

# Toward a sustainable career perspective on contingent work: a critical review and a research agenda

Sustainable  
career perspec-  
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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide a synthesis of the contingent work field and to advocate a sustainable career perspective on contingent work.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Adopting a broader review approach allowed to synthesize the contingent work literature across contingent work types (temporary agency work, gig work and freelance work) and develop a sustainable career perspective on contingent work. The authors searched for empirical, conceptual and review articles published from 2008 to December 2021. In total, the authors included 208 articles.

**Findings** – The authors advocate a sustainable career perspective that allows for organizing and synthesizing the fragmented contingent work literature. Adopting a sustainable career perspective enables to study contingent work from a dynamic perspective transcending one single organization.

**Originality/value** – The field is suffering from fragmentation and most importantly from an oversight of how contingent work experiences play a role in a persons' career. This paper addresses this problem by adopting a sustainable career perspective on contingent work.

**Keywords** Contingent work, Alternative work arrangements, Nonstandard work, Gig work, Temporary work, Temporary agency work, Freelance work, Career, Sustainable career

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

Contingent work (i.e. workers who have short-term contracts with organizations; [Katz and Krueger, 2019](#)) is a defining characteristic of today's labor markets. To illustrate, in Europe in 2020, 10.5% of workers were contingent ([Eurostat, 2021](#)). Similarly, 10% of all workers in the United States are contingent workers ([US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020](#)).

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Moreover, the context in which contingent workers operate is changing (e.g. [Ashford et al., 2018](#)). For example, labor market intermediaries (LMIs), which connect contingent workers to work available in the labor market ([Bonet et al., 2013](#)), are a new, rapidly emerging type of organization. The most familiar LMIs are online platforms in the gig economy, such as Uber or Upwork, which are replacing the human resource (HR) function in the world of work outside traditional employment relationships ([Duggan et al., 2020](#); [Meijerink and Keegan, 2019](#)). Taken together, these changes highlight that the contingent work phenomenon has become a prevailing characteristic of today's labor markets ([De Cuyper et al., 2011](#)) and has significantly increased in complexity with the introduction of LMIs and the gig economy.

The societal prevalence and increasing complexity of the contingent work phenomenon have coevolved with a proliferation of research on how contingent work influences people's work experiences. Several systematic reviews and conceptual papers have been published examining, for example, the psychological impact of short-term contracts ([Ashford et al., 2007](#); [Connelly and Gallagher, 2004](#); [De Cuyper et al., 2008, 2011](#); [Feldman, 2006](#)) and the influence of technology on the contingent work experience ([Jabagi et al., 2019](#); [Meijerink and Keegan, 2019](#)). However, the steep increase in research has not led to a more integrated understanding of the phenomenon because research is conducted in different research streams that are barely connected (cf. [Ashford et al., 2007](#); [Burke and Van Stel, 2011](#)). Since those different streams all tend to use their own terminologies and concepts, we argue that the increase in research has led to less rather than more conceptual clarity and consistency. Hence, a synthesis of those research streams could further stimulate the development of knowledge on contingent work and help researchers to position their work in current (fragmented) debates in the literature.

The circulation of different terms in the literature—typically coined within different disciplines—to denote contingent work illustrates the fragmentation of the literature. For example, *nonstandard work* (i.e. sociology), *atypical work* (i.e. OB) and *alternative work arrangements* (i.e. OB and HRM) are used interchangeably as general denotations for contingent work ([Kalleberg, 2000](#); [Selenko et al., 2018](#)). Contrary to these more generic terms, different terms are used for contingent work in specific work contexts. [Cappelli and Keller's \(2013\)](#) influential classification illustrates this, as it is “informed by and reflects the legal distinction[s]” ([Cappelli and Keller, 2013, p. 575](#)). Drawing on [Cappelli and Keller](#), as well as [Kuhn and Maleki \(2017\)](#), researchers distinguish temporary workers, agency workers, freelancers (also referred to as independent professionals, contractors, solopreneurs or self-employed workers, gig workers, platform, or on-demand workers), on-call workers and seasonal workers as distinct contingent worker types. Overall, there is considerable conceptual complexity and inconsistency in the area of contingent work.

In this paper, we use contingent work as a generic term for flexible work as contingent work is still the most commonly used term, particularly among organizational behavior (OB) and human resource management (HRM) scholars ([Connelly and Gallagher, 2004](#)). However, we acknowledge the consensus is continuously shifting in this rapidly advancing field. For example, in their recent article, [Caza et al. \(2022\)](#) proposed using gig work, which is typically characterized as online platform-mediated work, as a new umbrella term for contingent work. Given that contingent work is still the most common umbrella term at the time of writing this article, we use this term. In addition, we refer to gig work as a collection of activities involving microtasks mediated by an online platform (see also [Cropanzano et al., 2022](#)).

Besides a lack of interdisciplinary connections and consistency, another noteworthy observation is that most of the literature has focused on contingent workers' work experience during their work at one organization (e.g. [Allen, 2011](#); [Guest et al., 2010](#)). Given the increased prevalence of LMIs that connect contingent workers to multiple organizations over time, the dominant focus on studying one single organization is problematic. This focus has

limitations because it ignores contingent workers' experiences across organizations and between the phases of employment. Contingent workers operate "in-between" spaces, betwixt and between work roles, organizations and career paths" (Ashford *et al.*, 2018, p. 25). Therefore, we propose a career perspective that does justice to the complex reality of contingent work. Arthur *et al.* (1989, p. 8) defined a career as "the unfolding sequence of a person's work experiences over time." Hence, a career perspective enables a temporal, personal and contextual understanding of their needs. In addition, practitioners and policymakers increasingly discuss how to support contingent workers throughout their *careers* in the new world of work (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016); thus, we must generate a more thorough understanding of their careers.

To address this problem, we advocate a sustainable career perspective (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) that allows for synthesizing the contingent work literature. We use the sustainable career lens to analyze and critically review the fragmented contingent work literature. Van der Heijden and De Vos (2015) defined sustainable careers as "sequences of career experiences reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, thereby crossing several social spaces, characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual" (p. 7). De Vos *et al.* (2020) argue that three dimensions are central to analyzing career sustainability: *person, context and time*. Applied to contingent work, the person dimension looks at characteristics of the contingent worker (e.g. perceptions, agency) that influence the work experience; the context dimension highlights the situational factors (e.g. organization, sector) at play in the contingent worker's work experience; and the time dimension highlights changes over time (e.g. shocks, transitions) that shape contingent workers' career experiences (cf. De Vos *et al.*, 2020). These three dimensions actively interact with each other to shape career sustainability, characterized by the indicators of happiness, health and productivity across the lifespan. For example, specific competencies or behaviors may be more or less effective in safeguarding one's career sustainability in different organizations and countries (i.e. context) and in various life and career stages (i.e. time).

In all, the main contribution of this article is therefore to propose a career perspective on contingent work research based on a sustainable career perspective (De Vos *et al.*, 2020), which is well-suited to move the field forward. This lens enables us to organize the contingent work literature and offer an integrative framework of contingent work by focusing on contingent workers' career experiences (Baruch and Sullivan, 2022; De Cuyper *et al.*, 2011) instead of describing only experiences in one organization, based on the type of contingent work performed (cf. Cappelli and Keller, 2013; Guest *et al.*, 2010; Van den Tooren and de Jong, 2014). Therefore, this career perspective presents an overview of patterns in contingent work research, as well as identifies opportunities for future research on sustainable careers of contingent workers. This helps both contingent work and career researchers to further theorize on the interplays between person, context and time (Ancona *et al.*, 2001) in contingent workers' careers as well as developing practical implications for supporting contingent workers' career pathways.

## Method

We deliberately chose a broader review approach that allowed us to critically review the fragmented contingent work literature (Brawley, 2017). In particular, we searched for terms referring to contingent work (e.g. contingent work, alternative work arrangements, temporary work, flexible employment, gig work and nonstandard work). Next to adopting these umbrella terms in our search strategy, we also searched for articles dealing with one specific type of contingent worker such as freelancer, independent professional, independent contractor, agency worker, on-call worker or gig worker. Specifically, based on the frequency of publications on these topics until 2008 (see details about this year below), we identified the following scholarly disciplines as the most relevant to our review: applied psychology

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(e.g. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*), management (e.g. *Human Resource Management Journal*), sociology (e.g. *Work, Employment and Society*) and entrepreneurship (e.g. *Small Business Economics*). Our inclusion criterion was that an article's central theme should deal with the experiences of contingent workers. In 2008, the last review article appeared that extensively synthesized empirical studies across contingent workers and their attitudes and behaviors (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008). To ensure we captured the relevant developments in this fragmented field, we searched for empirical, conceptual and review articles published from 2008 to December 2021. In total, we included 208 articles. Although we are confident that our search strategy resulted in articles that represent the fragmented field of contingent work, we by no means claim to be exhaustive in the articles we include. The aim of our study is not to systematically review the existing body of literature, but to critically review the patterns in the literature and provide a career perspective that can help organize the fragmented literature and guide future research endeavors. Full details about our 208 included articles can be found in the online [supplementary material](#).

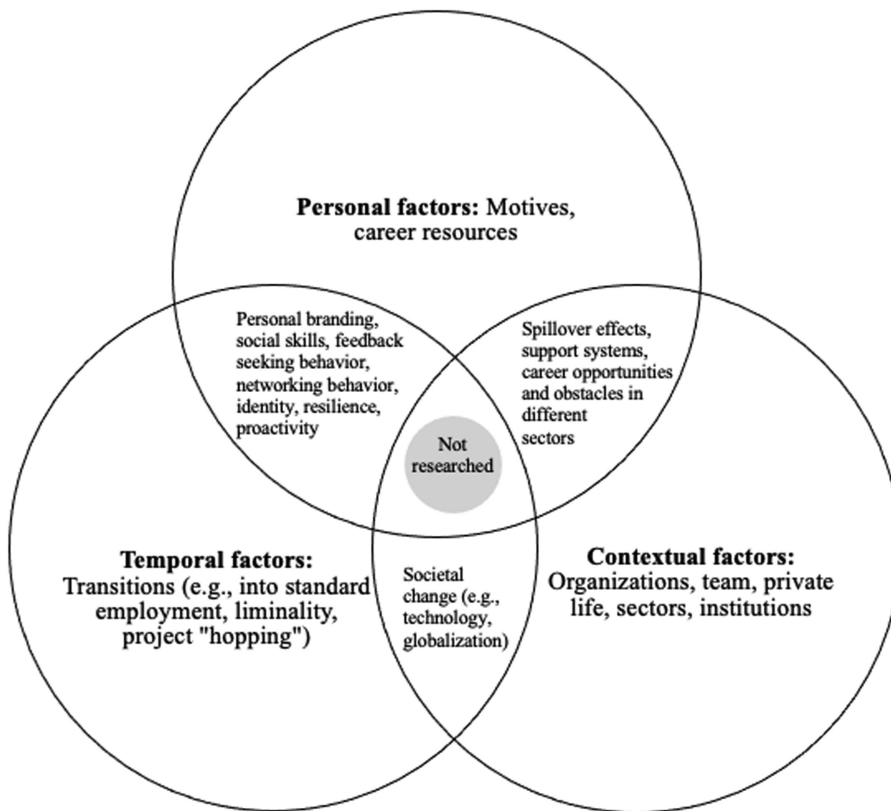
### **Applying a sustainable career perspective to reorganize the contingent work literature**

We organize the contingent work literature based on the sustainable career framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). This framework is valuable for several reasons. First, the contingent work literature is fragmented within and across multiple disciplines, which all tend to use their own terminologies and concepts. This issue makes the comparability of these literatures difficult, hence hindering the scholarly development in the field. Second, existing research on contingent work has over-emphasized studying (cross-sectional) snapshots of contingent work experiences, even though these experiences all occur as a part of these workers' career paths. These two problems can be solved by adopting a sustainable career perspective to analyze and organize the contingent work literature because it creates a common language that allows scholars from different disciplines to share their insights with each other. For example, psychologists have primarily studied individual experiences of contingent work, whereas sociologists have prioritized how their work context makes them a precarious group. Analyzed from a sustainable career perspective, this allows psychologists and sociologists to study how the person and their context may interact to shape contingent workers' career experiences. Second, temporal processes are inherent to a sustainable career perspective, thus allowing scholars to analyze contingent work experiences across people's working lives. Such a perspective can provide more insight into the key antecedents, mechanisms and boundary conditions impacting contingent workers' careers. In the next section, we organize the literature along the three dimensions of the sustainable career framework: person, context and time and detect patterns in the current body of literature on contingent work. Note that when coding the articles, they could be coded into multiple dimensions. For example, if a study included both individual and contextual factors, this article would be relevant for both dimensions. See [Figure 1](#) for an overview.

#### *Person dimension: individual as an agent*

The person dimension reflects the role of individual career actors as the primary agents responsible for their career sustainability. Organizing the contingent work literature within the person dimension, we recognize two different streams that have evolved separately: (1) a well-established literature regarding personal motives to engage in contingent work and (2) a nascent literature regarding contingent workers' career resources.

We found that a literature stream has evolved around motives to engage in contingent work (cf. Bernhard-Oettel *et al.*, 2008; Sobral *et al.*, 2019). Important motives for engaging in



**Figure 1.**  
Topical overview of  
existing contingent  
work research  
organized according to  
the sustainable career

contingent work – often referred to as push/pull factors – can be traced back to being voluntary or involuntary in the flexible contract situation (Keith *et al.*, 2019; Lopes and Chambel, 2017; Sobral *et al.*, 2019). Motives are complex due to several push (e.g. increased autonomy regarding when and where to work, higher earnings) and pull (e.g. having no choice, use it as a stepping stone to attain secure employment) factors (Sobral *et al.*, 2019). Studies show that when workers are pushed into contingent work, it leads to negative outcomes, such as decreased job satisfaction and well-being (Lopes and Chambel, 2017). These findings show that pushed contingent workers are at risk in the labor market.

The second literature stream focuses on career resources. The fact that contingent workers need to maintain their workstream constantly because of their short-term work relationships creates the need to develop resources to help them navigate their careers. Specifically, *career resources* are factors that enable an individual to be resilient and in control of their career (cf. Hirschi, 2012). For example, career competencies and career adaptability are necessary career resources that constitute a contingent worker's career potential. *Career competencies* are knowledge, skills and abilities essential for career development (Akkermans *et al.*, 2013), and *career adaptability* is defined as a psychological resource to cope with uncontrollable external events, such as transitions (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012). Several studies on contingent work have, often implicitly, studied such career resources. For example, social skills (Galais and Moser, 2018) and feedback-seeking behavior (Lapalme *et al.*, 2017)

among agency workers were positively related to attaining permanent employment. Self-profiling and career control among agency workers were positively related to informal learning (Preenen *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, freelancers' networking behavior related positively to career success (Jacobs *et al.*, 2019; Van den Born and van Witteloostuijn, 2013). Personal branding can also be a tool for freelancers to acquire future projects and nurture the entrepreneurial self (Gandini, 2016; Sutherland *et al.*, 2020; Vallas and Christin, 2018). In addition, an entrepreneurial orientation helps gig workers experience meaningful work (Nemkova *et al.*, 2019). Finally, resilience, internal locus of control, emotional stability, self-efficacy and capabilities such as cognitive flexibility and learning agility were introduced by Ashford *et al.* (2018) and McKeown and Pichault (2020) as essential resources for gig workers and freelancers.

Taken together, contingent work research at the individual level has predominately focused on personal motives and, to a lesser extent, on contingent workers' career resources (albeit implicitly). Such findings align with sustainable career thinking in the sense that contingent workers' personal characteristics, such as motivation and career resources, are at the core of their career sustainability. Yet, the finding that pushed contingent workers are in a risk group shows that some careers of contingent workers are inherently at risk for featuring long-term career unsustainability when workers lack career resources (Bal *et al.*, 2020; Kost *et al.*, 2020).

#### *Context dimension: structural factors in contingent workers' careers*

In the career literature, several scholars have argued that context is essential for understanding career experiences because careers do not evolve in a vacuum (e.g. Inkson *et al.*, 2012). Contingent workers are, by definition, in a volatile environment characterized by the absence of a stable organizational membership over time (Caza *et al.*, 2022) – making it imperative for researchers to capture contextual insights into their careers. The context dimension of the career sustainability paradigm highlights various contextual layers as important structural factors in the work environment, such as the organizational, group, private life, occupational sector and institutional levels (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, these different contextual layers are essential because they are crucial elements that contribute to distinct contingent worker career experiences.

One commonality for all contingent workers is that they operate in a context beyond organizational boundaries (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2017). Contingent workers either have two employers simultaneously (e.g. agency workers and on-call workers), or they work with multiple clients and platforms simultaneously (e.g. freelancers and gig workers). Thus, it is crucial to look beyond organizational boundaries to investigate (1) how complex relations encompassing multiple organizations and technological advancement supersede the traditional organizational level and (2) how various levels, such as group, private life, occupational sector and institutional, influence contingent workers' career experiences. Next, we organize contingent work research according to the different layers of context discussed in sustainable career research.

Synthesizing the contingent work literature at the organizational level, we recognize several studies that have contributed to explaining unique organizational contextual factors that influence contingent workers' career experiences. To illustrate the influence of multiple organizations, we found studies focusing on agency workers that examined the triangular relationship between client organization, agency organization and agency workers. For instance, studies investigated HRM practice outcomes such as commitment, psychological contract fulfillment, perceived organizational support, organizational citizenship behaviors and counterproductive workplace behaviors by applying them to the triangular relationship (Connelly *et al.*, 2011; Galais and Moser, 2009; Giunchi *et al.*, 2015). These studies found that

both the client and agency organizations are critical contextual factors that influence agency worker career experiences. Hence, contingent workers' careers are influenced by the multiple work relations in which they are embedded.

We found additional studies regarding the influence of organizational contextual factors in the literature on gig work. For example, several studies outline how organizational HRM practices are perceived differently by gig workers, which, in turn, are likely to shape their work experiences (Connelly *et al.*, 2021; Jabagi *et al.*, 2019; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019). Organizational HRM practices are important in shaping the general "employment relationship" (Van De Voorde *et al.*, 2012). However, conceptualizing organizational HRM practices in work relationships that include at least three parties – the gig worker, requesters/clients and the online platform provider – is complex in the gig economy. For instance, performance systems are replaced by online, platform-based client rating systems (Duggan *et al.*, 2020; Meijerink and Keegan, 2019), whereby ratings can be perceived differently depending on the design of the rating system. While positive feedback via high ratings is likely to increase the perceived competence of a gig worker, algorithmic punishments are likely to have adverse effects on the gig worker's career experiences (Jabagi *et al.*, 2019; Nemkova *et al.*, 2019).

Across much of the gig economy, algorithmic management is used to control workers. It decreases gig workers' independence on platforms and constrains horizontal and vertical transitions (Rosenblat and Stark, 2016; Wood *et al.*, 2019). Such work unleashes the disruptive role of technology in contingent work relations (Brawley and Pury, 2016). Workers are managed on platforms via algorithms resulting in a reconfiguration of the traditional employment relationship (Duggan *et al.*, 2020; Kellogg *et al.*, 2020). This reconfiguration of the traditional employment relationship leads to a diffusion of responsibilities at the platforms and clients regarding who is in charge to support gig workers' careers (Kost *et al.*, 2020; Rahman and Valentine, 2021). The lacking identification of an employer for gig workers (Stewart and Stanford, 2017) shows the importance of applying a network view consisting of the platforms, clients/customers and gig workers' themselves to understand career development in the gig economy.

Although the organizational level has been studied extensively in the contingent work area, research on the group-, private life-, occupational sector- and institutional levels is less developed. Specifically, contingent work research has tried to understand contingent workers' career experiences by directly integrating the team and private life dynamics (i.e. by incorporating specific concepts on that level in study designs). Yet, the institutional and occupational sector levels have received less scholarly attention or were merely indirectly addressed (i.e. by not integrating explicit concepts on that level in study designs).

As a consequence of contingent workers' working beyond organizational boundaries, dynamics on the group level can unfold in different ways. Contingent workers can be prone to be excluded from their team by their current "employer" or client (McKeown and Pichault, 2020). For instance, contingent workers working in blended teams consisting of contingent workers and traditional workers receive little advice and develop few friendship networks within the team. Furthermore, they might be stigmatized (Boyce *et al.*, 2007; Wilkin *et al.*, 2018). This indicates that contingent workers likely face unique group-related obstacles in their career. In contrast with contingent workers working in teams, others working alone have been referred to as micro-entrepreneurs. Specifically, gig workers primarily work alone without any team (Friedman, 2014). Building connections, often facilitated through internet-based communities, with peers who both engage in contingent work and work alone, can create supportive environments which decrease anxiety and foster productivity and creativity (Petriglieri *et al.*, 2019; Schwartz, 2018). To illustrate, coworking spaces can function as a modern social environment to meet like-minded people and foster social support among contingent workers (Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2016). Further, Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) discuss active solidarity and the emergence of collective action among gig workers

working on food delivery platforms. In addition, [Gegenhuber et al. \(2021\)](#) found a range of voice mechanisms for gig workers on other platforms. These potential stigmatizations and support systems show that group dynamics can lead to upward and downward cycles in contingent workers' careers.

Organizing the studies on the private life level, we note that this level of analysis is crucial to understand the career experiences of contingent workers because of spillover effects between the professional and non-professional spheres ([De Hauw and Greenhaus, 2015](#)). Contingent workers tend to struggle with work and non-work boundaries because they often work irregular hours ([Gold and Mustafa, 2013](#)). [Shevchuk et al. \(2019\)](#) put forward that gig workers' nonstandard work hours adversely affect their life partnerships and caregiving responsibilities. In addition, contingent workers' lack of stable income can put them into precarious financial situations ([Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018](#)), causing insecurities that spill over to families and households ([Kalleberg, 2009](#)). Specifically, decisions on critical events in a contingent worker's private life, such as family formation or marriage, can affect their career sustainability.

The occupational sector level has only been indirectly addressed in the contingent work literature, except for two recent studies showing that lawyers experience lower professional status when working on online labor platforms ([Yao, 2020](#)) and photographers experienced that platforms undercut their professional status ([McDonald et al., 2021](#)). The indirect role of occupational sector has been addressed by, for example, several studies that examined career experiences of food delivery riders and taxi drivers ([Duggan et al., 2021](#); [Ravenelle, 2019](#)) and freelance workers in the IT and creative sectors (e.g. [McKeown and Pichault, 2020](#); [Petriglieri et al., 2019](#)). From a career perspective, it is important to understand how contingent workers can face unique career opportunities and obstacles in different sectors. For example, a case study on contingent workers using Upwork found that the platform introduced barriers for them, such as capped wages and intensive performance pressure, due to the high global labor supply in the creative sector ([Popiel, 2017](#)). In contrast, professional status can be a source of security for contingent workers in the health care sector ([Wall, 2015](#)).

Finally, how the institutional level can influence contingent workers' career experiences is unexplored yet, promises exciting insights. For example, freelancers and gig workers do not automatically have any social protection (e.g. health care and sickness benefits, unemployment benefits). This lack of social security implies that they need to manage their social risks themselves. However, not all of them are taking action in this regard, which can influence their long-term career sustainability ([Friedman, 2014](#)).

To conclude, organizing the contingent work literature into the sustainable career context dimension shows the importance of looking at contextual factors beyond the traditional organization. This emphasis on the role of context in sustainable careers allowed us to organize the literature (cf. [De Vos et al., 2020](#)) and introduce a common contextual language for the disparate perspectives on contingent work (i.e. organizational, group, private life, occupational-sector and institutional levels). These multiple levels are essential and need to be considered when analyzing contingent workers' career sustainability.

#### *Time dimension: changes in contingent workers' career experiences*

[De Vos et al. \(2020\)](#) advocate a dynamic perspective on sustainable careers, whereby time can have different meanings for distinct types of workers, such as contingent workers. In particular, contingent workers operate in a dynamic environment due to their short-term contracts. When contingent workers finish one contract or job situation, they may experience various transitions. For example, they may transition from contingent work to unemployment, from contingent work to traditional employment or continuing with contingent work (e.g. moving to a new temporary client). Based on all these possibilities, contingent workers will likely accumulate widely varied work experience over time ([Clinton et al., 2011](#)), which results in multiple dynamic



career pathways. Therefore, although contingent work research has predominantly focused on snapshots of one moment in time, the sustainable career lens shows that contingent work experiences need to be studied from a temporal perspective (Ancona *et al.*, 2001).

Based on our literature review, we identified a “stepping stone” concept that examines transitions into traditional employment and suggests that some contingent workers see their first contingent work project as a stepping stone to traditional employment in an organization. However, research shows that only some workers successfully manage the transition, while others remain in contingent work (Esteban-Pretel *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, not all contingent workers have the same likelihood to transition successfully: temporary workers seem to benefit from the contingent work stepping stone more than agency workers or freelancers (Berton *et al.*, 2011; Givord and Wilner, 2015). Contingent workers engaged in agency work for an extended time reported lower well-being both in the workplace and outside work than those beginning the agency work (Chambel and Sobral, 2019). For contingent workers, performing low-skilled “gigs” in the gig economy, their transitions to the outside of the gig economy are likely to be constrained. Their often complex diverse career pathways can be interpreted as unfocused by HR managers outside of the gig economy decreasing the likelihood to be hired (Kost *et al.*, 2020). Taken together, these findings suggest that the dynamic processes and long-term career impacts of contingent work on those who aspire to obtain traditional employment are critical, yet not well understood.

Another concept introduced in this regard is liminality, as it is important in explaining contingent workers’ career experiences. For example, after a project has finished, some contingent workers do not move into another working position and are instead in an in-between phase. Liminality is characterized as a phase in which workers face high uncertainty about their future work situation (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), which is a key part of the contingent work experience (Winkler and Mahmood, 2015). These in-between phases of unemployment lead to emotional highs and lows among contingent workers (Rowlands and Handy, 2012). Hence, we emphasize that liminality needs to be considered as a temporal factor because it is an in-between phase that shapes contingent workers’ dynamic work experiences over time (Ancona *et al.*, 2001). To have a sustainable career as a contingent worker, it is a key skill to manage intense varying emotions caused by the volatile career environment (Caza *et al.*, 2022).

### **Moving contingent work research forward: interplays between person, context and time**

Figure 1 shows that although we identified research on every dimension, there is a lack of research incorporating *all three dimensions*. This is problematic because, in career experiences, person, context and time constantly interact (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, we now use the organizing framework of sustainable careers to elaborate on several avenues for studying contingent workers’ careers at the intersection of these three dimensions. Specifically, we highlight four concepts that promise to shed light on the person, context and time interplay in contingent workers’ career experiences: person-career-fit, career shocks, employability and flexicurity. We chose these specific topics because person-career-fit, career shocks and employability have already been frequently addressed within a career sustainability framework (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2020). These topics are likely of particular value for understanding the career experiences of contingent workers functioning in a volatile environment. Although to date not explicitly researched from a sustainable career framework, the concept of flexicurity aligns nicely with the underlying idea of the framework as it acknowledges that person, context and time interact in shaping experiences. More specifically, studying flexicurity can unravel how institutional and legislative factors shape career experiences and add value by placing the experiences of contingent workers in their wider institutional context. Table 1 provides an overview.

Person-career-fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Which personal and contextual factors enable or hinder contingent workers from achieving person-career fit over time?</li> <li>• How do contingent workers at different life stages encounter distinct barriers and enablers to achieving person-career fit?</li> <li>• How do contingent workers form and manage their multiple commitments to organizations over time? How does it influence their careers if they do not align their various commitments? What is the nature of these alignments or misalignments?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delphi study to identify relevant stakeholders with their constraining or supporting “power” on contingent workers over time</li> <li>• Ethnographic studies to examine how the interplay between personal and contextual factors of contingent workers’ career experience evolve over time</li> <li>• longitudinal within-person and between-person studies to identify antecedents, outcomes, mechanisms and boundary conditions related to person-career fit</li> </ul>
Career shocks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What career shocks do contingent workers experience?</li> <li>• What are the short-term and long-term consequences of these career shocks?</li> <li>• How do contingent workers cope with negative career shocks and capitalize on positive career shocks?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth interviews to explore the different types of career shocks among contingent workers</li> <li>• Quantitative process methods (e.g. growth modeling, latent profile analysis) to examine the distinct sequences of short-term and long-term consequences</li> </ul>
Employability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why do some contingent workers manage to build a portfolio over time, based on their sequences of projects, and thereby increase their employability, while others do not?</li> <li>• How can employability be enhanced over time across multiple organizations?</li> <li>• What type of social and economic resources are exchanged between contingent workers and their stakeholders contributing to their employability enhancement?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-depth interviews to explore constraints and enablers of employability enhancement</li> <li>• Process methods to analyze upwards and downwards cycles over time which unfold through the interplay of personal (e.g. motives, career resources) and contextual (e.g. sector) factors</li> <li>• Longitudinal studies to understand intrapersonal differences in the employability of contingent workers based on personal and contextual factors</li> </ul>
Flexicurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can flexicurity systems be designed to stimulate sustainable career experiences?</li> <li>• How do different legislations influence the career experiences of contingent workers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies on countries that have advanced flexicurity policies to examine how they can foster career sustainability</li> <li>• Comparative studies on flexicurity policies across countries</li> </ul>

**Table 1.**  
New research directions and exploratory research questions based on a sustainable career perspective

*Person-career-fit*

The key mechanism bringing the three sustainable career dimensions together is the notion of dynamic person-career-fit, which is the degree to which a worker’s career aligns with their needs and personal values (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). Sustainable career development is an idiosyncratic process in which contingent workers demonstrate agency in striving for person-career fit over time and are impacted by contextual factors. De Jager *et al.* (2016) and Brawley (2017) argued that we need to understand the unique factors and contingent workers’ needs that influence contingent workers’ person-career-fit. The multiple employers or clients that contingent workers interact with can, over time, play a role by constraining or nurturing person-career-fit. For example, gig workers may voluntarily engage in gig work for a limited amount of time and experience high levels of person-career fit. Yet, agency workers likely experience lower levels of person-career fit even in shorter periods because they often strive for a permanent contract with an employer. Studying these processes from a dynamic and systemic perspective (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) allows for a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of contingent workers’ career experiences.

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Furthermore, we propose that there is a potential polarization between the strong (e.g. more pulled) and weak (e.g. more pushed) contingent workers; that is, there may be a so-called Matthew effect at play (cf. [Forrier et al., 2018](#)). Some contingent workers are likely to attain and strengthen their person-career-fit by capitalizing on their career resources over time ([Ashford et al., 2018](#)), while others may lack access to career resources due to structural factors, such as missing structure regarding working time, income instability, or major power asymmetries in work relationships ([Rosenblat and Stark, 2016](#)), resulting in a further decline of person-career fit. Therefore, we encourage researchers to examine the development of contingent workers' person-career (mis)fit to understand their distinct career trajectories better.

### *Career shocks*

Future research should also examine career shocks among contingent workers to understand the interaction of the person, context and time dimensions. Career shocks are disruptive events that cause deliberate career reflection and potential changes in contingent workers' careers ([Akkermans et al., 2018](#)). Such shocks have a demonstrably strong impact on workers' career decisions ([Seibert et al., 2013](#)) and career success ([Blokker et al., 2019](#)). Furthermore, career shocks significantly impact entrepreneurs' career decision-making ([Rummel et al., 2021](#)). Consequently, we expect contingent workers to be particularly prone to career shocks due to many different career experiences, such as transitioning between jobs and projects and facing financial and employment insecurity. Recent examples particularly salient for contingent workers' careers are the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Resignation trend, which, for many contingent workers, has triggered short-term and long-term career changes ([Akkermans et al., 2020](#); [Spurk and Straub, 2020](#)). While these developments have influenced all workers, contingent workers are especially influenced due to their precarious working conditions and regular job and career transitions. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic may be a source to amplify the resilience or vulnerability of contingent workers ([Spurk and Straub, 2020](#)). Similarly, the Great Resignation has triggered many career transitions, possibly also between paid employment and contingent work, or between different types of contingent work. Studying such career shock-induced career transitions would be a fruitful way forward to studying contingent workers' careers.

For this reason, we advocate that analyzing career shocks impacting contingent workers helps us to understand complex and dynamic contingent work experiences over time. Career shock is a fruitful concept to study person, context and time interactions, as it allows capturing across contexts disruptive events that can significantly impact contingent workers' career sustainability. Hence, we hope that contingent work and career scholars will start to examine *how* and *why* career shocks can impact contingent workers' careers.

### *Employability*

There is a need for studies that examine how employability can be a securing anchor for contingent workers in their careers. Employability is the likelihood of finding a new job in the labor market ([Forrier et al., 2015](#)) and is considered a panacea to overcome job insecurity in the fading parenting relationship between organizations and workers ([Forrier and Sels, 2003](#); [Kinnunen et al., 2011](#)). Yet, how contingent workers can become and stay employable in the long run is a complex issue ([Barnes et al., 2015](#); [Fugate et al., 2021](#); [Kovalenko and Mortelmans, 2016](#)). For instance, organizations often do not invest in enriching contingent workers' employability due to the short-term work relationship. Thus, a key future avenue is to examine how contingent workers' employability enhancement can be achieved across multiple employment relationships over time. Such studies can theorize about employability related to social exchanges arising from the interdependence of contingent workers and their

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stakeholders (e.g. colleagues, clients, LMIs, institutions) (Chambel and Sobral, 2011; Forrier *et al.*, 2018; Fugate *et al.*, 2021). As multiple stakeholders make up the context of contingent workers, studies that take a multistakeholder approach and study how we can make employability enhancement a shared responsibility are especially helpful (Barnes *et al.*, 2015; Chambel and Sobral, 2011). Hence, employability is a well-suited concept to study the sustainable career perspective's person, context and time interaction because contingent workers' employability development across their career is a shared responsibility between contingent workers and their stakeholders (Kost *et al.*, 2020).

### *Flexicurity*

A final avenue for future research is studying flexicurity and contingent work. Flexicurity is an institutional-level concept. Wilthagen and Tros (2004) state that the concept of flexicurity is roughly defined as the nexus of flexibility and security. Stated differently, flexicurity is about strategies to simultaneously enhance flexibility and security in the labor market. Thereby, security can take three forms: (1) job security, (2) employment security, or (3) income security. Specific flexicurity designs vary among institutional legal national systems, such as the number of short-term contracts a contingent worker can have from the same "employing" organization in a row, as the flexibility-security matrix is shaped differently among countries (Beuker *et al.*, 2019). The most well-known example is likely Denmark's flexicurity policy. Those strategies combine active labor market policies aimed to activate workers toward being more flexible while also providing generous social welfare policies to support those in need.

Research is needed to explain the effects of distinct flexicurity policies on contingent workers' career experiences. In addition, we need theorizing on how flexicurity can be translated to the organizational level to understand the roles and responsibilities of organizations that hire contingent workers (Kornelakis, 2014; Zhang *et al.*, 2015). In this vein, LMIs play a crucial role in supporting and securing work for contingent workers performing non-standard career paths (Lorquet *et al.*, 2018). In short, these studies will be insightful on how (external) security systems can be designed on institutional and organizational levels to influence contingent workers' career sustainability (Semenza and Pichault, 2019). Flexicurity is a fitting concept to study the person, context and time interactions impacting contingent workers' career sustainability because it can be a contextual buffer to safeguard an individual's flexibility over time.

### **Conclusion**

Contingent work is a prevailing characteristic of the labor market in the new world of work (Katz and Krueger, 2019). Although research into this phenomenon has been expanding rapidly, insights continue to be fragmented across different literature streams. In this article, we organized and synthesized the fragmented contingent work literature through a sustainable career lens. This perspective takes into account that contingent workers' career experiences result from a complex and dynamic interplay between personal and contextual factors over time. Based on our review and synthesis of the contingent work literature, we identified several areas for future research that offer the most potential for knowledge development. Specifically, we propose research should focus on person-career fit, career shocks, employability and flexicurity to help this research area move forward. We are convinced that further advancing our understanding of how these (f)actors shape the career experience of contingent workers is essential for creating sustainable careers for contingent workers. As such, we hope our critical review and research agenda will spur new research on contingent workers' careers and helps build interdisciplinary connections in this area.

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### Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online.

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