

Precarity: How Did The Pandemic Reshape The Employment Landscape?

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Introduction

What does it mean to find stable employment? In the post-pandemic landscape, jobs appear scarcer, demanding worse hours and offering diminished pay. Even before the pandemic, the traditional job advice seemed outdated due to the rise of the gig economy fuelled by digital communication. Workers found themselves navigating a 24/7 work environment, often characterised by long shifts, unorthodox hours and low pay. This surge in 'job precarity' had already left individuals discontent with their working conditions, serving as catalysts for the embrace of radical politics, as witnessed during the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States (Chancer *et al.*, 2019, 6). However, this was all pre-pandemic.

Enter COVID-19 – the great disruptor. The outbreak and ensuing crisis have not only spotlighted existing challenges but also intensified them. Millions of low-skilled workers were pushed to the pandemic's frontlines, risking their health, while certain industries faced abrupt closures by government mandate. The pandemic has dealt a blow to the prospects of finding work, exacerbating the already prevalent crisis of job insecurity for many individuals in the workforce. This article aims to analyse the profound impact of COVID-19 on job insecurity, providing key insights into how different segments of the workforce have been affected. As we explore these dynamics, key findings will emerge, underlining the far-reaching consequences of the pandemic on the employment landscape.

Job precarity before the pandemic

Having established the profound impact of COVID-19 on the job landscape, it is imperative to rewind and delve into the historical context of job precarity – what it means, and how it had already shaped the experiences of the workforce before the pandemic. Before we delve into the historical context, let's clearly define what we mean by 'job precarity'. Job precarity, in its essence, is the condition of insecure, unstable employment marked by non-standard hours, low wages and, often, the necessity to juggle multiple jobs. This phenomenon, a cornerstone of the pre-pandemic life for many individuals, emerged alongside the rise of the so-called 'gig economy' (Han and Hart, 2021).

In the decades preceding the pandemic, significant shifts in working habits transpired. The once-stable employment scenario – where individuals transitioned from diverse paths such as the educational one into secure jobs with relatively guaranteed stability – evolved into a model characterised by shorter hours, part-time work and lower pay. The rise of neoliberalism played a pivotal role, gradually diminishing the bargaining power of workers and reducing regulatory constraints on companies (Mirchandani, 2020). By the 2010s, a stark divide between the rich and poor had taken root, with generations experiencing heightened levels of relative poverty and the mental health toll of job precarity (Allan *et al.*, 2021). This historical context sets the stage for understanding the pre-existing challenges that people faced in the world of work before the outbreak of COVID-19. As the traditional employment landscape underwent a substantial

transformation from the stable and guaranteed employment of the pre-1970s era, job precarity became a pervasive reality (Han and Hart, 2021). Shorter hours, part-time work, lower pay – all became defining features of the working lives of individuals navigating the gig economy. As we transition into the pandemic era, the exacerbation of these challenges will become increasingly apparent.

The pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic marked a seismic shift in the employment landscape, exposing and intensifying the pre-existing challenges of job precarity. As we pivot to focus on the pandemic's impact, it is crucial to understand how it heightened vulnerabilities across various sectors of the workforce.

COVID-19 not only revealed the fragility of the global workforce but also accentuated the vulnerabilities of workers when faced with a crisis. Precarious employment – characterised by low-quality conditions, lack of rights and income inadequacy – became even more pronounced in the face of the pandemic (McNamara *et al.*, 2021; Pantuliano, 2020). The subsequent economic downturn laid bare the disparities among workers, setting the stage for a closer examination of how different groups coped with the challenges. The working world, in the throes of the pandemic, can be broadly categorised into three groups based on corresponding privileges. Those who could retain their jobs and work remotely, those considered essential workers who had to work in-person, and those regarded as non-essential but could not work remotely (Loustaunau *et al.*, 2021; Rho *et al.*, 2023). Each category faced distinct challenges, contributing to the complexity of the pandemic's impact on job insecurity. States, influenced by neoliberal international political organisations, assumed a decisive role in reshaping the dynamics of employment decision-making. During this critical time, the state became the arbiter, determining essential jobs and reshuffling the traditional power dynamics in employment (Loustaunau *et al.*, 2021; Rho *et al.*, 2023). This shift in decision-making processes between the state and employers further contributed to the financial and employment uncertainties experienced by workers.

As we navigate the intricate layers of the pandemic's impact, it becomes apparent that the divisions among workers were not merely based on the nature of their jobs but were intricately linked to state interventions and policy decisions.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job insecurity

The complexity and recentness of the COVID-19 pandemic make it challenging to measure the full scope of its consequences on job insecurity. However, by organising our exploration, we can discern patterns and specific challenges faced by different segments of the workforce.

The pandemic thrust job insecurity into the global spotlight, exposing a spectrum of challenges that extend beyond mere employment status. Financial stability, employment status and overall worker wellbeing became intertwined in a global challenge of unprecedented proportions (Rho *et al.*, 2023). As we delve into the aftermath of the pandemic, distinct patterns emerge, affecting essential workers, non-traditional precarious workers and even high-skilled professionals.

Essential frontline service personnel bore the immediate brunt of the pandemic, dealing daily with heightened risks such as close interactions with customers, risking their health, overworking and facing a lack of benefits or control over schedules (Mai *et al.*, 2023). This vulnerable class of workers witnessed an exacerbation of social stratification, with their experiences mirroring a deeper societal divide. Workers in the

service sector, subjected to the phenomenon of consistent precarious employment, faced challenges defined by weak employment contracts, unpredictability of daily tasks and short-term scheduling (Loustaunau *et al.*, 2021). While the service sector was traditionally associated with precarity, the pandemic extended these challenges to other segments of the workforce, albeit at various levels. Contrary to the notion that higher education would secure stability in future careers, high-skilled and highly paid full-time workers experienced a position of precarity due to layoffs and lower wages during the pandemic (McNamara *et al.*, 2021). The traditional understanding that higher education guaranteed strong employment conditions was contradicted, highlighting the vulnerability of high-skilled workers (Mai *et al.*, 2023). This shift underscores a broader transformation in the nature of work, transcending traditional categories. Beyond the realms of employment, the increased job precarity during and after the COVID-19 crisis has taken a toll on the mental wellbeing of the world's population. Transformations in work dynamics, coupled with worsening working conditions, have heightened the possibilities of anxiety and depression (Zheng *et al.*, 2021). Essential workers, in particular, faced unique challenges – battling not only the fear of COVID-19 infection but also minimal benefits and overwork (Mai *et al.*, 2023).

As we attempt to comprehend the multi-faceted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes evident that job insecurity extends far beyond employment status, encompassing mental health and wellbeing in a profound way.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on job insecurity, our journey traversed the pre-existing challenges of job precarity, magnified by the global crisis. The historical backdrop revealed the transformation of stable employment into a landscape marked by non-standard hours, low wages and heightened stress. As the pandemic unfolded, it laid bare the vulnerabilities across different segments of the workforce. Essential workers – on the frontlines of the crisis – faced unprecedented risks, including compromised health, overwork and a lack of benefits. Non-traditional precarious workers in the service sector grappled with the enduring challenges of weak employment contracts and daily unpredictability, while high-skilled professionals found themselves unexpectedly navigating layoffs and lower wages. Beyond the economic realm, the mental health implications of heightened job precarity during and after the pandemic have become apparent. Anxiety and depression have become unwelcome companions for workers across various sectors. As we strive to comprehend the profound effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear that job insecurity transcends traditional employment metrics. It encapsulates a broader re-evaluation of the relationship between workers and work. The pandemic, with all its challenges, beckons us to question the desirability of returning to pre-pandemic levels of job precarity.

In conclusion, the question that lingers is whether our established norms of work truly serve the wellbeing of workers. Perhaps, in the aftermath of this crisis, we are called not just to rebuild but to re-envision – a world where the relationship between workers and work is characterised by stability, fairness and a profound acknowledgement of our shared humanity.

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