

Need for Agile Workforce in the New Normal: Past, Present & Future

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This study examines the evolution of the new-age agile workforce, its probable antecedents, and possible consequences through a comprehensive review of literature. This is significant in the post-pandemic occupations giving birth to hybrid workplaces as a substantial workforce opts for remote working and freelancing work arrangements to provide a comprehensive solution to the evolving talent needs in the new normal. The Internet/platform companies extended great skill-based solutions to both the organizations and employees. It is observed that if such arrangements provide functionality to society in tough times, they can even be more successful in the new normal. The matching of organizational requirements, workforce expectations, and societal goals gives birth to the creation and expansion of new age skill-oriented agile workforce.

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Introduction

An agile workforce is the new terminology allotted to such employees who are practicing non-traditional alternative forms of employment in this digital era. These include various types of part-time workers, gig workers, freelancers, crowd workers and platform workers. They are referred to as agile talent as their prime characteristic is speed and flexibility (Younger & Smallwood, 2016). These kinds of work arrangements in which both the standard and non-standard employees work in an organization are generally referred to as hybrid workplaces. These types of scenarios push organizations to go digital for the majority of jobs and provide new kinds of opportunities for jobbers on online platforms. This has given birth to more and more varieties of non-standard employment with increasing flexibility in the job markets (Dasgupta, 2001).

When most of the skilled employees in the services sector are struggling to upkeep their careers by consistently practicing freelancing, the rise of a pandemic posed the potential to disrupt the jobbing markets in horrific ways wherein people not only lost income or work but dignity and hope also (Fine et al., 2020). A reputed consultancy has researched remote working during the pandemic and found half of their respondents belonging to HR leaders' group reporting that more than 81% of employees are performing remote working (Pattnaik & Jena, 2020; Gartner Inc Survey, 2020).

The need for analyzing all the work roles for the possibility of their transformation into non-standard employment is quite critical in the post-pandemic era. In spite of scaling reskilling in the organizations, various tech firms are striving hard to close the constantly upgrading tech-role vacancies (Anand & Pillai, 2017). Platforms come here for the rescue. More than 50% of these platform workers extend skilled services to the organizations like programming, digital marketing, business consulting, etc. and most of the jobs make these freelancers earn more than \$80,000 per annum (Ioannou, 2020). Freelancer.com reported the highest number of freelancers registered from India in 2017 only; which was even more than 20 percent of the total registered people then (Anand & Pillai, 2017). Digital tools like Zoom have facilitated flexibility in white-collar jobs and workplace experts speculate on the transformation of various white-collar jobs into temporary ones including that

of advertising and human resources (Berliner, 2020).

While looking at the transformation of jobs related to utility services in India during the pandemic, the most sought-after were the tutorial services for children, grocery delivery services, beauty services, infrastructure cleaning and maintenance services, personal driving services and IT services. Some of the biggest freelancing platforms which hit these targets include Urban Company for beauty and infrastructure maintenance, Vedantu for tutorial services, OLA & UBER for driving services, 'Amazon flex' & 'Amazonfresh' for goods delivery services, Zomato and Swiggy for food delivery services and freelancer, Upwork and Toptal for specialized IT services (Business Today, 2022).

Younger (2016) has urged strategic thinkers to classify the new age workforce into three categories viz. employees, non-employees, and freelancers wherein non-employees need many more sub-categories in the light of growing alternative and flexible arrangements that transform a traditional workplace into a hybrid one. An emerging sub-category in the 'non-employees' identified by Younger (2016) is *agile talent*. These are not-time or permanent employees but mostly do critical and strategic work for the organizations hiring them.

Materials & Methods

A narrative review of literature has been penned to describe the different milestones of this phenomenon along with

the important characteristics of the changing mindsets of employees overtime in it; over a period of two previous decades. Studies included were retrieved using the major keywords viz. multiple job holding (MJH), gig work, platform working, agile workforce and non-standard employments. The studies reviewed have been synthesized into a structured arrangement with three major milestones towards the emergence of the new age agile workforce including MJH, crowdsourcing, freelancing, and gig working practices along with a set of antecedents and possible consequences of each stakeholder involvement

The First Kind of Non-standard Employment

The first non-standard employment found in the available literature can be considered as part-time secondary jobs under the purview of multiple job holding (MJH). MJH is quite an old phenomenon in the jobbing history but the reasons and the dimensions of the circumstances in which it is practiced kept on changing with the transformations and dynamics in the jobbing fashions. Various definitions have described this phenomenon in different ways. Some have pointed towards the priority dimension while deciding about primary and secondary employments while others have described MJH as a situation where an individual maintains primary employment and engages in additional work for pay. Merriam-Webster's New World Dictionary (2007) defines MJH as a need arising out of financial stress. Shishko and Rostker (1976) defined the practice of holding a second

regular job in addition to one's main job." The Cambridge Dictionary (2010) defined it as "paid work that you do in addition to your normal job, especially without telling your employer."

These descriptions infer that it is done exclusively to supplement one's primary income and can be done with or without being in the notice of the primary employer. Traditionally it was done to earn extra and mostly the second jobs were performed at night after wrapping up the work in the day's job, that is why it was also termed as moonlighting. Ashwini *et al.* (2017) have stated that currently, MJH is more prevalent in the IT industry because of the work-life balance initiatives offered by the IT firms which include flexi-timings, work from home, and the like. This way multiple job holding emerged as the foundation of the evolution of new-age alternative work arrangements.

Psychographic Traits of MJH Workforce

Most of the researchers have argued about a positive association between MJH and the self-esteem of the workforce (Schuermann, 2014; Oakley *et al.*, 2008; Bolnick, 2003; Tweedy & Johnson, 1996). It means that people with high self-esteem go for multiple jobs in the same or diversified fields from their primary occupations. People with low self-esteem engage in

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subconscious behaviors that undermine their success, making them less likely to ask for or get promotions, raises and even jobs (Frankel, 2010). Professionals practicing MJH felt a great deal of personal pride and self-worth and demonstrated a passionate attitude toward their job (Hyun-Jun et al., 2018). Mid-level workers gained confidence from their secondary jobs because they were given more respect at the secondary position, which increased their self-esteem (Parham & Gordon, 2016).

In addition, self-efficacy and MJH have been studied for discovering their association but the outcomes of all studies are not unidirectional; anyone can be the cause of the other one (Sanders, 2016; Dorenbosch et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2014; Jamal et al., 1998). The proximal levels of all streams (self-efficacy, social normative beliefs, and attitudes) may seem like intrapersonal factors. However, these affective/cognitive factors that originate from interpersonal (social situation, social normative beliefs) or cultural environmental (cultural environmental, attitudes) factors are distinguished from those that originate from within the person (biology/personality, self-efficacy) (Zdikri bin et al., 2018). Professionals often replaced their stress, fatigue, and lack of respect with self-satisfaction and self-efficacy associated with work and money (Jack, 2017).

Traits of MJH Workforce

Most of the studies about the association between MJH and job satisfaction suggest that many employees go for

multi-jobbing for gaining job satisfaction in their secondary jobs (Ara & Akbar, 2016; Santangelo & Lester, 1985; Voydanoff & Kelly, 1984; Ronan et al., 1977). The investigations about the relationship between MJH and job performance are not much unidirectional and depend upon the individual's expectations from their primary and secondary jobs (Ara & Akbar, 2016; Majidian et al., 1993; Jamall, 1986; Wisniewski & Kleine, 1984). Some do it to improve their performance in primary jobs while others do it just for financial motives. Various examinations about turnover intentions (Sanders, 2016; Rispel et al., 2014; Jamal et al., 1998) except Sangwan (2014) suggest that multi-jobbers have a high tendency to turnover as they do multi-jobbing for seeking better opportunities.

Most of the reviews about organizational commitment towards MJH suggest that in the absence of proactive retention initiatives by the management, employees tend to do it ultimately compromising their organizational commitment (Ashwini et al., 2017; Khatri & Khushboo, 2014; Jamall, 1986). The available reviews of job strain suggest that MJH leads to job strain in the workforce (Saxon & Carabello, 2015; Fröhlich et al., 2013; Lewchuk et al., 2003). Most of the studies of financial strain with MJH infer that it is triggered by the financial hardships of the employees (Koomson et al., 2017; Ara & Akbar, 2016; Saxon & Carabello, 2015; Mulokozi, 2015; Lambert & Hogan, 2009; Böheim & Taylor, 2004; Kimmel & Conway, 2001). Lastly, all individuals want a good quality of life, so the asso-

ciation between MJH and quality of life suggests that in order to maintain a decent standard of living and maintaining a good quality of life, employees opt for MJH (Saxon & Carabello, 2015; Pal, 2014; Parham & Gordon, 2011).

Crowdsourcing

Earlier multi-jobbers used to do mostly blue-collar work in their secondary or tertiary jobs (as evident in the MJH studies) by physically commuting. But with the inception of digitalization, mushrooming of different online platforms has provided opportunities for multiple freelancing, gigs and crowd works. The first new-age crowdsourcing assignment as available in the literature can be considered as the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) used by Amazon and many other organizations, wherein the tasks are let out on the website, for completion from the specialized workforce, and biddings are invited. The best price worker is hired for that task and the terms and conditions are finalized.

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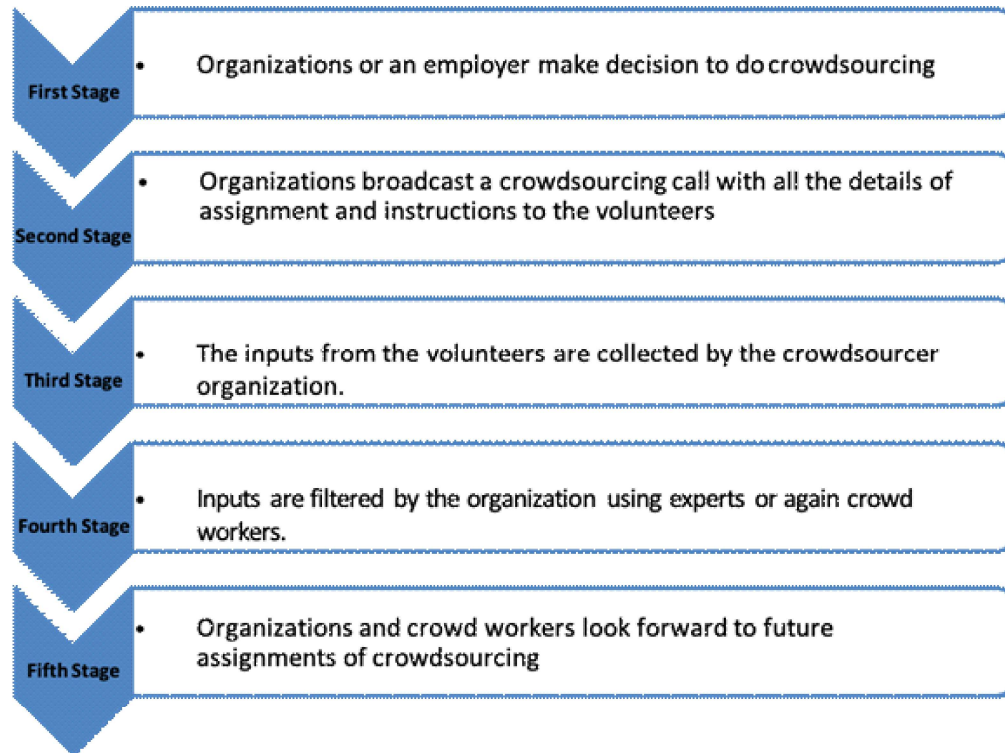
The jargon “crowdsourcing” is a compact combination of “*crowd*” and “*outsourcing*”, which was coined for the very first time in ‘The Rise of Crowdsourcing’ (Howe, 2006) in Wired Magazine. This article describes very simply what crowdsourcing is and how it

has been made possible by technological advances. But it was defined academically, as establishing a market where a taskmaster can submit batches of small tasks to be completed for a small fee by any worker who chooses to pick them up in exchange for a reward (Karger et al. 2011). Fig. 1 enlists the five stages of crowdsourcing.

Crowdsourcing of Blue-collar & Artistic Jobs

Highly educated workers are more likely to practice MJH and digitalization has promoted online forms of MJH, especially crowdsourcing work (Pouliakas, 2017). The serial MJH is exactly the crowd work assignments for different organizations; this is how the journalists build their identities in their field (Meyers, 2010). Mishra (2019) has highlighted the introduction of platform jobs by various crowdsourcing platforms. He has described various recent examples of the same as, the launch of ‘*Flex*’ by Amazon in June 2019 in India which permits gig workers to deliver goods as a part-time stint. In August 2019, Amazon launched a new project called ‘*AmazonFresh*’ online which offers two-hour grocery delivery as a side hustle. Swiggy also rolled out online; it is gig jobs of pick-up and drop services and also made an expansion of Swiggy stores. All these recent examples suggest the identification of most of the crowd/gig workers as multi-jobbers. The introduction of gig jobs through crowdsourcing platforms has enabled blue-collar workers perform tasks of delivering goods and pick-drop services and this scenario has made the

Fig. 1 Stages of Crowdsourcing



Source: Adapted from Wexler (2011)

Indian Government regulate the social security benefits of these blue-collar gig workers also (Mishra, 2019).

Crowdsourcing of White-collar Jobs

The work done in an online environment without the notice of the primary employer indicates the element of crowd work. This undeclared virtual work is indeed the synonym of MJH (Baumann & Klotz, 2017). Interaction between people and technology is the core explanation of crowdsourcing systems. These may be illustrated as a concerted cyberinfrastructure that can combine speckled resources, including both human

brainpower and device computational competencies (Zhai et al., 2011). The skill harnessing of internal members of an organization using crowdsourcing applications which intend to make use of their capabilities within a large company also comes under the purview of crowdsourcing (Jayakanthan & Sunderrajan, 2011). Also, when state-of-the-art algorithms are not able to solve problems, crowdsourcing of human intelligence jobs appears to be an effective solution (Lofi et al., 2012). All these studies reviewed here suggest a close interwoven association between MJH, crowdsourcing, freelancing and gig working in the current digital age and all these

Table 1 Prevalent International and Indian Crowdsourcing Platforms

Trending International Platforms				Trending Indian Platforms			
S No.	Name	Workers sourced	Tasks offered	S No	Platform name	Workers sourced	Tasks offered
1	Freelancer .com	All profession freelancers	IT, accounting, finance, legal and over 1000 categories	1	Urban Company	Mostly Blue-collar utility workers and beauty professionals	infrastructure repair, maintenance, servicing and personal care services
2	Toptal.com	IT freelancers	IT Specialized services	2	Meesho	IT savvy homemakers	Reselling & marketing
3	Upwork .com	White collar freelancers	IT Specialized services along with Data Science & analytics	3	Vedantu	Both part time and full time educators	Teaching, content development, sales
4	Amazon 's Mechanical Turk	Both clerical and intellectual	Data Cleansing, Entry or content creation and Human Intelligence tasks	4	freelancertohire.com	IT freelancers	IT Specialized services
5	guru.com	Both clerical and intellectual	IT, language, designing, administrative, marketing, legal etc	5	freelanceindia.com	IT freelancers	IT Specialized services
6	Uber	Blue Collar	Driving Services	6	worknhire.com	Both clerical and intellectual	IT, language, designing, administrative, marketing, legal Etc.
7	Airbnb	Owners of properties for hosting and earning from it	Leasing or renting short-term lodgings	7	youth4work.com	Both clerical and intellectual	Development, data entry, trainings & test series

Source: Compiled and developed by authors

terminologies are being used interchangeably in the available literature. Moving next to the consideration of the type of work available on these crowdsourcing platforms, reference may be made to Table 1.

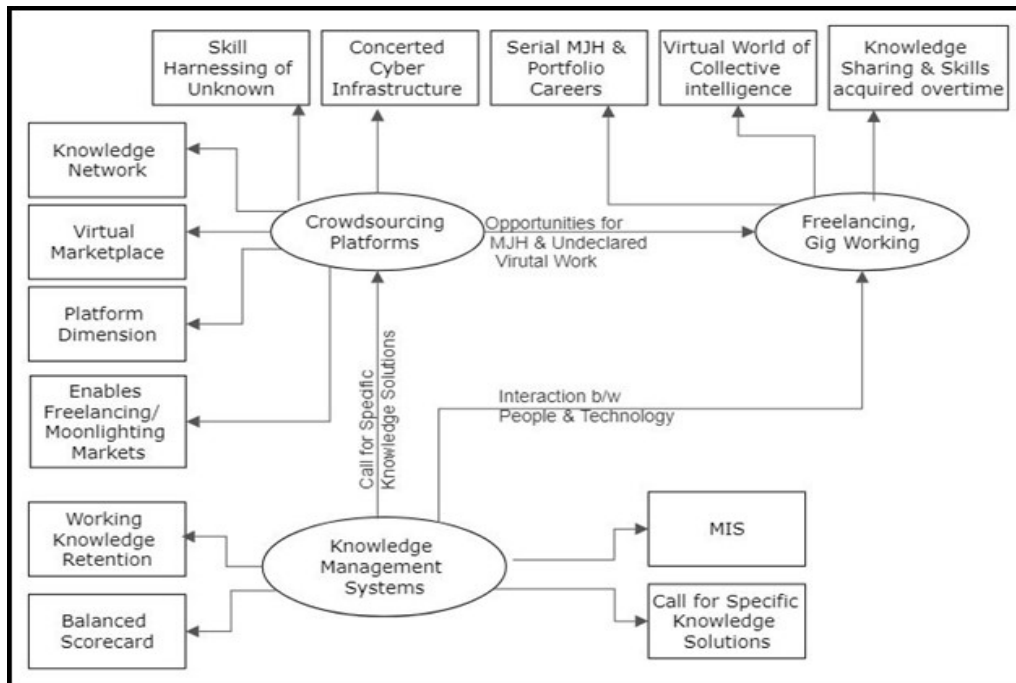
White-collar jobs are being exclusively crowdsourced and performed in the digital age with the help of platform companies.

The table clearly depicts that white-collar jobs are being exclusively crowdsourced and performed in the digital age with the help of platform companies.

Evolution

After reviewing the accessed literature, authors have extracted important dynamics with the help of which, the system of platform working has evolved and would continue to progress through the new age freelancing and gig working practices. These dynamics have been proposed and presented in a comprehensive flow diagram in Fig. 2. The call for specific knowledge solutions is very well dealt with the facilities extended by the crowdsourcing platforms using the wisdom of the unknown and specialized crowd workforce (Callaghan, 2016; Ghezzi et al., 2018).

Fig. 2 Model of Dynamics in Freelancing and Gig Working Platform Systems



Source: Developed by authors.

Note: 'MIS' denotes Management information systems, 'b/w' denotes between and 'MJH' denotes multiple job holding

Thus, Fig. 2 depicts that these platforms enable exclusive freelancing, crowd working, platform working and gig working by the millennials or generation Y specifically (Pouliakas, 2017). Ultimately when workforce acquires significant skills and knowledge with a variety of experiences through platform working, they build their portfolio careers and become an integrated part of the virtual knowledge network at large (Gold & Fraser, 2002; Cooper, 2005)

Agile Talent for Hybrid Workplaces

Wikipedia can be considered as the first example of public participatory online crowdsourcing application where the crowd workers can update or edit the data on the website as per their expertise and convenience. This way crowdsourcing has been characterized as a distributed problem solving and invention model (Howe, 2008).

Apart from IT services, various other business players have moved into crowdsourcing of non-standard employees and the pandemic has boosted the need of such online services like virtual tutoring, infrastructure maintenance, medical advising, and beauty & wellness. With the changing needs and desires of generation Y in the modern workforce, retiring baby boomers and all the differently motivated millennials who want more autonomy and active participation in the management without being in any specific category of employees, the challenges for HRM to create and manage hybrid workplaces have been greater (Gochman & Storfer, 2014).

Increasingly, strategic and critical roles are also being outsourced to alternative forms of employment. That is why, all these non-standard gigsters or freelancers performing vital roles in the organizations are referred to as *agile talent* as their prime characteristic is speed and flexibility (Younger & Smallwood, 2016). Earlier non-standard employments were generally christened as part-time jobs but with the explosion of crowd work platforms, more and more employees are going for agile projects rather than full-time employment and HR leaders forecast that until the end of the next decade, agile talent would account for almost half of the staff of the organizations in Europe, Silicon Valley, and other global technological hubs (Younger, 2016).

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Denning (2018) asserts the significance of deploying agile talent for the development of contemporary hybrid organizations and managing agile talent through the new agile-lite HR practices globally. The four key elements in managing this agile talent proposed here include designing the organizations for agility, thinking of platforms instead of structures for developing internal market governing the talent deployment, making work meaningful, and continual redesign of organizations for boosting the sense

of organizational culture in the workforce. The development, implementation, integration, and practice of contemporary workforce planning are critical for having a prepared, ready, and agile workforce in the new hybrid workplaces (Martin, 2015).

It is evident from the literature that agile roles/jobs and teams are a part of

every multinational organization in the current scenario. With all these inputs accumulated from the literature, we propose a few very critical organizational, workforce, and societal drivers responsible for the development of an agile talent pool in contemporary hybrid organizations and freelancers' marketplaces and articulate them in Table 2. This table also contains the consequences of each of the drivers.

Table 2 Antecedents & Consequences of Deploying Agile Workforce

A ORGANIZATIONAL ANTECEDENTS	Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	CONSEQUENCES											
Want convenient access to difficult technical or functional expertise		Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Improved quality										
Demand of speed & flexibility in deliverables			Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Reduced turnaround time									
Demand of innovation				Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Continual process & performance improvement								
Demand of cost efficiency					Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Reduced costs							
						Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results							
B WORKFORCE RELATED ANTECEDENTS							Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	CONSEQUENCES					
Desire of lifelong learning and innovations by generation Y								Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Self-motivated training & development				
Desire of productivity with autonomy									Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Continual improvement			
Desire of role satisfaction and self esteem										Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Improved performance		
Desire of speed & flexibility in deliverables											Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	Reduced turnaround time	
												Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results	
C SOCIETAL ANTECEDENTS													Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results
Optimum utilization of resources for sustainable development	Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results												
Skill based employments		Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results											
Work-life balance and quality of life			Antecedents are facilitated by "Freelancing Platforms" to achieve consequent results										

Source: Developed by the Authors

Looking at Table 2, many types of antecedents can be seen which when facilitated by the freelancing platforms help the organizations, employees, and society achieve the results described in the consequences. First is the organizational one, they want convenient access to difficult technical and functional expertise with the demand of speed, flexibility, continual innovations, and reducing costs to the company in all processes. Second, employees are desirous of life-long learnings and innovations, productivity with autonomy and a greater sense of role satisfaction and meaningful work which they perform, and of course speed and flexibility in their deliverables. Moving to the third stakeholder, society is continually evolving with increasing intellect about workplace norms and regulations, and in line with the same, society strives for optimum utilization of resources for sustainable development, skill-based employment, and work-life balance to ultimately aim for socially responsible citizens, skill-based pay parity and finally a wholesome and holistic way of living life.

Conclusions

The rise of platforms and changing workplace expectations demanding speed and flexibility by both the millennial workforce and consumers has pushed the traditional jobs towards new-age non-standard employment and the much-anticipated hybrid workplaces. The persons performing these on-demand jobs are referred to as agile talent. They can be part-time workers, gig workers or freelancers and are characterized by

speed and flexibility in their jobs, sometimes networking also for cross-functional autonomous projects. This study reviewed the various phases in the evolution of this agile talent starting from the very first type of non-standard employment i.e., multiple job holding or engagement in part-time jobs. Further, it is concluded that the rise of freelancing is also very much prevalent in Indian jobbing fashion hiring all types of technical, functional, and routine agile talent. Finally, a comprehensive framework of antecedents and their possible consequences of deploying the agile workforce in organizations have been proposed to extend the opportunity of future research in this direction.

Future investigations can be conducted to empirically analyze the relationships of the antecedents and consequences of the three stakeholders involved in the deployment of agile workforce in organizations. Moreover, psychographics and workplace traits of agile workforce can be studied empirically which can aid the organizations in appropriate hiring and formulation of effective talent management policies.

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