

How the Gig Economy Empowers Unschoolers

The growth of freelancers, or those working in the “gig economy” as their own independent contractors, is reshaping the way many Americans approach work. A 2016 Stanford University study found that independent freelancers comprise about one-quarter of the U.S. workforce and estimated that half of all workers could be independent contractors by 2020.

Second (and third) jobs have always been a reality for many Americans who take on additional work for financial reasons, but the majority of today’s gig economy workers choose freelance work on its own merits. A McKinsey study reveals that 70 percent of today’s independent workers are pursuing this employment path by choice rather than out of necessity.

Gig Work Goes Hand in Hand with Educational Freedom

The increasing popularity and feasibility of gig work create more opportunities for work/life balance, particularly for parents who are often juggling employment and child-rearing responsibilities. The flexibility that independent contract work can offer opens up possibilities for parents who may be dissatisfied with conventional schooling options for their children. Some of these parents are turning to unschooling either as homeschoolers who embrace a self-directed, interest-based approach to education or by sending their children part-time to a self-directed learning center or “unschooling school.” Or both. These parents see the gig economy as the future of work in the same way they view unschooling as the future of learning.

For Isabel Azalia, working in the gig economy and unschooling blend together well. She and her husband, who was born in Nicaragua, both have graduate degrees in engineering and worked for Fortune 30 companies. When they became parents, they began exploring other work options. Isabel dabbled in art and photography, and her husband took a different job that enabled him to work from home full-time. They decided to homeschool because they were underwhelmed by their local public school options in Florida and equally dissatisfied with private school choices.

“I did really well in school,” Isabel says. “I was a straight-A student, got a full-ride scholarship to the number three school in the country for computer engineering, but I was miserable in school. I hated it. I felt trapped in school the whole time.” She wanted a better experience for her children but still thought she would send them to school. “I was fine with sending them to school because I would have more time to work, but when I started looking at the schools, I thought: How have they gotten worse?” Homeschooling allowed the freedom and flexibility for learning that she and her husband were looking for, and they embraced a non-coercive, self-directed approach tied to their children’s interests.

Now, Isabel has crafted a designer photography business focused on museum quality artistic photographs. Her husband, who already has numerous patents, is looking to venture off on his own as an inventor. The parents share homeschooling and work obligations, but they are optimistic that a new self-directed learning center may open soon nearby, enabling their children to spend a couple of days a week there while they grow their respective businesses.

“I feel like it would be a game-changer for us,” says Isabel. “I could get more work things accomplished, get my marketing plan done and still be fully present for my kids. And my husband could work on his inventions.” She is clear, though, that she wouldn’t want her kids, who are four, seven, and almost ten, to attend a learning center more than part-time and instead would rather prioritize the time they spend at home as a family and throughout their community learning together organically. “Right now, my son is really into the physics of roller coasters, so we spend a lot of time on that,” she says.

More Freedom for Both Children and Adults

The gig economy and unschooling share common traits. Independent contractors who choose freelance work are often frustrated by traditional work arrangements and rigid schedules and are seeking more freedom, flexibility, and autonomy. Similarly, many unschooling parents find conventional classrooms to be highly standardized, test-driven environments and want their children to have the freedom, flexibility, and autonomy that they as adults also value. Isabel sees many connections between entrepreneurship and unschooling. “They both leave you feeling free at the end of the day,” she says.

Like the gig economy, unschooling is also growing. Newly released 2016 data from the U.S. Department of Education reveal that 20 percent of homeschoolers report “always” or “mostly” using informal learning practices, a jump from 2012. Additionally, independent, self-directed alternatives to school are sprouting up across the country, supporting more unschooling-inclined families with flexible attendance options.

As more American workers look to the gig economy to provide the freedom and opportunity they want, many may also choose to grant their children more freedom, as well. The gig economy, particularly in conjunction with the growth of self-directed learning centers, can help more families move from schooling to unschooling. Like conventional workplaces, conventional classrooms may soon be a thing of the past.