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# FREELANCING EXPERTISE

*Contract Professionals  
in the New Economy*

DEBRA OSNOWITZ

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*to the memory of my father*

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## FREELANCING EXPERTISE

## INTRODUCTION

The afternoon I spent with Ben discussing his work, career, and family life, was, in his words, “a chance to think about the big picture. With so much to manage and never enough time,” he explained, “that little screen gets all my attention.” Gesturing to several computer terminals crowded on to a corner table, Ben compared his work as a contract software engineer to “the people who made the Industrial Revolution. They changed they way people lived, where they lived, where they worked. A lot of it was for the good. But if you read history, you find out there were a lot of problems along the way.” Reflecting on his experience as an independent contractor, Ben believed he was witnessing a shift analogous to industrialization, a challenge to long-established patterns of paid employment. “There’s a fundamental change going through the workplace,” he elaborated. “I think the freelance consultant is probably one of the best things that’s happening over the next several years, but it will take a while for society to catch up with us.”

A white man in his early forties, college educated and middle class, Ben saw himself on the cutting edge of a trend. For six years he had been working as a “freelance consultant,” or contractor, from the suburban home he shared with his wife and two daughters. There he had the office equipment needed for a small business and had invested further in the technological “gear” that software development required. From his home office, Ben could communicate both with companies large and small and with colleagues who shared his passion for developing technology. At work but without a regular office routine, he could also attend to family needs without jeopardizing his job. “The Industrial Revolution put people in factories and destroyed a lot of cottage industries,” he mused, “but we’re bringing them back.” For Ben, contracting from home offered the autonomy to direct his own small-scale operation.

Emily was also a contractor, although she rarely worked at home and had few of the trappings of a home office. Instead, she moved from one work site to the next. At the time of our interview, she was dividing her time between a small publishing company and a much larger law firm, where she worked as an editor and proofreader. At each site, she occupied a small space, which she sometimes shared. “I hear it’s the wave of the future, this kind of moving around and working short term,” she explained, “and it’s fine as long as they give me work, and I like that I’m learning new things everywhere I go.” A single white woman in her late forties, Emily had been a contractor for little more than a year, and as our conversation continued, she weighed the pros and cons of long-term contract employment. “Knowing how to do this is probably a good thing,” she reflected, “but I still don’t feel like I understand it. I don’t know if it’s dependable.... I wonder about doing it in twenty years.”

Emily, too, sensed a shift in the world of work, away from the long-term steady job with a well-marked career path. By her own account, she was doing well, with an income at least equivalent to what she had earned as a “regular, permanent employee.” When her former employer relocated, she had discovered a ready market for her services. “I know how to do what I do,” she assured me. Even so, Emily seemed somewhat less sanguine than Ben about her long-term prospects in the workforce. She was confident in her abilities but uncertain about her future. “I guess I could use an advice manual,” she mused. “Maybe I should be planning for something.” Emily’s unease stemmed less from day-to-day experience than from the

recognition that she was assuming ever-more responsibility for charting her own course. Any direction she took incurred risks. Should she, like Ben, invest in a home office? Learn new skills? Seek new markets for her services? “They say it’s a new economy,” she reflected. “I guess I’m trying to figure out what that means.”

Emily and Ben share a set of questions and observations about work and careers with social scientists, policymakers, and workers alike. Across the economic spectrum, employment has become less secure and careers less predictable. New work practices—with such terms as reengineering, lean production, or just-in-time staffing—have generated a new sense of precariousness.<sup>1</sup> Jobs calling on a specific body of knowledge or set of skills may be eliminated, outsourced, or replaced with new requirements. Technological change may demand adaptation as new technologies threaten long-standing practices. Likening these developments to the Industrial Revolution, Ben underscored the dislocation that segments of the workforce now experience, even as many workers embrace change. Echoing Ben, Emily also gave voice to a pervasive sense of insecurity in the wake of organizational downsizing and internal restructuring through which employing organizations have shed jobs and realigned expectations. As contractors no longer working for a single employer, Ben and Emily represent one facet of a shift in employment relations that have become increasingly tenuous.

Had she investigated popular sources of advice, Emily would probably have found a growing literature offering guidance for self-identified freelancers, consultants, or contractors.<sup>2</sup> Some of these sources date back decades, indicating that contract employment is far from new. But a recent stream of books, magazines, and websites now celebrates the potential for liberation from work in a bureaucratic hierarchy. Some advocates of change invoke a new entrepreneurial culture and encourage all workers to seize opportunities and pursue their dreams. Others take a more cautionary tone and equate individual success with such personal traits as independence and self-motivation, or they admonish would-be entrepreneurs to remain conscientious in plying their trade, managing their resources, and maintaining good business relations. Encouraged simultaneously to embrace risk and guard against danger, Emily might well have found advice about the new economy contradictory.

In the first few years of the twenty-first century, two headlines highlighted these contradictions. “The Liberated, Exploited, Pampered, Frazzled,

Uneasy New American Worker,” read the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* on March 5, 2000. Inside, articles celebrated the free agent, who moves easily from project to project, unbound by formal employment or even, in some cases, by a physical address. Free agents avoid stagnation and worry little about job security, rights, or benefits. Riding the wave of new technology, they can reap the rewards of innovation. By April 23, 2003, however, a front-page story in the *Wall Street Journal* chronicled the crash that followed the heady days of an expanding economic bubble; the headline read, “Once Stars of the New Economy, Free-Lance Workers Take the Brunt of Its Downfall.” By then, the free agent had become one casualty of a downturn. No longer commanding high fees, freelancers were the first to scramble for work when companies began to cut costs. Few journalistic accounts reported estimates of the size or scope of this unanchored workforce. Instead, most stories illustrated either free-ranging possibility or ongoing unemployment.

Such signals can be hard to decipher. Evidence of changing patterns of employment may appear in the press, in advice literature, and in talks among friends and acquaintances whose working lives are taking new directions. Increasing numbers of people appear to change jobs with increasing frequency. Staffing agencies offer to link individuals with specific skill sets to employers who seek their services. Career counseling offers advice for those “outplaced” and unemployed. New forms of employment represent options and alternatives, sometimes approximating the notion of free agency, occasionally defined as self-employment,<sup>3</sup> and variously termed temp work, freelancing, consulting, or contracting. As Ben and Emily observed, such developments are notable less for a unified pattern than for a multiplicity of trends that appear uneven and often paradoxical.

This book is about contract professionals, people such as Ben and Emily who sell their expertise in a market for their services. Contract professionals are mobile workers hired temporarily to apply specific knowledge and skills. Rather than salaries, they receive hourly wages or, less often, project fees. Rather than having employers, contractors have clients, with whom they forge short-term agreements, sometimes through staffing agencies acting as third-party intermediaries in the labor market. Their clients are businesses, large and small; nonprofit institutions; and occasionally individuals seeking specific services. Like Ben, some of the contract professionals whose stories appear on these pages work at a distance from their

clients, usually from offices in their homes, where e-mail, fax, and phone can connect them around the globe. Others work mainly at clients' sites of business and, like Emily, may be so integrated into organizational life that they seem indistinguishable from the employees around them. A subgroup of contractors is geographically mobile, relocating periodically as they move from one client site to the next.

The contractors who are the subject of this book work in one of two occupational groups: (1) writers and editors or (2) programmers and engineers. In these two occupations, contract employment is well institutionalized, and both contractors and their clients are familiar with its practices. For them, contracting is a relational system that operates in tandem with standard organization-based employment. The system provides staffing options for employers seeking flexibility in the size and composition of a workforce, but it also requires ongoing negotiation with contractors to define the scope and content of each new assignment. For contractors, therefore, informally defined work relations supplant formal affiliation and structural authority in an office hierarchy. Contract professionals must, therefore, depend on their own expertise to enact competence and instill confidence in their abilities.

I set out to investigate the strategies and structures of contracting at the turn of the twenty-first century, at the height of a booming economy and plentiful employment. I interviewed contractors and, at a series of work sites, observed them at work with colleagues and clients. My investigation lasted well into an economic recession, when the boom-gone-bust was front-page news. By then, however, I had heard one contractor after another dismiss both the high-flying rhetoric of free agency and the dismal predictions of downward mobility. Instead, I heard a more nuanced **account of plans, choices, and constraints**, all of which spanned economic cycles, then as now.<sup>4</sup> Many of the people I met were exuberant about the challenge and variety that contract employment provided. Others were less sanguine about their prospects or less satisfied with their work. Yet all saw themselves as skilled professionals making their way in a time of change. Neither workforce mavericks nor labor market victims, they were navigating a system of employment with its own norms, processes, and mechanisms of control.

The accounts of the contractors I interviewed revealed much about the workings of this system. My informants related strategies for finding

contract assignments, developing work-based relationships, and remaining employable over time. Their stories illustrated a complex calculus by which they weighed their risks and sought opportunities. Keenly aware that their contractual status set them apart from normative notions of holding a job, many offered their own interpretations of changing employment relations and raised questions that I shared as I began this investigation. In a time of accelerated social and economic change, what constitutes a good job? A satisfying career? What does contract employment portend for work and careers in a new economy?

I had other questions as well. I knew that contracting is one of a number of work arrangements associated with increasing workforce flexibility, and I wondered how contracting in these two occupational groups compared with other forms of short-term employment. I wondered, too, how the processes and practices associated with contracting might differ between or within these two groups. How, for example, might demographic differences—especially gender, race, and age—affect contractors' options? What organizational practices and employment policies are significant? How do these skilled professionals manage the risks of a volatile economy and understand their contractual status? What, then, might their experiences reveal about changing employment relations and new patterns for work and careers?

## **Changing Employment and the Standard Job**

Contracting is one of a range of alternative forms of paid work that contrasts with standard jobs, the institutionalized system of social relations that defines regular employment. Lodged in an organization, a standard job represents a position, fixed vertically and horizontally. With it comes a set of formal responsibilities, often classified in a status hierarchy and elaborated in a job description, along with informal expectations governing workplace interaction. Although informal processes may influence hiring, firing, and mobility within a firm, the standard job is a formal arrangement. A job connotes stability, an individual's ongoing relationship with a single employer, a steady paycheck, and established patterns of authority and accountability. Measured against this standard, most alternative forms of employment—contracting included—provide less stability or at least

less regularity. They may be part-time, intermittent, casually arranged, temporary, or seasonal. Individual workers may experience high mobility, periods of unemployment, and multiple employers and work sites.

The standard job has a relatively short history. It was forged in the early twentieth century and institutionalized in U.S. policy during the New Deal and the decades that followed. Its dominance corresponds with the industrial era, a period of national corporations and vertically integrated firms. A standard job in such settings came to imply steady work, even lifetime tenure, and the prospect of a career with one employer. Social insurance—the benefits tied to standard employment in the United States—protected employees from the risks of illness and disability and often protected their families as well. Having a job meant going out to work. It separated paid employment from household labor. Having a good job, especially for full-time male employees, meant earning a family wage high enough to support a middle-class household. In the mid-twentieth century, therefore, the standard job complemented the normative nuclear family, with its single primary wage earner. Social policies protected employees with standard jobs by extending legal rights, covering occasional periods of unemployment, and elaborating standards for regulated work-site practices.<sup>5</sup>

Even at its mid-century high-water mark, however, the standard job was never universal. Rather, its formal practices applied most broadly to employment in large organizations with internal personnel systems. There, corporate policies or collective bargaining agreements prevailed, and job classifications defined relative status. For a great many professional and managerial employees, employers further promised lifelong careers in return for commitment and competent performance. In the mid-century corporation, therefore, layoffs for those in white-collar jobs were exceedingly rare.<sup>6</sup> Layoffs did periodically affect workers in mass production, but under union contracts, they too could depend on established procedures, usually based on seniority, for determining who would be dismissed and called back. Although the mechanisms might differ, therefore, both white-collar and blue-collar workers were secure, subject to standard practices and regulations.

The standard job, in turn, became the basic unit in what came to be known as an internal labor market, a system of hiring and promotion bounded within an organization. Where internal labor markets regulated employment, employees were typically hired at the bottom rungs of a

hierarchy and then retained and promoted from within its ranks.<sup>7</sup> Analysts have offered different explanations for the expansion of internal labor markets, but all stress the order and regularity they imposed.<sup>8</sup> Within an employing organization, an internal labor market structured mobility. It also provided a rationale for employers to invest in a workforce and for employees to commit their efforts to organizational goals.

Changes in this rational, ordered process, the destabilizing of standard employment, are one key to understanding the contradictions that contract professionals face in the new economy. Rather than well-marked paths and clear criteria for success, segments of the workforce have encountered new calls for entrepreneurialism, initiative, and adaptability. Employers offer fewer promises and demand less adherence to formal rules. Individuals exercise greater latitude and decision making. The standard job has thus shed some of the rigidity that characterized employing organizations in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, despite the loosening of its strictures, the standard job, the fixed position in an employing organization, continues to provide both a system of regulation and a cultural ideal, a set of norms associated with "permanent," full-time work. Other forms of employment, contracting among them, are thus alternatives to this standard.

Signs of strain in this system had appeared by the last decades of the twentieth century. Long-term employment had become less dependable and promotion through internal labor markets less assured. Researchers seeking explanations for this new instability have pointed to the parallel processes of downsizing and restructuring, which in the 1980s began to sweep through entire industries, dislodging systems and displacing employees.<sup>9</sup> Downsizing directly threatens job security, even for those who survive layoffs. Restructuring, in turn, flattens hierarchies and shrinks the ranks of managers and supervisors. In the aftermath of restructuring, organizations tend to depend less on formal rules and procedures and, instead, stress communication and collaboration. Under these conditions, problem solving devolves downward, to lower levels of the hierarchy;<sup>10</sup> control becomes less centralized; and workers exercise greater discretion. The scope of jobs may also expand. Rather than narrow classifications and predetermined duties, for example, job descriptions may identify knowledge and skills to be applied to broad functional areas.<sup>11</sup>

The reconfiguring of organizations and internal labor markets has, in turn, altered career trajectories. Whereas employees' advancement once

depended on loyalty to a single employer and progression along a career path, employees now more readily move across organizational boundaries, from one employer to another.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of downsizing, of course, changing jobs may well be a forced choice and not necessarily a means for career advancement.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, in some occupations mobility between employers has become a well-established strategy for gaining varied experience.<sup>14</sup> Considering this evidence of greater mobility, some analysts have proposed employability, rather than job security, as the basis for longevity in the workforce.<sup>15</sup> Even employees who remain with a single employer, they suggest, must be prepared to move from project to project, as work teams convene and dissolve. Mobility, they argue, can provide opportunities and expand choices, especially for knowledge workers with essential expertise.

More varied patterns of mobility indicate more variation across opportunity structures. Whereas holding a specific job once defined an individual's future prospects and marked individual progress, opportunities for advancement now more often take a career in unanticipated directions. In its extreme form, employment in this fluid, dynamic universe becomes less a sequence of positions than a series of opportunities, each building on the next, a trajectory that unfolds through individual initiative as employees develop both their own expertise and the knowledge that allows their employers to succeed. The optimism reflected in these images coincides with the rhetoric of free agency that pervades much of the popular advice now offered to workers in the new economy. Although the possibilities for endless opportunity appearing in some advice literature are surely overstated, such analyses do suggest a stark departure from earlier models of career success through loyalty to a company and adherence to its protocols.

The new economy, therefore, represents a broad cultural shift through which employees no longer exchange loyalty for security and no longer expect their careers to follow a scripted progression of stages. Work relations have generally become more fluid and open to frequent change. Still, despite challenges to its uniformity and stability, the standard job remains associated with a relatively stable organizational position, however tenuously held. For most of the workforce, too, the standard job remains the dominant model for defining relations of employment. Against its promise of regularity, most alternative forms of work necessitate greater self-reliance and mobility. Analysts of alternative work arrangements distinguish a number of these forms with the term *contingent work*.

## Nonstandard, Contingent Work

*Contingency* connotes instability, and the term *contingent work* has been applied to a constellation of work arrangements, each differing in one or more ways from the standard, “permanent,” full-time job.<sup>16</sup> As a concept, contingent work lacks a clear definition. Nonetheless, the notion of contingent employment has generated much debate about the causes and consequences of the short-term and alternative work arrangements that have proliferated in the new economy. Although these alternatives depend on the standard job as a basis for comparison, many such forms have long existed in tandem with standard employment, and some predate the standard job. Among these segments of the workforce are on-call workers, day laborers, seasonal employees, and migrant workers, all of whom experience sporadic or intermittent episodes of paid work.<sup>17</sup> In many ways, these long-standing arrangements exemplify the instability associated with contingency. The notion of contingent work, however, is broader and more inclusive.

Common definitions of contingent work also encompass temporary arrangements, including short-term assignments mediated by staffing agencies or contracting companies.<sup>18</sup> These relatively recent forms of employment are similar in that they are both triangular—that is, an intermediary in the labor market and its client firm divide responsibility for hiring employees and overseeing their work. Broader definitions of *contingent work* add part-time work to the mix, especially when a worker would prefer or is seeking a full-time job.<sup>19</sup> Still broader definitions include all part-time workers as well as those who work independently on contract and consider themselves self-employed. Defined this broadly, *contingent work* is synonymous with an array of nonstandard work arrangements.

These differing definitions underlie a debate over the number of contingent workers in the United States. Addressing the perception of a developing problem, the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1995, began collecting data to document the size and scope of the contingent workforce and then conducted several more counts in alternating years.<sup>20</sup> Questions added to the Current Population Survey (CPS) ask workers about their formal work arrangement; the expected duration of their current jobs; and various related aspects of employment, including earnings, benefits, and union

membership.<sup>21</sup> Analyses of these successive surveys, using different definitions of contingency, have yielded widely divergent estimates, with different implications for employment policy and practice.

Applying a series of narrow definitions, analysts with the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) initially estimated the size of the contingent workforce at 2.2–4.9 percent of the total working population, a low range that captures only those respondents who expected their current employment to end within a year. In contrast, a separate team of researchers analyzed the same data but applied a much broader definition that generated a much larger figure: 29.4 percent of the workforce.<sup>22</sup> Over time, the two perspectives represented by these estimates have converged principally on one point: the size of the contingent workforce, however defined, has shown little change from the mid-1990s into the twenty-first century.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, later waves of data collection, spanning an economic cycle, verified that contingent work encompasses a stable segment of overall employment.

The debate over numbers and definitions also represents different views about the causes and consequences of contingent work. Analysts who apply a narrow definition suggest that these arrangements are evidence of expanded opportunities for certain segments of the workforce. Correlating contingent status with workers' social characteristics, they identify a disproportionate number of women, younger workers, and older workers near retirement. In these groups, they suggest, individuals might well be choosing arrangements that allow them to reduce their hours or to enter or exit the workforce with relative ease.<sup>24</sup> Other analysts, however, see in the same correlations evidence of limited opportunity, especially for populations that are already disadvantaged.<sup>25</sup> They identify patterns of lower compensation, fewer employment benefits, and very low levels of union membership, and they see in the disproportionate numbers of women and racial minorities a pretext for ongoing economic inequality and social marginality. Most nonstandard work arrangements, they suggest, reinforce barriers to upward mobility and so constrain opportunity over time.

Unfortunately, the debate over numbers can obscure larger questions about the changing structures of employment and new sources of opportunity and constraint. The emergence of nonstandard work arrangements across industries, occupations, and sectors of the economy, taken together, represents a structural shift that has, in turn, shifted risk from institutions

to individuals and from employers to workers. In contrast to the relative security and regularity that much standard employment still provides, contingent status increases risk in multiple ways: greater uncertainty, fewer formal rights and legal protection, and greater individual responsibility for finding sources of work and remaining employable.<sup>26</sup> The erosion of internal labor markets and the formal regulation of the standard job occur along many dimensions.

The larger debate over contingent work, therefore, is about risk and opportunity. Questions of risk underlie the challenge to standard employment that contingency represents. The standard job and its legacy provide shelter from labor market risk by protecting workers from at least some of the uncertainty inherent in economic exchange. Social insurance and the system of rights associated with standard employment further provide protection from chance events that affect an individual's employability and labor market prospects. The standard employment relationship thus manages and distributes risk. Employers that provide standard jobs, even with the limited commitments that characterize work in the new economy, assume the risks of keeping a business sound and a workforce employed. By externalizing a segment of the workforce and limiting the terms of their commitment still further, employers shed elements of risk, which individual workers must then assume.

Researchers concerned with the consequences of increased risk for a segment of the workforce often characterize nonstandard work as "substandard" and equate contingent status with the proliferation of "bad" jobs.<sup>27</sup> For contract professionals, such reasoning suggests, contingent work represents a problem. Lack of commitment to long-term employment makes relations with clients uncertain. Selling their services in a sometimes volatile market becomes a constant imperative. The insecurity inherent in this unregulated system is evident in Emily's unease about her new employment status. Wondering whether contracting can be "dependable" over time, she too raises questions about the risks and consequences of contingency. At the same time, however, both Emily and Ben describe contracting as an opportunity made possible, as Ben explains, by "a fundamental change" in work relations that can also offer steady employment and professional challenge. How can we reconcile these two facets of experience?

Vicki Smith, a sociologist, offers a perspective that moves past the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" jobs and looks instead at the interplay

between risk and opportunity.<sup>28</sup> As employment relations have become unstable and careers unpredictable, she asserts, variation across settings and circumstances structures risk and opportunity differently. In the new economy, most workers face some degree of uncertainty and may take risks and assume responsibilities that were both inconceivable and unavailable several decades ago. Rather than a clear distinction between “good” jobs and unstable work arrangements, workers encounter a range of institutional contexts.

### Variation across the Contingent Workforce

The shifting dimensions of risk and opportunity point to variation across occupations, industries, and labor markets that employ contingent workers. Institutionalized differently, specific nonstandard arrangements present different labor market structures, industry practices, and occupational norms. Variation extends, as well, to the terms of the standard job. Although standard employment once provided clear—although by no means equal—opportunity structures for those situated within internal labor markets, it too has absorbed some of the risks of the new economy. Variation and volatility, experienced across the workforce, thus confront individuals with a new calculus for making choices.

Much of the analysis of nonstandard, contingent work has focused on lower-wage occupations and has identified conditions that offer multiple means of subordinating contingent workers. Clerical and industrial temps, for example, earn lower wages than their counterparts in standard jobs; forgo most benefits of standard employment; and contend with isolation, disrespect, and frequent readjustment to the changing demands of supervisors, coworkers, and staffing agency recruiters, who demand deference and control labor market access.<sup>29</sup> When a divided workforce encompasses a marginal segment of workers, these studies suggest, contingent status is a mechanism of subordination that augments individual risk and limits access to better opportunities.

Nonstandard work arrangements may also exacerbate race and gender inequalities. For example, case studies of clerical temps document discriminatory practices that might well be deemed illegal for workers who hold standard jobs.<sup>30</sup> Studies of part-time workers reveal a common assumption that part-time hours benefit women but justify lower wages.<sup>31</sup> Studies

of home-based contingent workers reveal similar assumptions that paid work performed at home is appropriate for women, whose low wages are secondary to family concerns.<sup>32</sup> Contingent status, together with accommodation of work and family, may thus provide a pretext for inequality, as family needs delimit a worker's options and drive individual choices.<sup>33</sup>

Across professional occupations, however, different opportunity structures offer a varying mix of risk and choice. For example, attorneys working through staffing agencies on temporary assignments report marginality in their profession as a whole but greater control over their time and choice of assignments than jobs in law firms typically allow.<sup>34</sup> Traveling nurses, who move from one locale to the next, similarly avoid the heavy workloads and mandatory overtime so often demanded of their counterparts on hospital staffs.<sup>35</sup> Unlike attorneys, however, traveling nurses also report ready access to standard jobs without loss of professional standing. In contrast, adjunct faculty members, working outside the tenured core of the internal labor market of academia, find their experience as teachers and researchers devalued and their options foreclosed.<sup>36</sup> Here contingent status marginalizes one segment of an occupation.

Despite evident variation, professional occupations tend to offer those with nonstandard work arrangements a greater measure of autonomy than other contingent workers exercise. Professional work is traditionally associated with a status that confers prestige.<sup>37</sup> Professionals possess expert knowledge, usually gained through formal education, an investment in human capital expected to pay off in relatively high incomes and positions of authority. Indeed, professionals employed in standard jobs lodged in internal labor markets do, in general, exercise more authority over their work than lower-level workers are allowed. Professionals are trusted workers.<sup>38</sup> They adhere to occupational standards that help to maintain their status. Professionalism thus includes adherence to principles of practice. It provides both a mechanism of control and a source of identity for professional practitioners.

### Studies of Contract Professionals

What, then, do we know about contract professionals? Which occupations constitute the workforce segment of these contingent workers? What norms and practices prevail on each side of the divide between standard and

nonstandard employment? Contract employment, by definition, is governed by short-term agreements, which typically last for a defined period of time or for the term of a project. Contracting usually means much mobility and frequent negotiation as individuals move from one project to the next. Professionals involved in artistic production—among them screenwriters, film editors, and sound and light technicians—have long worked through contract arrangements, in fluid skill-based labor markets, with teams that are assembled for the duration of a project and dissolved when the effort ends.<sup>39</sup> On contract, these workers apply their well-defined expertise and then move on, finding new projects through networks of colleagues, clients, and brokers of talent. Labor markets for artistic production thus resemble the structure of craft work before the industrial-era factory with its narrow jobs and institutionalized assembly line.<sup>40</sup>

Contract professionals in print media evidence some of the same patterns. For example, two groups of researchers analyzing self-employed freelancers in Britain, one focusing on translators and the other on copy editors and proofreaders, found emerging occupational groups of contractors working on a project-by-project basis. Most of these workers expressed overall satisfaction with their work arrangement, despite having been “pushed” into freelancing when their former employers downsized.<sup>41</sup> Both studies identified a preponderance of women among these contract workers, and both found many who considered their work arrangement a strategy for accommodating paid work with family responsibilities. Echoing debates about the contingent workforce in the United States, these studies document conditions in which social characteristics rationalize the contingent status of one segment of a labor market.

Contractors also encompass a segment of the technical professionals—engineers, computer experts, and technical writers—who, as Peter Meiksins and Peter Whalley (2002, 11) explain, “customize” their working time.<sup>42</sup> These researchers focus on experienced professionals, both women and men, who opted to limit their hours at work, either through contracting or through organization-based jobs defined as part-time. For these workers, standard employment had come to demand more of life than they were willing to give, and contingent status became a strategy for achieving more autonomy to control their daily schedules. Contractors in this study exercised enough leverage to select assignments that allowed them to limit their working time. Avoiding staffing agencies for finding work,

they relied instead on informal networks of colleagues and clients, together with professional associations that helped them establish connections. Despite their limited hours, these contract professionals navigated effectively within a system of employment that depends on informal social relations.

To date, Stephen R. Barley and Gideon Kunda have provided the most comprehensive analysis of contract work.<sup>43</sup> These researchers, too, studied technical professionals, identifying a broad swath of workers, from “gurus,” who develop and implement cutting-edge computer systems, to technical administrators, who maintain work stations and in-house networks. Their analysis thus offers a bird’s-eye view of an employment sector that is more a set of occupations requiring technical expertise than a single, unified body of knowledge and skills. Most of the technical professionals in this study contracted with staffing agencies, which not only identified sources of work but also brokered “deals” between contractors and clients (96). Here, too, contractors moved within a system of employment relations, but one in which a triangular arrangement, with a staffing agency as intermediary, had become the norm. Like the technical professionals studied by Meiksins and Whalley, these contractors exercised more negotiating leverage than most lower-wage contingent workers are able to exert. Market conditions, human capital, and experience in the market all mitigated some of the uncertainty and powerlessness found among clerical and industrial temps.

Barley and Kunda equate contracting with an “itinerant professionalism” (285), through which contractors apply their expertise for a series of clients and maintain up-to-date skills, usually understood as knowledge of the latest technical tools. Itinerant professionalism conceptualizes contract employment as a shift from organization to occupation. Whereas employees with standard jobs look first to their employing organizations as sources of social identity and connection, contractors look to their occupations. Whereas organizations depend on administrative measures—incentives, sanctions, rewards—to exert control over employees, contractors turn to the market, where reputations affect their long-term employability.

Barley and Kunda depict contractors as strategic actors seeking to negotiate the best deals while simultaneously managing a set of contradictions that pervade the experience of contracting: respect versus resentment, technical challenge versus routine work, high pay versus high exposure to the vagaries of market forces. These contradictions surface in contractors’