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Freelancing and the Future of Museum Work

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Abstract How are museums evolving in an increasingly “gig”-based U.S. economy? And how do emerging museum professionals confront those changes? An estimated 30% of the American workforce does freelance work. The growing pool of freelancers includes talented and knowledgeable museum consultants. While a workforce increasingly structured around “gigs” instead of jobs makes finding full-time employment trickier, it also offers rich opportunities for strengthening the museum community. This article explores opportunities and advantages afforded to the museum community by the growing “gig economy” as well as potential threats and limitations. In addition to financial considerations, the gig economy is reshaping how American workers approach work-life balance, social responsibility, and collaboration. Tapping the freelance workforce may help museums in the quest for relevance and inclusion and emerging museums professionals should consider freelancing as a career path.

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Museum work is always evolving and museum staff, especially emerging professionals, must embrace new opportunities at the forefront of that evolution. The next era of museum work will likely engage the flexible and rapidly growing “gig economy.” “Gigs”—one-time professional engagements or jobs of short duration—include on-demand services like Uber, but also longer freelance and consulting commitments.¹ As of 2017, an estimated 30% of the American workforce did freelance work, and that number is growing.² This contractor workforce already includes many knowledgeable museum consultants and a rising generation of museum professionals is poised to join it.

Museums are major players in the national, state, and local economies, generating \$15.9 billion in income, and, as such, they are subject to shifts in the economy, such as the rise of independent workers.³ Though contract workers are not a new phenomenon in museums, several catalysts have contributed to their growth in the field. When the 2008 recession hit, museums responded to the economic stress with hiring freezes and budget cuts, even as many experienced increased attendance.⁴ Technology has been transforming museums, behind-the-scenes and in the galleries, by expanding the visitor experience and enabling easier collaboration between workers while saving time, energy, and money.⁵ Also, a changing U.S. population in which millennials are the largest living generation and immigrants are driving workforce growth has increased the need for flexible and varied employment.⁶

Beyond the economic considerations, museums are transforming as they strive to remain beacons of social progress. A robust freelance workforce may help museums in their quest for equity, relevance, and inclusion as the gig economy reshapes how American workers approach work-life balance, social responsibility, and collaboration. A workforce that incorporates more gig workers offers the opportunity to strengthen the museum community by making it more inclusive, supportive, and equitable for all workers.

Opportunities and Advantages

Hiring independent museum professionals on a project-by-project basis can help museums to continue providing excellent mission-driven projects while maintaining sound finances. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) argues, “museums play an essential role in cultural and social life across the US.”⁷ Nevertheless, museum jobs are disappearing or being overburdened with new responsibilities and expectations. Museum freelancers can alleviate the pressure of dwindling or burdensome jobs and also introduce greater representation in the museum workforce.

Money

A contract worker can cost 30-40% less than a regular employee for the same work because under U.S. labor law businesses must provide more benefits and pay more taxes for full-time employees.⁸ Museums large and small consistently pride themselves on “doing more with less” and hiring independent museum professionals is an effective way to stretch a budget. In addition to only paying for time spent on a specific project or organizational goal, hiring a freelancer releases the organization from other financial burdens beyond employment benefits, including overhead expenses such as providing workspace, office supplies, professional development, among other considerations. While some of these benefits and amenities may be offered to freelancers, they are not expected. Freelancers get their income from multiple clients and then manage benefits for themselves, relieving any one museum from supporting them.⁹

Expertise

There are many highly skilled and knowledgeable professionals that devote their talents to different museum projects, including designers, exhibit fabricators, conservators, educators, writers, and public relations experts. Some focus solely on museum work, while others balance museum work with corporate or other non-profit work. Hiring people with specialized knowledge or skills, allows museums to advance scholarship and experiment with techniques that build on both the museum’s existing work and the freelancer’s independent experience. This is already happening in a lot of museums; for example, a dynamic part-time museum educator from one museum runs a special series of family programs at another nearby institution, and a brilliant history Ph.D. student working on a dissertation contributes information to a museum’s collections scholarship. Each museum project requires a specific team and employing freelancers adds greater variety and value to museum teams.

Diversity

Despite claims that museums “provide places where communities can come together, interact, understand, and appreciate cultural diversity,”¹⁰ museums do not yet reflect the true diversity of our society. A 2015 study by the Andrew Mellon Foundation, in collaboration with the American Association of Museum Directors established that only 28% of museum staff belong to historically underrepresented minorities and museum leadership positions are dominated by non-Hispanic white workers.¹¹ Freelancing brings more workers with different backgrounds and abilities into museum work, and these different voices help tell richer stories. Full-time museum jobs often find workers from traditional educational and training pathways that are riddled with race and class barriers, along with other obstacles.¹² By restructuring the work, museums can build new pathways. By breaking down traditional jobs by skill set and finding workers—potentially freelancers—suited to those tasks, museums increase the possibility of finding more talented, focused, and diverse individuals.

Energy

Freelancers also offer an alternative to asking already overburdened employees to take on additional tasks or learn entirely new skills. Museum workers of all kinds are vulnerable to becoming overburdened. Task saturation, budget limitations, and time constraints all contribute to staff dissatisfaction and burnout.¹³ Even managers who recognize these threats can reinforce those dangers with conflicting expectations. Many museum managers feel that they do not want to force their staffs to give up free time, but then still expect projects and programs to happen under tough constraints. Contract workers are paid to alleviate staff burden and concentrate their energy on specific projects. Independent museum professionals also bring added excitement to the projects they take on—an excitement that can spread across museum teams and help build creative momentum across an organization.

Community

Hiring a museum freelancer is hiring a museum lover. Freelancers are motivated to provide excellent work to the museum community broadly, strengthening the entire field in the process. In the “Hollywood model” of employing independent workers, a project is identified, a team is assembled, the team works together for precisely as long as is needed to complete the task, then the team disbands.¹⁴ This already happens in museums to a certain extent for some projects and planning. Workers from different departments come together to collaborate on a project or outside experts are called in to assist. This collaboration builds stronger work communities in the field and produces better results. Freelancers, by definition, work for more than one organization and enable cross-pollination between their clients. A variation on the collegial exchanges that happen at conferences or through direct institutional collaborations, freelancers offer another connection between museums.

Incorporating freelancers or consultants into museum projects can be an economical way to add top-tier, specialized attention to projects while bringing in new voices and broadening museum audiences. Independent professionals bring in ideas from outside a museum and then go out and advocate for projects beyond that museum’s walls.

Threats and Limitations

Despite the value they add to museum work, hiring freelancers might raise some concerns. Many of the potential drawbacks to hiring freelancers relate to existing abuses in the museum workforce. As the museum world confronts injustices and imbalances in its practices, all workers will benefit.

Strain on Staff

Hiring workers takes staff time and energy; it means managing more people, getting new people up to speed

and, sometimes, establishing new systems and processes for communicating across teams. In already overburdened workplaces, repeatedly hiring outside help for special projects may only contribute to the challenges.¹⁵ The task of vetting, training, and managing a freelancer may stretch overworked staff even further. Evaluating whether staff —of any kind—have the resources they need in order to meet demands is important to great museum work. Pressure from stakeholders to “go the extra mile” can be innocuous (ex. encouraging workers to be “team players” by taking on more small tasks) or it can be exploitative (ex. on-call scheduling for employees who feel their jobs are in jeopardy). Many projects that contribute to staff stress and strain are worthwhile—it is a matter of prioritizing and assigning them appropriately. This is the same for freelance hires; when deciding how to build a team, a potential contract worker’s contributions must always be weighed against the additional strain of managing them and integrating them into the existing team.

Inequity and Exclusion

Despite lofty mission statements, museums often fall short of properly valuing their workers. There are activists in the museum field that are bringing labor abuses, and the discrimination they perpetuate, to the forefront of discussion. Unpaid internships that are expected, but often unrealistic for aspiring workers, limit the pool of professional talent to those who can work for free in order to get a foot in the door.¹⁶ Unsustainable wages buttressed by the belief that museum workers feel lucky to have jobs they love, no matter what they are paid, also create barriers to museum work. These are just two examples of how museums are failing to support the people working to make them awesome. Several organizations are working toward correcting these and other unjust practices, which are failing museum workers and undermining museums’ social missions. These organizations include #MuseumWorkersSpeak,¹⁷ Inluseum,¹⁸ the Gender Equity in Museums Movement,¹⁹ Museums & Race: Transformation and Justice,²⁰ Latino Network of the American Alliance of Museums,²¹ and in the UK, the Carrot Workers Collective,²² among many others that provide resources for equity in the museum workforce.

Since the cost of hiring a freelancer for a specific project is often less than hiring a full-time employee, some industry observers fear that consultants and contractors are siphoning away money that would otherwise pay sustainable wages to a full-time worker.²³ If realized, that fear would also exacerbate wage inequity and discrimination, and simultaneously delay the need for museums to make other necessary changes to their systems and practices. Rather than worsening inequalities, freelancers present a new opportunity for negotiating these

issues in the museum. The more independent work becomes an accepted path, the more people will be able to join in great museum work, and the more workers can opt out of oppressive, exploitative work environments, showing museums what workers will and will not tolerate.

Policy Traps

The freelance workforce is not free from exploitation either and museums may fear worsening labor issues by employing contractors. Policy loopholes, such as the misclassification of employees as contractors, can leave contract workers vulnerable to abuse and can undercut fairness for everyone. Federal labor regulations, including protections against discrimination, largely focus on workers in traditional jobs and not contract workers. New classifications and considerations must be made for these new types of workers—some doing old jobs in a new way, some doing entirely new jobs, some doing several jobs, or half a job. Lawmakers are calling for policy changes to protect workers in this shift away from traditional jobs, including better safety nets suited to freelancers, portable retirement and health benefits that are not tied to an employer, and better regulations that protect part-time workers' rights as well as, or better than, those of full-time employees.²⁴ Encouraging and hiring freelancers does not mean accepting abusive or problematic policies, and the larger the freelance workforce grows, the greater the pressure for changing regulations.

Lack of Institutional Continuity

By their nature, freelancers are not committed indefinitely to a particular organization. A museum may fear that contract workers will not understand their institution—its collections, its stories, its audience, or its mission. The flexible nature of freelancing does not ensure any deep or long-term investment in clients, but nor does it prevent such commitment either. Furthermore, the institutional memory that develops from long-term employment may be at greater risk as museum job satisfaction and retention rates take a dive. Reasons expressed by museum professionals for considering leaving the field include: low compensation, poor work-life balance, schedule or workload issues, and unclear career pathways to advancement.²⁵ Freelancers, who are not constrained by one position, can redefine such aspects of their jobs themselves, perhaps preventing burnout and keeping them in the field longer. Freelancers also build on past work with more ambitious projects at different institutions and do not feel stifled by limited advancement opportunities. If museums can develop a deep bench of regular freelancers who become trusted by and invested in that institution and/or the community they serve, a happier, more engaged, long-term workforce may result.

Quality

When museums hire outside help they may worry about receiving lower-quality work or not receiving work at all. Some people interview well but perform poorly. Sometimes work gets interrupted or delayed. When traditional museum staff members fall short, institutions may reassign the work, adjust deadlines, or provide additional training to ensure they get the results they are seeking. With contractors, these options may not be available. However, there are other ways museums can protect themselves from poor work product. First, hire smart:

check portfolios and/or references of the freelancer applicants. Second, create clear contracts and agreements when hiring. Getting positive results from contractors is similar to getting results from traditional staff. Both require clear and regular communication to be sure everyone's expectations and responsibilities are clear. If a museum builds a group of trusted freelancers that it uses again and again, as needed, this flexible workforce can become as stable and efficient as its permanent counterpart.

Conclusion

In 1995, Elaine Heuman Gurian, a long-time museum consultant, argued, "If our work in museums is evidence of our collective commitment to enhancing the quality of life for society, then we must be attentive to maintaining a high quality of life for our work community."²⁶ More than twenty years later, there is still work to be done to ensure a strong, inclusive, happy museum community. The gig economy can help museums rethink their workforces and reexamine the responsibilities they have to their workers—full-time, part-time, contract, and volunteer. Museums will always need a permanent workforce of employees and/or volunteers. Adding a flexible workforce of freelancers will help museums find better ways to balance time and money, and, the greater variety of work museums encourage, the greater variety of people museums can welcome and support.

Part of encouraging this change will involve debunking the myth of the full-time museum job. It does not always happen. It does not always last. It does not always pay the bills. It is often more than 40 hours per week with "some nights and weekends necessarily included." It may not leave space for a worker's personal life. And it will typically involve "other duties as assigned." Many emerging professionals can be strung along in temporary, low-paying, or volunteer positions by the promise of the dream museum job. Encouraging museums to hire gig workers will necessarily also require stripping the terms "freelancer" and "consultant" of long-held negative connotations. These arrangements should be viewed as strategic partnerships and independent museum professionals should not be thought of as predatory, hobbyist, or unqualified because they do occupy permanent positions.²⁷ Entrepreneurship and self-motivation are often listed as desired traits in museum job descriptions, but the ultimate statement of those traits—striking out as a freelancer and essentially starting a small business—is not always valued in the same way. A shift to a more flexible museum workforce will require a shift in these attitudes.

Emerging museum professionals can find opportunity in the gig economy. They face new economic realities compared with the previous generation of museum workers, with higher costs of living, the burden of student loan debt, and fewer employment benefits, all threatening their long-term economic stability. It can be a struggle to find a full-time museum job that accounts for such obstacles and harder still to compete for it in today's limited market. Emerging professionals also face an expectation of volunteering in order to get a foot in the door but putting in unpaid time in order to secure employment at a museum is unrealistic for many workers. There is no rule that says a worker who is paid equitably cannot also decide they want to volunteer their time. But it should never feel like coercion. If we want our museums to help develop a stronger society we have to show that they matter—both by paying workers well and encouraging volunteerism.

Emerging professionals should consider “gig” work one of the options for a fulfilling museum career. They ought to weigh such a path against permanent, full-time museum work when they consider their personal career desires, goals, and limits. In their quest to compete for appealing, well-paying, full-time jobs in the museum field, many young and emerging professionals are already developing the skills of successful freelancers. They balance multiple responsibilities such as multiple or part-time jobs, ongoing coursework, and creative side gigs, and they are constantly on the lookout for new skills that make them attractive hires.²⁸ It is not a far leap from there to freelancing.

How the gig economy affects museum work is up to the people doing that museum work—and those entering the field in the next several years. The more common and accepted freelancing becomes the greater the supports for alternative work. Instead of thinking of freelance work as temporary, workers can commit to making such arrangements for themselves and the institutions that hire them. The goal is to make all museum work well-compensated, well-protected, and well-valued. Museums can share the workers, costs, and benefits. Encouraging workers to find the right fit for their needs also encourages finding the right fit for museums' needs and maximizing the value for all.

Notes

¹ Marion McGovern, *Thriving in the gig economy: how to capitalize and compete in the new world of work*, Wayne, New Jersey: Career Press, 2017, p.1. eBook; Lydia Dishman, “How The Gig Economy Will Change In 2017,” *Fast Company*, January 5, 2017.

² Edelman Intelligence, “Freelancing in America: A National Survey of the New Workforce,” independent study commissioned by Freelancer’s Union and Elance-oDesk, 2017. <https://www.upwork.com/i/freelancing-in-america/2017/>; “The 2016 Field Nation Freelancer Study: The Changing Face of the New Blended Workforce,” https://fieldnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/The_2016_Field_Nation_Freelancer_Study_R1V1_1_-2.pdf; World Economic Forum, “The Future of Jobs Report: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution,” January 2016, http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs.pdf.

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⁴ Annette Bernhardt, “Low Wage Recovery 2012,” a report for the National Employment Law Project, August 2012. <http://www.nelp.org/content/uploads/2015/03/LowWageRecovery2012.pdf>; “Museums and the American Economy in 2011,” a report from the American Association of Museums, (April 2012), <http://www.aam-us.org/docs/research/acme12-final.pdf>; “Museums and the American Economy in 2012,” a report from the American Association of Museums, (April 2013) <https://www.aam-us.org/docs/research/acme-2013-final.pdf?sfvrsn=2>; IN the UK, this experience is similar: Gary Noakes, “Recession is a double-edged sword for museum sector,” *Museums Journal*, Issue 109/11, p. 7, (November 2009) <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/37651>.

⁵ Roberta Gedert, “Technology is changing how visitors experience museums,” January 29, 2017, <http://www.toledoblade.com/Art/2017/01/29/Art-Upgrade-From-virtual-tours-to-digital-displays-technology-is-changing-how-visitors-experience-museums.html>; Kelly Song, “Virtual reality and Van Gogh collide — technology is turning museums into a booming industry,” CNBC, September 24, 2017. <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/09/22/how-technology-is-turning-museums-into-a-booming-industry.html>.

⁶ Anthony Cilluffo and D’Vera Cohn, “10 demographic trends shaping the U.S. and the world in 2017,” Pew Research Center, April 27, 2017 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/27/10-demographic-trends-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world-in-2017/>.

⁷ Museums as Economic Engines: A National Study commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums and conducted by Oxford Economics, 2017, p. 5.

⁸ U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, U.S. Department of Labor, “Statement of Seth D. Harris Deputy Secretary U.S. Department of Labor Before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions,” June 17, 2010.

⁹ Part of a freelancer career is managing a small business, determining employment benefits, insurance, protections, office space, schedule. All of these aspects of the work are flexible when determined by the freelancer rather than the employer. Resources can be found at www.freelancersunion.org

¹⁰ Museums as Economic Engines: A National Study commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums and conducted by Oxford Economics, 2017, p. 5.

¹¹ The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey (2015), p. 3; Betty Farrell, Ph.D. and Maria Medvedeva, Cultural Policy Center, NORC and the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago, “Demographic Transformation of the Future of Museums,” a study commissioned by the Center for the Future of Museums, an initiative of the American Alliance of Museums, 2010.

¹² The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation: Art Museum Staff Demographic Survey (2015), p. 4.

¹³ Robert R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (New York: Routledge, 2009) p. 64.

¹⁴ Adam Davidson, “What Hollywood Can Teach Us About the Future of Work,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/magazine/what-hollywood-can-teach-us-about-the-future-of-work.html>. Davidson notes that the Hollywood model includes strong unions that ensure livable wages for unionized, project-based workers.

¹⁵ Robert R. Janes, *Museums in a Troubled World: Renewal, Irrelevance or Collapse?* (New York: Routledge, 2009) p. 64.

¹⁶ Derek Thompson, “Work Is Work: Why Free Internships Are Immoral,” *The Atlantic*, May 14, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/05/work-is-work-why-free-internships-are-immoral/257130/>.

¹⁷ #MuseumWorkersSpeak is an “action-oriented platform for social change at the intersection of labor, access, and inclusion.” They are aiming to engage with and ultimately combat “barriers to entry and advancement rooted in race and class.”

¹⁸ “The Inluseum advances new ways of being a museum through critical discourse, community building and collaborative practice related to inclusion in museums.” <https://inluseum.com/>.

¹⁹ The Gender Equity in Museums Movement (GEMM) raises awareness about gender inequity in the museum workplace and offers resources for change. <https://www.genderequitymuseums.com/>.

²⁰ Museums and Race is a group of museum professionals trying to restructure institutional policies that perpetuate structural racism and oppression in museums. <https://museumsandrace.org/>.

²¹ The Latino Network of the American Alliance of Museums advocates for Latino workers, Latino audiences, and Latino/Latin American content in museums. It is also a liaison between liaison between the U.S. museum community and Latin American and the Caribbean museums, research centers, and cultural institutions. Latino Network of the American Alliance of Museums, “2016 Annual Report - 2017 Strategy and Goals,” <http://www.aam-us.org/docs/default-source/professional-networks/2016-summary-of-activities-2017-strategy-and-goals.pdf?sfvrsn=0>.

²² In the United Kingdom, the Carrot Workers Collective examines the myths surrounding full-time museum work and asks, “Why do we often think that cultural work isn’t ‘real work’, and therefore that cultural workers don’t deserve the same rights as everyone else?” Carrot Workers Collective, “Surviving Internships; A Counter Guide to Free Labor in the Arts,” https://carrotworkers.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/cw_web.pdf.

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²⁵ Emma Boast and Maddie Mott, “Labor of Love: Revaluing Museum Work,” March 14, 2018 <http://labs.aam-us.org/blog/labor-of-love-revaluing-museum-work/>; Sarah Erdman, Claudia Ocello, Dawn Estabrooks Salerno, and Marieke Van Damme, “Leaving the Museum Field,” blogpost, Alliance Labs, September 22, 2017 <http://labs.aam-us.org/blog/leaving-the-museum-field/>; Brie Weiler Reynolds, “Working Parents in 2017: What They Want at Work,” FlexJobs.com, August 11, 2017, <https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/what-working-parents-want-at-work/>; Adrienne Barnett, “When I Grow Up, I Want To Be a Museum Professional,” <http://www.westmuse.org/2012/01/23/when-i-grow-up-i-want-to-be-a-museum-professional>; <http://labs.aam-us.org/blog/leaving-the-museum-field/>.

²⁶ Elaine Heuman Gurian, *Institutional Trauma: Major Change in Museums and its Effect on Staff*, (Washington: American Association of Museums, 1995,) pp. 20-21.

²⁷ Ruth Reader, "Freelancers Are Sick Of Being Called 'Gig Workers'," *Fast Company*, October 17, 2017.
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