

The Economist



The future of work

There's an app for that

Freelance workers available at a moment's notice will reshape the nature of companies and the structure of careers

HANDY is creating a big business out of small jobs. The company finds its customers self-employed home-helpers available in the right place and at the right time. All the householder needs is a credit card and a phone equipped with Handy's app, and everything from spring cleaning to flat-pack-furniture assembly gets taken

care of by "service pros" who earn an average of \$18 an hour. The company, which provides its service in 29 of the biggest cities in the United States, as well as Toronto, Vancouver and six British cities, now has 5,000 workers on its books; it says most choose to work between five hours and 35 hours a week, and that the 20% doing most

earn \$2,500 a month. The company has 200 full-time employees. Founded in 2011, it has raised \$40m in venture capital.

Handy is one of a large number of startups built around systems which match jobs with independent contractors on the fly, and thus supply labour and services on demand.

Excerpts from “There’s an app for that” in *The Economist*, January 3, 2015

The Economist January 3, 2015

The young Turks

The Los Angeles-based Business Talent Group provides bosses on tap for companies that want to tackle a specific problem without adding another senior executive to the payroll: Fox Mobile Entertainment, an online-content provider, turned to it for a temporary creative director to produce a new line of products.

Creative companies add a twist to the model: they demand ideas, rather than labour and services, and give a prize or prizes only to the ones they find interesting. Innocentive has applied the prize idea to corporate R&D; it turns companies’ research needs into specific problems and pays for satisfactory solutions to them. will be.

Everyone’s a corporation

Megan Guse, a law graduate, says that the on-demand model allows her to combine a career as a lawyer with her taste for travel. “A lot of my friends that have gone the Big Law route have these stories about having to cancel weddings, vacations and miss family events. I can continue working while being in exotic places.” Flexibility is also valuable for elite workers who

want to wind down after decades of selling their soul to their companies. Jody Greenstone Miller, the founder of Business Talent Group, says that her company’s comparative advantage lies in rethinking corporate time: by breaking up work into projects, she can allow people to work for as long as they want.

A limited Utopia

One of Gilbert and Sullivan’s oddest operettas, “Utopia Limited—or the Flowers of Progress”, focuses on an exotic South Sea island which, under the influence of Victorian industrialism, sets about turning all the inhabitants into limited companies. It is rarely performed today, in part because the targets of its on-the-nose-in-1893 satire seem remote. But perhaps, after

a century in which companies were vast things, such a satire of corporate individualism is due for a revival or two. If so, the piece will be easier than ever to stage: if there are not already on-demand services that can provide Polynesian props, semi-retired set designers and down-on-their-luck tenors at the swipe of a screen, there soon will be.

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