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## Freelancing expertise: contract professionals in the new economy

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*Freelancing Expertise: Contract Professionals in the New Economy*, by Debra Osnowitz. ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 2010, 260pp., ISBN 978-008014-7656-3, £16.50, paper.

By John Storey, The Open University

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This book draws on interviews with 68 contract professionals to reveal insights into their work and their individual coping strategies. Using these accounts it goes on to interrogate key aspects of the new economy. The workers in the study are drawn from two occupational groups: computer programmers/software engineers and writers/editors. But the import of the analysis extends well beyond these particular segments of the labour market because, as the author notes, ‘All workers, even those who remain firmly lodged in standard jobs, now confront, in some form, the unpredictability of a volatile economy’ (p. 191). One implication is the need for resilience and adaptability in the face of change and this is a study of how these workers, who are especially exposed to that volatility and uncertainty, have responded to the challenge.

Osnowitz uses the specifics of these workers’ experiences and responses to raise a wide range of interesting dimensions of the changing nature of work more generally. These include aspects of unequal power relations, the possibility of increased regulation, the potential for setting standards, and the implications of globalisation for the structuring of work opportunities. The ways in which the respondents talk about their work and their lives and the ways in which they navigate their way through a series of challenges and opportunities are used as the basis for a set of wider interpretations about the nature of work (including standard, full-time employment) in the emergent global economy.

The interviews (thirty four from each of the two professional groups) were conducted mainly in the Northeast of the United States though part of the sample was also drawn from the West Coast and a smattering from other territories. No regional differences in the accounts were discernible. The sample began with a handful of personal contacts; onward referrals allowed for a snowball sampling method. An additional twelve informants reflected the perspective of those who recruited, engaged and managed contractors. A degree of observation was used to supplement the predominantly one-to-one interviewing methodology. The research was conducted as part of the author’s doctoral studies.

Osnowitz notes that many of the debates on topics relevant to her theme stretch back over an extended time period. She also points out that, depending on how ‘contingent work’ is defined, its incidence has been calculated as anywhere between 4% of the US workforce to nearly 30%. Her analysis is systematic, thorough and balanced. She is alert to the interpretations which cast contingent work as equivalent to ‘bad work’ alongside contrasting interpretations which have seen it as a path to liberation and self-determination. In this book, Osnowitz adheres to neither camp: she systematically assesses the multifarious risks and opportunities through a careful analysis of the data yielded by her informants. She notes that her sample is not representative of the wider span of contingent workers many of whom experience far more marginal and more

disadvantaged conditions than her two groups of experts who are, in some instances, able to negotiate terms more favourable than those achieved by full time, standard employees. The cohort is comprised mainly of people in their 40s and 50s who have already experienced organisational employment and who have in many of the cases positively opted for freelance working.

The book examines the nature of freelance work from a number of angles. The relative advantages and disadvantages and the calculus made by the freelancers are explored; the way in which they have to display their expertise (the 'performance') is also revealed; their experience of marginalisation when working for and on the premises of employing organizations is also revealed; their utilisation of networks and the way they manage their (non-organizational) careers is assessed. The book widens its lens with a reconsideration of the implications of contracting for the nature of work relations. This last takes-in a consideration of the potential for 'collective advocacy' of some kind (for example, professionalization and trade unionism are considered) in order to deal with situations where client organizations breach expectations and contracts and informal understandings. The discussion in this part of the book then extends into a weighing of the scope for the introduction of standards and regulations. The author notes that freelancers are themselves highly ambivalent about such ideas and, in truth, the tentative proposals remain rather abstract.

The book concludes with a wider discussion of the nature of the 'new economy'. This is acknowledged to be highly multifaceted with contract professional work constituting just one mode. Yet, it is argued to be a mode which merits closer attention by policy makers because it is relatively neglected in legal and policy-making activity. This non-standard form of work is deemed by the author to be different but not necessarily subordinate. The essential message is a plea for a reconsideration of the institutions of employment relations in order to take full account of the contemporary reality of contractual diversity.

The research and its findings broadly reflect similar work in the UK among similar occupational groups. As such, the book is not groundbreaking but, its undoubted strengths are to be found in the imaginative, open-minded and thorough-going nature of the assessments made. There is no overarching theoretical stance but there is an underlying, values-driven, commitment to fairness and equity in the landscape of diverse forms of work.

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