



Redesigning Precarious Work for Better Mental Health: A SMART Solution

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Brief Introduction to Work Design & Mental Health in Precarious Work

Precarious work is work that is of a low quality with the potential for adverse consequences, often characterised by temporary contracts, gig work, inflexible working conditions, and job insecurity (Kreshpaj et al., 2020). It can lead to negative physical and mental health outcomes (e.g., feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout [Allan et al. 2021]). Research on precarious work shows the role of poor work design in facilitating adverse mental health effects, particularly for those outside ‘traditional’ organisations’ salaried work (e.g., in platform work such as crowdsourcing, delivery, rideshare).

Work design is central to an ‘employee’s’ experience of work, and concerns the content and organisation of one’s tasks, roles, responsibilities, and relationships at work (Parker, 2014). It is critical for individuals’ motivation, wellbeing and productivity within both formal job structures, as well alternative organisational settings such ‘gig’/platform work (Parker & Grote, 2022). Many aspects of work design are psychologically important, fostering motivation and commitment, and alleviating or preventing job strain. Many countries have legislated employer obligations for good work design to address

mental health issues, and the SMART work design model (Parker & Knight, 2023) provides an accessible tool through which organisations can understand and address these work design issues.

SMART Work Design

The SMART work design model synthesises 100 years of research on work design, statistically identifying key clusters of important work characteristics (Parker & Knight, 2023; see also <https://www.transformativeworkdesign.com/smart-work>). It has been used extensively in organisations to address the psychosocial risks associated with poor quality work, by identifying work design challenges and opportunities at the individual, team, organisational, and policy levels. Through engaging with leaders and frontline employees of organisations that contract precarious work, platform designers or platform workers, tailored support can be provided to enhance these job’s mental and physical health impacts. Table 1 shows examples of work characteristics that help individuals experience SMART work design.

Table 1. Work characteristics associated with SMART work design dimensions

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Work Design.

Stimulating	Mastery	Agency	Relational	Tolerable Demands
Completing a variety of tasks	Clarity of one's roles/ responsibilities	Decision-making autonomy about when and where work is completed	Good quality social processes including social support from leaders	Manageable workloads
Using various skills, problem-solving	Feedback from the job and others	Decision-making autonomy over how work is completed	Feeling like the work/task is significant and meaningful	Consistency in work instructions (low role conflict)
Developing themselves at work	Being able to complete a 'whole' job from start to finish	Opportunity influence decisions that affect one's work	Have contact with the beneficiaries of one's work	Balance between family and work-related responsibilities

SMART Solutions to precarious work design challenges

Stimulating: Precarious workers can lack stimulation as there is little or no meaningful professional development opportunities through their contracted work, or low task variety as this contracted work includes very specific tasks.

An example solution: Ensure precarious workers are offered opportunities to complete a range of tasks rather than very specific, repetitive pieces of work, and provide opportunities for skills development through the contracting organisation. Such opportunities may include the formation of Guilds or Communities of Practice responsible for helping precarious workers with developing or learning new skills.

Mastery: Facing high levels of uncertainty, precarious workers can experience ambiguity about their role, for example, through lack of transparency about how work on the platforms is distributed/evaluated. Temporary contract workers also report feeling they do not complete a 'whole job' from start to finish (Ang & Slaughter, 2006) and micro gig work often contracts only small pieces of the whole work.

An example solution: Organise work tasks to allow experience of completing a whole job or task from start to finish, rather than only piecemeal tasks. If workers cannot do the whole job, ensure there is transparency about how their contribution is evaluated/distributed. Boost role clarity through providing opportunities for feedback from colleagues, supervisors, or end-users (this latter aspect can also make the work more stimulating and meaningful).

Agency: precarious work often includes low levels of job control, for example through lack of collective bargaining rights. Many gig/platform workers are not considered employees, which means they do not have a voice to influence the way they carry out their work or how tasks are allocated.

An example solution: Empower workers to decide what, when and how work is done, for example through giving choices to platform workers on the order or method to use in their allocated tasks, without resultant negative consequences (e.g., fewer future work opportunities). Organisations could involve representative groups of

temporary workers in their collective bargaining rounds to ensure bargaining agreements involve good work design.

Relational: precarious work can foster higher levels of isolation from others in completing the work (for example, those who are subcontracted working remotely or on platforms), with limited opportunities for social contact.

An example solution: leaders and 'regular' employees in organisations could enhance day-to-day opportunities to develop social connections, such as involving temporary workers in internal team meetings, encouraging them to use common workspaces, or be part of meetings with the end-users. Platform work companies should facilitate opportunities for workers to interact with each other, whether remotely or face-to-face. Platform workers do interact and discuss the opportunities and challenges of their work through social media channels like Reddit, however, these initiatives are beyond the platform's remit.

Intolerable demands: Some elements of precarious work almost by definition create intolerable demands (e.g., unpredictable hours, lack of paid time off, insufficient hours). These defining elements of precarious work may exacerbate other demands in the work – for example, gig-workers often feel unable to say 'no' to work opportunities even if they are overloaded as they don't know if they will get further work. 'Rideshare' drivers often are nudged to work at busy times and they might not want to decline in case it affects performance indicators such as a certain 'ride acceptance' rate, which often need to be sustained to remain on the platform (e.g., Uzunca & Kas, 2023)

An example solution: Regular monitoring by organisational contractors/platforms of the demands experienced by precarious workers to ensure demands remain at a fair and tolerable level, with opportunities for workers to flag and appropriately address intolerable demands. Leverage data gathering capabilities of algorithmic management platforms to prompt fruitful conversations with human decision-makers to consider the job demands of platform workers.

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