational membership is declining. In addition linear career progression is less common, and short-term "gig" contracts are on the rise. Our goal in this roundtable is to exchange ideas on how educators can better prepare students for this gig economy. We will discuss the nature of the changes and their implications, and then brainstorm ideas for adapting our classroom practices to address these issues.

Keywords: Careers; nature of work; pedagogy

Session format: Roundtable discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this proposed roundtable discussion is to examine the ways in which management educators can help to prepare students for the "new world of work." Specifically, we will moderate a discussion about the ways in which traditional management courses could be adapted to account for (1) the decreasing role of traditional organization structures and formal management relationships and (2) the increasing role of individual agency and short-term work contracts. The goal of this session is to share and learn about practices, materials, and activities that can better prepare our students to succeed. The session will be relevant to educators working with undergraduate and MBA students.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching implications

Growing attention has been devoted to the "new world of work" (Barley, Bechky, and Miliken, 2017; Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2017; Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017), and it seems that for many of our students, their career future will be one of short-term engagements across a variety of different jobs and even different industries (Younglai, 2016). Although exact measurement is difficult, it is estimated that almost one third of current workers can be classified as "independent workers," meaning that their careers consist predominantly of multiple short-term contracts or "gigs" (Manyika et al., 2016; PEPSO, 2015; Busby and Muthukumaran, 2016), and younger workers like our students are disproportionately likely to be independent workers (Noakes, 2015). In fact, almost all of the net growth in the US economy in the last decade has been in the contingent workforce (Katz & Krueger, 2016). Moreover, many researchers predict that the frequency of gig work will grow substantially in the future, until it is the dominant form of work (e.g., Barley, et al., 2017; Davis, 2016). As a result, contrary to what they studied in business school, many graduating students will not have the opportunity to climb a stable career

ladder within an organization. Instead, they may find themselves in a game of "chutes and ladders" that requires them to navigate a complex path, shifting in and out of short-term positions indefinitely (Davis, 2016). These multiple roles often demand different skills, practices, and goals, typically while juggling multiple gigs concurrently (Freelancers Union & Upwork, 2016).

Theorists have admitted that the rapidly changing nature of work exceeds the bounds of current organizational theorizing (Barley et al., 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2017), and we suspect that it also exceeds the bounds of our current teaching about organizations. Despite the AACSB's confidence that there is a "generally accepted sets of learning experiences to prepare graduates for business and management careers" (AACSB, 2017, p. 34), and the EFMD's similar belief in "internationally accepted standards" (EFMD, 2017, p. 64), we are less certain that there is an established set of experiences that provide everything our students need. This fact raises an important question: How can we better prepare our management students for modern work?

The vast majority of the case studies available examine large, traditional organizations (e.g., GE, Ford, etc.). Moreover, the topics that we teach often assume traditional organizational roles, employment contracts, and role relationships. For example, Human Resource Management courses almost always address the talent management cycle of recruitment, selection, training, and development. But how does this cycle apply in the digital economy of short-term contingent workers? Many workers today will find that recruitment and training practices have changed. Furthermore, managers may find themselves struggling with ways to develop a contingent workforce as traditional performance management techniques may not be possible. Likewise, Organizational Behavior classes often focus on topics such as organizational identification and socialization, but these topics assume that long-term commitment is a goal shared by individuals and organizations. How important is socialization for contract workers? How can we teach our

students to be engaged workers, or managers leading engaged workers, when they may only work there for a few months? How should we teach core topics such as mentoring and motivation in ways that account for the declining role of organizational membership?

In addition to finding ways to adapt core HR, OB, and OT topics to address the new world of work, it is also important to provide students with the appropriate skills to navigate their future careers in this economy. The precarious and complex nature of the gig economy causes many young workers to burn out early (Mojtehedzadeh, 2017; Sagan, 2016), but at the same time, some find that the gig economy offers them important opportunities to create even more fulfilling careers (Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2017; Petriglieri, Ashford, Wrzesniewski, forthcoming; Spreitzer et al., 2017). What are the core skills and capabilities required to thrive in the gig economy? How can we help our students to develop these skills and abilities? What will help them to create and sustain fulfilling careers? And as leaders, what do they need to know to help a contingent workforce thrive, rather than burnout?

In keeping with the conference theme of sharing best practice, we want to have an open conversation about *what* changes to make and *how* to make them. Although we will seed the conversation with examples from exercises and activities we have experimented with, our goal is one of sharing. We hope to identify ways in which we can help our students to navigate the complex dynamics involved in short-term contract work. For instance, what activities or exercises will help our students navigate ways to find appropriate leaders and mentors in this new world of work? How do we teach them to motivate and reward short-term workers in managerial positions?

Session description

      The session will be a moderated discussion structured to allow sharing of current best practice and collaborating to identify future possibilities for addressing the gig economy. We propose the following schedule.

0-10 minutes: Introduction to the topic and roundtable participants.

10-20 minutes: Preliminary brainstorming and discussion, with facilitator making a list of ideas

      What do our students face in the "new world of work"?

      What topics need to be adapted?

      What skills do students need to have in this new world of work?

      How do we prepare students? How can we prepare students?

20-35 minutes: Focused discussion. Depending on the number of participants, breakout groups will be formed with each discussing elements from the preliminary brainstorming. Groups will be asked to prepare a brief report in two parts – how to adapt a current topic and the seed for an activity to do so.

35-55 minutes: Reports from groups

55-60 minutes: Final remarks and email sheet distributed to create "micro-community" for further discussion and sharing of resources post-conference.

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