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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

Examining the Role of Autonomy in Independent Work Practices

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in Informatics

by

Hillary Abraham

Thesis Committee:  
Associate Professor Melissa Mazmanian, Chair  
Professor Paul Dourish  
Assistant Professor Roderic Crooks

2021



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# **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Examining the Role of Autonomy in Independent Work Practices

by

Hillary Abraham

Master of Science in Informatics

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Melissa Mazmanian, Chair

More and more individuals are choosing to opt-out of the traditional workforce, instead exploring independent work arrangements. Autonomy has long been identified as a driving motivation for independent workers, but it remains unclear how these workers seek out and experience autonomy in their day to day lives. I address this open question through interviewing independent knowledge and creative workers, as well as conducting a diary study exploring 1) workers' motivations for seeking out independent work and 2) how their work practices have changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. I find autonomy is not monolithic; rather, there are several aspects of their lives over which workers feel they can have autonomy through working independently. Although workers' autonomies were threatened, reduced, or removed during the COVID-19 pandemic, few considered returning to work at a formal organization. This research expands our understanding of autonomy by creating a framework detailing what autonomy means to workers and how that autonomy is practiced. Further, these stories demonstrate how crucial the various forms of autonomy can be to workers; people will continue to find meaning in their work as these autonomies crumble. Only when they disappear entirely with little hope of returning do workers consider abandoning independent work. Given these findings, it is crucial to continue exploring the role of autonomy in independent work as it is defined more broadly.



## INTRODUCTION

Independent work has been on the rise for decades. High-skilled workers could choose to work in traditional organizations, securing health benefits and regular pay. However, independent work by choice is growing, particularly for workers who identify as women [22]. Current scholarship argues that the primary draw for independent workers centers around temporal freedom [18]. The ability to manage one's own schedule is particularly compelling for women, who often leave traditional workforces due to inflexible schedules and lower pay [15]. However, as formal organizations adopt more flexible work practices, independent work by choice continues to rise [23]. It is unclear what additional motivations are drawing workers to operate outside of traditional organizations.

Regardless of prior motivations, the COVID-19 pandemic upended many assumptions workers had about their work; both within and outside of formal organizations. Some newly unemployed workers turned to freelance knowledge work or the gig economy while trying to find full-time employment [3]. Veteran freelancers worried that contracts might dry up as the economy slowed [35]. Many workers, such as performers, photographers, and event planners, lost their ability to do their job at all [6]. The pandemic undoubtedly has shifted work across the board; however, few studies have examined how the pandemic actually affected freelance work practices day-to-day, or to what extent workers' choices to become independent have changed.

To explore these questions, we<sup>1</sup> conducted a diary study of independent working professionals – those who work for themselves full-time by choice. By examining their work

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<sup>1</sup> “We” in this context refers to the broader research team involved in co-designing the study and working with participants. In addition to contributing to study design, I independently conducted 5 of the 11 participants' study engagements, analyzed all of the data included in this writeup, and wrote the thesis. In this paper, plural pronouns will refer to the broader study context and data collected, as these data are not solely “mine.” Singular pronouns will be used to reflect the independent analysis I am conducting within this broader research context.

practices, the values that workers are hoping to serve through their work becomes more apparent. While I too find that temporal flexibility in scheduling work is a driving motivator for independent workers, additional forms of meaningful autonomy emerge as critical to the appeal of independent work. These autonomies are particularly compelling for women with children, who often cannot fulfill their dual identities as professional and parent in the traditional workforce. Workers experience each of these forms of autonomy as reduced or removed during the pandemic, however, our participants do not report trying to seek employment in formal organizations. In fact, most feel more strongly about their decision to remain independent. A closer examination of what motivates independent workers has implications for our understanding of how highly skilled independent work figures into the future constellation of work practices and the structure of work in the decades to come.

## **RELATED WORK**

### **Organizational Studies of Workplace Autonomy**

Autonomy over one's work has long been a focus in the organizational literature [14,19]. In general, autonomy is considered critical to high-skilled workers conducting work that is not only technically complex, but also highly variable [19,20,25,33]. Others have found that increased autonomy is only beneficial for workers who are highly motivated, as is typically the case with knowledge workers [10]. Many high-skilled workers in highly autonomous positions fail to report autonomy as a benefit - not because it is undesirable, but because autonomy is perceived as fundamental to the work itself. In other words, many workers perceive autonomy as a right, rather than a privilege [25].

While autonomy is considered important, the literature does not have a single widely accepted definition of what, fundamentally, constitutes autonomy [12]. Many academics define

autonomy as having control over the ways in which tasks are performed, such as deciding how the task can be completed, the order of tasks, and how quickly the task should be completed [2,14,16,20,33,34]. Some scholars have suggested a distinction between autonomy over how work can be completed and autonomy over the product of the work itself [8]. In an increasingly distributed world, it is unclear whether autonomy over tasks alone captures the full scope of autonomy that appeals to workers [40].

Notable in these studies is how worker autonomy is often perceived as an oppositional force to organizational control [21]. Indeed, most studies of autonomy at work examine autonomy as a scalar object; something that can be, in varying degrees, given or taken away [24]. As a result, scholars have called to reexamine autonomy as a practice, rather than a property [24]. Thus, I seek to understand *what* aspects of their work-lives workers feel they have autonomy over and *how* this autonomy is experienced and practiced, particularly outside of traditional organizations.

### **Promises of Independent Work**

Work outside of formal organizations has increased over the past decades [22]. Many novel work arrangements, such as contingent work, contract work, and freelancing have appeared [1]. While nonstandard work arrangements are broadly on the rise, it is unclear to what extent working independently has increased by choice or out of necessity. In part, this is due to problematic categorizations used for tracking various forms of employment. Studies gauging independent work often use 1099 tax forms, which categorize precarious “gig economy” workers alongside high-earning independent knowledge workers [23]. That said, it is clear that workers who engage with independent work by choice are more satisfied with their work than those who are independent out of necessity [23].

To an extent, the discourse surrounding both forms of independent work overlap. Both “gig” work and independent knowledge work emphasize the appeal of temporal autonomy [30,31,39]. Having full authority over one’s own schedule by choosing when, and when not, to work continues

to be a draw for workers. Scholars researching the gig economy have complicated this discourse by demonstrating that the “choice” to work is not always, in fact, a choice; for example, workers are constrained to particular hours of work by market demand [29]. Similarly, Barley and Kunda’s study of software contractors demonstrated that while workers had theoretical control over their time, they rarely chose to take time off; rather, time was spent improving skills, networking, and taking on more work in anticipation of a potential future where jobs were scarce [18]. Thus, it is unclear whether or not the promises of autonomy are realized once workers engage with nontraditional forms of work.

However, more recent work on independent knowledge workers, in particular, indicates that their work does involve a high degree of flexibility [11]. Sometimes referred to as “digital nomads,” developments in information technology allow for high-skilled knowledge workers to control when and where they work [28]. Studies have demonstrated how independent workers build and blur the boundaries between their home-lives and work-lives, often moment-to-moment and reactively [7]. These dynamic strategies allow workers to attend to their needs holistically, finding fulfillment in both personal and professional aspects of their lives [26].

The flexible potential of independent work may have a particular appeal for workers identifying as women. Work is assumed as necessary in our society; work is the foundation of our social contracts, is how we meet our basic needs, and is the center of much of our social activity [37]. To be a fully dedicated member of society, at this moment in time, means to have a professional identity. Women, in particular, struggle with societal expectations thrusting them into the workforce and contradicting expectations to keep them at home [9]. While both men and women prioritize their home and family lives while at work, only men can do so while still being perceived as an ideal worker; women attempting to balance home and work are perceived as undedicated to their careers [27]. This means that women workers in formal environments often face disproportionate stagnation in pay and advancement [15]. Societal discourses place the blame

for this career stagnation on working women, claiming they simply need to work harder or balance their time more effectively. These claims ignore the various societal institutions set up to keep mothers, especially, at home [32]. While gender gaps in professional roles have come a long way since *The Second Shift* [17], present day wage gaps and gendered parental leave policies often compel women in heterosexual couples to make professional sacrifices for their higher-paid partner [32]. In short, women face a “false choice” between embodying either a family- or career-oriented identity [38]. Prioritizing a career fundamentally means a sacrifice on the home front, which many women are not willing or able to commit [27]. It is unclear if independent work provides a hopeful alternative to traditional career paths, which in many ways set up women to feel as though they are failing either at home, at work, or both [32].

It is clear from the literature that autonomy matters in people's experience of work and is a particular driver for those seeking independent work. As discussed, autonomy may have particular appeal for those who identify as women. Yet, it remains unclear what autonomy fundamentally means to workers; is the discourse of “autonomy” simply referring to control over one’s schedule, or are there more meaningful forms of autonomy that workers seek in independent work settings?

## **METHODS**

### **Participants**

This paper explores how women describe and recount what brought them to independent work and how they feel about this form of work in a dramatically changing environment. Because this study has a focus on changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, we only recruited women who had been working independently before the onset of the pandemic in March. We narrowed our focus to those living in the United States, as the global response to the pandemic has been quite different country to country.

This analysis includes 11 individuals who identified as women and classified themselves as contract workers, freelancers, or independent workers. All of them worked independently for at least a year and were living throughout the US. Nearly all of the women we recruited are white; one identified as White and Black / African American. This division mirrors demographic characteristics of the broader independent worker population, with roughly 90% of this workforce being White ([5], Table 6). Two characteristics came to light through analysis that were important for my findings: household members (specifically, whether or not young children were at home), and living arrangements (i.e. the specific house or general area they lived in). With regard toward household members, three participants had children who lived at home. Two lived with only their romantic partner, two lived with roommates, and three lived alone. As for living arrangements, four participants moved, either to different houses in the same neighborhood or across the country, in response to the pandemic. These characteristics are highlighted in Table 1.

*Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants*

| <b>Race</b>                       | <b>Age</b>  | <b>Household</b>   | <b>Housing</b>                          |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| White: 100% [11]<br>Black: 9% [1] | 18-24: 18% [2]<br>25-34: 9% [1]<br>35-44: 55% [6]<br>45-54: 18% [2] | Children + Partner: 36% [4]<br>Only Partner: 18% [2]<br>Roommates: 18% [2]<br>Alone: 27% [3] | Did not move: 64% [7]<br>Moved: 36% [4] |

### **Data Collection**

Our study design included a survey, an initial interview, 7 days of diary entries in response to prompts, and a final closing interview [Figure 1]. We included 11 participants in our study, totaling 22 semi-structured interviews, 77 diary responses, and 11 questionnaires. Data collection occurred between September - November 2020; about two weeks elapsed for each participant between the demographic survey and closing interview. All of the interviews were conducted via Zoom by three members of the research team, and the diary responses were collected via email or

text (participant’s choice). The multi-stage study design allowed for rapport to develop between the participant and interviewer despite being distributed.

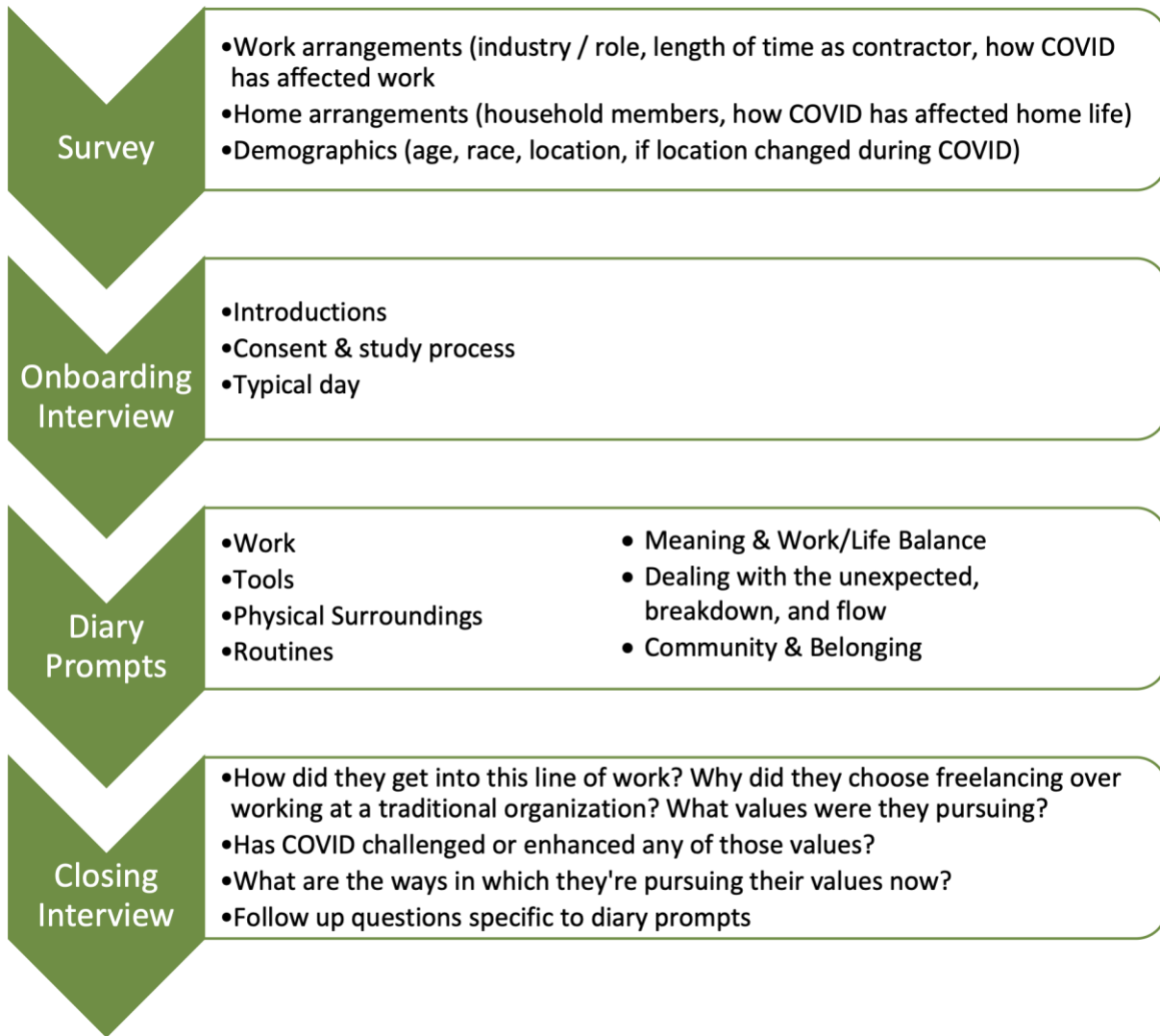


Figure 1: Study Procedures

The initial survey collected key demographic information about each participant, as well as how COVID affected their work and home life. This provided a general orientation for the interviewer entering into the interview as to if the interviewee was experiencing the pandemic very negatively or very positively. Following the survey, the onboarding interview went over study logistics and developed a rapport between the interviewer and participant; the research team

wanted to give the participant a sense of who would be reading their “diaries” in the hope that they would feel more comfortable documenting their personal experiences and corresponding emotions. This interview was brief, lasting between 15-30 minutes.

Each diary prompt focused on a different theme [Figure 1]. The prompts started out fairly neutral and became more focused on individual values and emotions as the week progressed. Most participants responded loquaciously to at least three prompts, but the prompts for which they chose to provide more detail differed amongst participants. Thus, the diary entries allowed the interviewer to assess which domains were particularly salient for each participant; while many had a lot to say about the meaning in their work, other participants’ physical surroundings, routines, or communities were more pronounced. The responses themselves were included in analysis, but they were also used to generate probes for the closing interview. This allowed the interviewer to customize the closing interview to topics that were most relevant to each participant.

The closing interview lasted approximately an hour. In addition to deeply exploring relevant topics, the closing interview assessed the values that participants were attempting to enact when pursuing independent work. Additionally, the interviewers inquired how those values had changed, either the value itself or their ability to enact the value, at any point during the pandemic. Finally, we wished to understand the ways in which participants modified their day-to-day operations to continue enacting these values, or if they were forced to abandon any (temporarily or permanently).

## **Analysis**

I conducted a thematic analysis of the grouped interview and diary data. The first round of coding focused on factors that led participants to independent work. Some example codes were: “manage own schedule,” “noncommittal,” “financial independence,” “self-directed learning,” “exploring niches,” “picking clients,” and “project-based v. time-based work.” While writing analytic memos, I noticed that each of these codes related to a freedom or autonomy the participant felt



independent work provided. I then returned to the data with a particular focus around autonomy and how these forms of autonomy might be categorized. Using a similar process, I turned to how these forms of autonomy were affected by the pandemic. Examples of codes include: “reduced flexibility,” “grabbing moments,” “failed routine,” “changing spaces,” “fear of lost work,” and “opportunity” Finally, I investigated how participants felt about their work throughout the pandemic. Some of these codes included: “considered quitting,” and “more strongly independent.”

## RESULTS

In addition to temporal autonomy, these participants experienced other forms of autonomy in independent work [Table 2]. Taken together, the promise of realizing various forms of autonomy underlie the appeal of independent work. Further, as long as these promises are experienced to some degree, participants are committed to staying in independent work scenarios.

*Table 2: Forms of autonomy enabled by independent work*

| <b>Autonomy</b> | <b>Definition</b>  | <b>Examples</b>  |
|-----------------|--|--|
| Temporal        | The ability to decide when and when not to work  | Scheduling one’s day, taking vacations.  |
| Environmental   | The ability to decide where, spatially and geographically, to work                       | Working from a couch, outside, home office, or coffeeshop. Maintaining the ability to move every few years, by choice or if a partner’s career demands it. |
| Operational     | The ability to pick and choose between available jobs and clients                        | Choosing jobs in order to earn more money, learn a new skill, explore a different niche, or avoid working with unpleasant clients.                         |
| Holistic        | The ability to manage & integrate personal and professional values into everyday choices | Enacting identity as a parent and professional, rather than one or the other; working sustainably in a wasteful industry                                   |

In this section, I first outline each form of autonomy participants described, then discuss how each form of autonomy was affected by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I explore participants' reactions to their work in light of the pandemic, with a focus on a participant who had most of her autonomy removed.

## **Autonomies Promised by Independent Work**

### *Temporal Autonomy*

Temporal autonomy manifests both in control over long term scheduling and day-to-day minutia. Many workers appreciated the ability to schedule traveling and time off whenever they liked. However, our workers most discussed having the ability to manage their own daily routines. In particular, workers appreciated the ability to schedule several long breaks into their day rather than be locked into a 9-5 or eight consistent hours of work. For example, Tara separates her work into a morning and evening chunk:

*"I pretty much wake up at 7:30 and just start sewing... And so I'm usually on the machine for a couple of hours trying to get some work done... In terms of breaking the day up, I usually do actually leave midday and do some kind of workout and a lunch break sometime late to early afternoon. And then generally I'll still work through - I have another prime sewing time, more from about four to seven and four to eight. So I would say that my days are long, but at the same time, I get to break it up with a two hour break in the middle of it, which I like ... That's the beauty of the independent working. I think you can manage your time how you want to, and then work in the evenings."*

*-Tara, Custom Clothing  
Interview*

Tara enjoys being able to take a large break in the middle of the day, coming back rejuvenated. These breaks allow workers to come to work mentally invigorated and accomplish other tasks when less able to work. In essence, working flexibly allows for the ability to determine the priorities

of work tasks alongside personal tasks, such as exercising, running errands, or preparing lunch for children. This enables workers, such as Nadine, to feel their time is being spent more productively:

*“I wonder for when people work in offices, are there three or four hours of the day in a lot of offices where people are going to a dumb meeting, that's sort of my time waste, or chatting with people? Because I used to work in an office for years- not many years, but maybe three years, and I felt I could have gotten that work done in four hours at home.”*

*-Nadine, Writer  
Interview*

Workers like Nadine are under the impression that working in an office encompasses a certain amount of busy work, “dumb” meetings, and chitchat. These workers appreciate performing their jobs and would rather spend their time on substantive tasks. It is not the case that these workers want to spend less time on their work; in fact, workers are happy to spend as long as it takes to ensure a project is done well. The distinction here is not the total amount of time spent working, but the motivational difference between project-based and time-based work. Fiona described the difference between these two approaches to work:

*“Having to go in the same place every single day for a time that someone has set for me has made me less focused, I think. Because like I said before, I'm looking at the clock being like, ‘When is this over?’ Instead of thinking about actually getting the job done, I'm thinking of it in terms of time and not actual work progress. So it's more like, ‘Okay, I have to get through these hours,’ instead of, ‘Okay, I have to finish this project.’ So I think it's made me less productive to work in the same place every day in my previous experience, because I'm just less focused on actually getting the job done. And I think when you're freelancing, there's no one really on top of you all the time telling you what time this and that has to be done.”*

*-Fiona, Stylist  
Interview*

Workers like Fiona still have deadlines they must meet, but their deadlines are based on a project being completed, not on working a set number of hours. Thinking about work as a project, rather than designated time, allows workers to feel more motivated when performing their work while

simultaneously getting more work done. In turn, this frees up more time for other activities; either more projects, hobbies, or childcare. The advantages of temporal autonomy are particularly compelling for parents, like Danielle:

*"I feel extremely fortunate that I never had to step away from work after having a child, that the work was flexible enough to allow me to spend time at home with my son, that I was able to create/modify my own work hours, while honing my skills and keeping current and in practice, and interacting with adults doing other adult things."*

*-Danielle, Research Contract Consultant  
Diary entry*

A traditional job would require Danielle to spend most of the day away from her son, but being a stay-at-home mom would require her to give up a professional identity. Any choice that propelled her career forward would have necessitated a sacrifice at home, namely spending less time with her son, that she was not willing to make. Choosing to stay at home would necessitate feeling less skilled and reducing her interaction with other adults; in many ways, it would make her feel less like an adult herself. In essence, Danielle is describing the "false choice" and how she is able to bypass it through the temporal flexibility of independent work. Managing her own time enables Danielle and other parents to circumvent these double-binds in favor of a more fulfilling lifestyle. Similarly, Faye described her long-term career aspirations juxtaposed with parenting:

*"I had my first kid and all I could think about was what if something happened to [my husband]. How would I support us. Then I had another kid and then I was like, 'Oh my God. I could be a single mom with two kids and no real job.'"*

*-Faye, Graphic Designer  
Interview*

For our working parents, independent work is how they are able to stay competitive in their fields while still being fulfilling parents; both day-to-day as they rearrange schedules to ensure their children are cared for, but also providing long-term security should they lose income from another parent. The flexibility that comes from working independently, at least before the pandemic, allows

parents to choose how to balance their time between parent and professional, both in the short and long term.

In short, temporal autonomy is the ability to choose when, and when not, to work. Temporal autonomy allows these workers to structure their days such that they are working when they are most motivated, taking breaks when needed without guilt, and spending their time on meaningful tasks. In turn, this enables workers to balance their time between work and other priorities more effectively than might be possible in a traditional organization. For parents, the ability to fully manage their schedules was one way they bypassed the “false choice” narrative. Scheduling their time around their families ensures that they can maintain both personal and professional identities without career stagnation or sacrifice at home.

### *Environmental Autonomy*

Workers deeply appreciate their ability to customize and change their immediate environments. Some have curated completely separate offices outside of or within the home, while others have integrated their workspaces within their living spaces. Many, like Faye, discussed how their workspaces curated a sense of comfort and reassurance:

*“My immediate environment is my living room, and it’s where I spend all of my time every day. It’s filled with furniture and objects that have been lovingly collected by me for years. The beautiful plants, the Eames lounge chair, my Moroccan brass tray coffee table that was my grandmother’s, the rug my father gave me when I was in college, the mid-century tufted tan leather sofas, the framed vintage prints on the wall by Charlie Harper and Audobon... they all make me very happy. I can sit in my living room and look out the big front windows and see my neighbors walking by, and their kids playing in the street. I’m surrounded on all sides by wonderful neighbors with whom I’m good friends and all of our kids have grown up together. I feel very lucky that my immediate environment (my living room) is surrounded by an equally awesome environment (my neighborhood).”*

*-Faye, Graphic Designer  
Diary entry*

Workers like Faye appreciate having control over the aesthetics and functionality of their work environments. In addition to creating comfortable stable spaces, workers value the ability to physically change space when hitting a mental block. Felicity described a routine she developed to break through such blocks:

*"I went out of my way to create an environment for myself, which I do often. I set up a diffuser, cleared the table, and made myself a couple cups of coffee. To me, going through these motions lets me focus much better than if I were to just plant myself down anywhere. It usually bothers or distracts me if my environment is messy, and I like to take deliberate steps to make a space for my 'work zone' so that I'm in the right headspace before I begin. I guess I kind of make a task into an event; I like to set myself up for it or else I feel unprepared, even if it's just a personal research project. If I'm at home and able to, I usually create an environment to intentionally affect me... I don't know if I wrote this down, but I took my twinkly lights down and put them on the table... So it's a way for me to kind of signal to my brain that this is a different environment, so I can focus here instead of just feeling like I'm going through a brain fog."*

*-Felicity, Writer  
Interview*

This sense of mobility is beneficial both in the immediate and long-term applications. Workers are able to move around when feeling unproductive, but also value not having to commit to geographic spaces. Lilly described appreciating the ability to move when she gets bored with a particular area:

*"I've always been somebody who's moved a lot, so I'm not intimidated by the idea of moving... I could do a fellowship somewhere for a year, or I could be a writer in residence somewhere, or do one of those one-year teaching assignments that they give to writers sometimes, or fill an opening when somebody's gone for a year. Or like New York Public Library has a big fellowship. I could do a research fellowship there or something. I just think the potential to do these fun things that you can't normally do if you have jobs that tie you down, that's kind of great... I think I just tend to bomb everything after five to 10 years. I'm like, 'I'm sick of this.'"*

*-Lilly, Nonfiction Writer  
Interview*

Lilly's flexibility in work arrangements allows her to maintain interest in her life and surroundings while still building her career; her mobility enables any number of possibilities to open up in front of her. While Lilly's partner also works remotely, other workers had partners whose careers were tied to a particular location. These workers valued the ability to move to new locations while not completely sacrificing their own careers.

Essentially, environmental autonomy is the ability to decide where to work, both in the immediate sense and the broader geographical sense. Our workers are not highly mobile digital nomads that continuously traverse the globe, but neither are they tied to a particular home office, co-working space, or occasionally a particular city. Rather, these workers appreciate curating several workspaces and navigating between them to suit the types of work they need to perform, change space to shift a mindset, or reignite their motivation for a task. The ability to control the spaces they work allows workers to feel more motivated, more productive, and more joy in their work.

### *Operational Autonomy*

Our workers deeply appreciate having personal autonomy over the specific jobs they choose and the ability to "own" the work they complete. This is not to say workers are "lone wolves;" our workers often collaborate with and report to others as part of their work. However, many - such as Beth - find they are more intrinsically motivated:

*"Working for other people just doesn't inspire me the same way working for myself does. While I have no problem contracting and working on other people's projects and supporting their vision. That's what I do as a producer, and that's what I get hired on these projects to do. There's something still about maintaining that ownership of this is me and this is my work. And, when I'm done, but at the end of the day, I'm responsible for myself."*

*-Beth, Filmmaker  
Interview*

Creative workers, in particular, value having full creative control over the types of work they perform. While they all discussed being able to take direction from a superior, it is much more rewarding to conceptualize and actualize the full scope of one's creative vision.

All workers, creative and otherwise, value the ability to choose the specific jobs they engaged with. There are several criteria that contributed toward the decision whether or not to accept work. Of course, money is a leading factor; many workers value the ability to increase their sense of security by procuring more work. Beyond the money, workers value the ability to decline work if other factors were more important than income. In particular, workers appreciate the opportunity to choose only exciting projects, though with more experienced workers this led to an overabundance of projects:

*"I definitely always say yes because I don't want to say no to a really awesome project. It used to be, when you're a younger designer, you just have random people calling you. And some of the projects are amazing and some of the projects are really awful. You can tell right away, this is not a good fit. This is not a client I want to work with. They don't have any money. And those are easy to say no to, but then at some point, those people stop calling and you just get a lot of really high quality inquiries."*

*-Faye, Graphic Designer  
Interview*

Rather than being doled out jobs that may or may not align with their personal interests, specialized skillsets, or learning agendas, workers value the opportunity to only accept jobs that align with their present needs and goals. The content of the project, as well as the client themselves, could be compelling or disinteresting. Workers appreciate being able to turn down uninteresting, low-paid projects as well as decline work with problematic teams.

Finally, workers value the option to define their work broadly or narrowly, with an eye toward continuous growth and challenges. This results in feeling more complete, both personally and professionally. For example, working independently affords individuals the opportunity to



learn skills beyond that of their core expertise. Tara, who makes custom clothing for her clients, values engaging in all of the various stages of clothing development:

*"I've come from a background doing a lot of different things in fashion, and there's no one part that I seem to really like more than another, I like all of it. So I like the pattern making and the sketching. I like the computer, like Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop programs that I had to use for sketching that I don't really use now, but I like the sewing as well. And there's all these different levels and even photo retouching and stuff like that, I don't feel like there's anything that's out of my realm in terms of focusing on and being able to do it myself... So in a way it was more like, why am I working for a place that doesn't allow me to actually use my full potential in all these different areas? And I can, I feel like I can do it all on my own... So I can now do things that I do fully believe in."*

*-Tara, Custom Clothing  
Interview*

By working for herself, Tara feels she has the ability to realize her "full potential." Rather than being limited to isolated components of the job, workers appreciate the ability to identify which aspects, and how deeply, to engage. Participating in various elements of work was compelling both for the day-to-day variety that it offers workers and for the long-term sense of growth and self-improvement that it allowed. Felicity, for example, enjoys learning details of her work that would not be possible outside of independent work:

*"I like exploring new ideas, and so that's part of the reason why this can be hectic, but I actually like the challenge of figuring out all of the nitty-gritty details of the job. When I'm working for myself, I don't feel guilty if I indulge myself a little bit to see, 'How do I create an invoice from scratch?' ...I just took a course like last week just to make sure that I brushed up on some of my pitching skills... So I feel like I give myself more leeway to build my skills because I see it as an investment. I don't know that I would have that flexibility in a more traditional job that would just say, 'You need to do this and this and this by such and such deadline.' I feel like I'm able to explore my curiosities a bit more and fill out my skillset, so that I'm not just doing proofreading and editing and writing, but I'm working on marketing and other things like that. I feel like it indulges my curiosity in a way."*

*-Felicity, Writer  
Interview*

Rather than work feeling begrudging or tedious, workers like Felicity feel that the opportunity to learn these new skills is rewarding and indulgent. On the other hand, workers also appreciate the ability to offload or avoid aspects of the work they find less rewarding; often, these were described as bureaucratic processes. To summarize, workers appreciate the *choice* in how broadly they defined their work at any given point; this means some work is offloaded, while other work is taken on.

For young workers, there is immense value in the opportunity to try out a variety of different specializations before settling down into one particular niche. For example, Fiona is early in her career:

*“So, that’s just how I wanted to start my career, like doing different things, maybe seeing what I’m best at, what kind of companies I’m best at, like maybe higher end fashion that do custom clothes or maybe more contemporary brands that are like \$150 and less. So, I’m just trying to figure out what place I belong in the most.”*

*-Fiona, Stylist  
Interview*

Rather than commit to a long-term job that she may or may not enjoy, independent work allows Fiona and other novice workers to explore what specializations and work environments are the best fit.

In short, operational autonomy is the ability to pick and choose between available jobs and clients. The motivations for these choices are varied; sometimes workers desire to learn a new skill, are interested in a new niche, want to avoid working with a particular client, or need to earn more money. However, the motivations for *why* they choose a job are less important than the fact they *are able* to choose the work they conduct. Operational autonomy gives workers the ability to choose their work; this choice provides workers a sense of ownership and pride over the individual projects they complete and their broader career trajectories.

## *Holistic Autonomy*

Finally, independent work is a way for workers to enact their personal values professionally. This is less about balancing, creating, or blending boundaries between work and home life; rather, workers value the ability to work in a way that aligns with their identity. Tara, for example, discussed how she came to her craft and what it means to her:

*“Some people ask why I don’t just make garments in a factory and I have two answers to that. The first being that I don’t support the conditions and the quality in most cases. And the second, and more important factor, is that I just love to sew.”*

*Diary entry*

*“So my grandmother actually was a seamstress and she made pretty much every garment for her family. And my mom taught me to sew when I was about 11... And just actually always knew that that was what I wanted to do... It’s like I said, there’s a lot of negativity I feel about it from a wasteful standpoint and a materialistic standpoint. I do [inaudible] a very excessive industry. It’s a very vain industry. There’s a lot of downsides to it, especially when you do work and see the factory conditions and stuff. So I feel much better doing what I’m doing currently... I actually got quite emotional and sentimental when I started thinking about it... it really did make me feel like this is what I feel like I should be doing, I do feel like I have a certain level of passion and skill for it and it makes me happy... It’s always meant something to me. And it’s always been something that I’ve not considered careers in other things and even today, I don’t know how to really consider a career doing something other than what I’m doing...”*

*-Tara, Custom Clothing  
Interview*

Many of our workers, like Tara, expressed a longtime passion for the work they do now. Tara has a deep familial connection to her craft; her mother and grandmother both sewed and taught her how to sew. Tara loves her work and it has always held meaning for her, yet working in the fashion industry conflicts with many of her core values. The fashion industry can be “wasteful” and “vain,” and many workers are forced to work in incredibly poor conditions. The industry promotes production and consumption far beyond what Tara believes is necessary or beneficial. Working independently allows Tara to live by her values of mindfulness toward the environment and other

people; she has the opportunity to modify clothes, rather than constantly producing, while simultaneously operating outside of an industry that is foundationally corrupt.

Other workers find independent work incredibly challenging; sometimes needlessly so. When asked what made them continue to do the work they do, several workers used the word “stubborn” to describe themselves. As Brooke outlined, this challenge, grit, and determination is part of the appeal:

*“I think that probably naturally I probably would do better under someone, because I take direction really well. I respond really well to structure, I think, and when you're self-employed, you have to make that structure for yourself and that's the major challenge, right? And so, on the one hand, it's grueling because it's something that doesn't come naturally to me and I struggle with it constantly. But on the other hand, it's really been rewarding because otherwise I wouldn't be in that situation and I would just be plugging away, doing stuff for other people and probably not really evolving that much.”*

*-Brooke, Architect  
Interview*

Workers like Brooke value hard work and determination. It would actually be much easier to work for someone else; working for themselves means they have the added work of structuring and organizing their days, projects and careers. However, workers like Brooke desire to push themselves beyond what they might be capable of, enabling them to continuously evolve.

While the ability to feel more fulfilled professionally is compelling for workers, parents uniquely appreciate independent work for its promise to “have it all.” In part, independent work creates a gateway to the adult world; isolated mothers, like Danielle, appreciate that their work let them both spend time with their children and engage with other adults in a professional manner:

*“I was home full-time, alone for a long time without daycare, to have some connection to a professional world, where I had to have contact with adults. But it wasn't just, ‘Here I am, in the woods of Maine, talking to a baby all day.’ You know? And so, I was grateful for that, regardless of how passionate I was about the work I was doing and the conversation I was even having, it was just good for me to use my voice... Just that*

*outside pressure to be expected to be able to communicate like an adult was sort of a useful bar to have in place, if that makes sense.”*

*-Danielle, Research Contract Consultant  
Interview*

Working at all guarantees recent mothers some form of interaction with other adults; but working independently grants parents an identity other than just “mother.” Working gave mothers a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment they feel they would not have achieved solely from caregiving:

*“The things that keep me going are: (A) a need to pay my bills; (B) a need to feel like I am more than “just” a mother or a wife or a homemaker; and (C) sheer stubbornness.”  
Diary entry*

*“Were I in that situation [“just’ a mother”], I see the adult’s primary assigned role as a parent and housekeeper. And that’s not intellectually, in some ways enough for me. I like to feel like a grown up, who’s not just, you know, seeing Baby Shark... I just wanted to think about something that wasn’t the kids. And I really do like a mix of the two. I don’t, I don’t - I don’t know, I’m not like an overly ambitious go getter, I guess, comparatively compared to, you know, people. I wouldn’t, like, I not vying to be a judge, you know, not trying to make partner at a firm. And in law, there are specific stereotypes of who’s a go getter, and I don’t really fit those molds. But I don’t want to not work either.”*

*-Barbara, Legal Services  
Interview*

Rather than have to make a choice between primarily a stay-at-home mom or primarily a career woman, independent work seemingly enables women to achieve an identity as a *working mother*. However, the false choice between parenthood and career is not completely bypassed. Faye described the tension she experienced at the start of her career and parenthood:

*“My mom always dreamt that I would marry somebody like a lawyer or a doctor and I could stay home with my kids... I didn’t want to be a housewife or anything like that. But, moving up here and my husband was making so much money right off the bat for his law firm and I just had to like, I was like a wayward orphan trying to find my way. He was like, ‘Well, let’s have a baby and you don’t have to worry about it.’ He just kept saying like, ‘You don’t need to worry about it, I’m making plenty of money and you can have a baby,’ and, ‘Aren’t you happy with this?’ I was like - But I just felt really, really,*

*really uncomfortable just being dependent on somebody else... That was the struggle that was really for the first 10 years that I lived up here. I had small children, I was trying to freelance on the side to just make some extra money and to keep one foot into some sort of professional world so that it wasn't like I took 10 years off to be a mom. I just wanted to stay in the game and if I could just make some extra money that would be really great... I did have just one lawyer that worked with my husband at his firm... he said something to the effect of, 'How's your hobby job?' He called it a hobby job. And this is after, this was after I was legitimately working pretty much full time and making good money and I was very, very serious about my career and very passionate about it. I think he just hadn't been paying attention and it was within five years probably that I went from just dinking around on the side to legitimately having a pretty good practice going, for real. And he called it a hobby job, and I will never forget that. I was so upset. I was so upset. Even his wife later was like, 'I'm so sorry. I know it's your real job.' I was like, 'Yeah.'"*

*-Faye, Graphic Designer  
Interview*

Here, Faye outlines the false choice she faced. She had an opportunity to choose to be a mother, just like her mother had always wanted. Although it was never her dream, she felt she should be grateful for her husband's breadwinning. She wanted to have a career, but also wanted to be a mother. Starting to work independently enabled her to "stay in the game" and develop a professional career that she was passionate about while caring for her children. This was far from a perfect solution. As she described, others did not always recognize the work that she performed as valid. To some, she would always be a mother first. Faye also felt guilty for the amount of work she conducted:

*"I think [working independently is] like a, I mean, it's kind of a stressful way of life to choose, I think. I guess, I've always felt really guilty about- I mean, I work a lot. I'm always, if I'm home I'm sitting on my couch with my laptop even at night. So my kids have grown up with basically a workaholic mom. I have always tried to camouflage my guilt by saying that I'm showing them, I'm setting a good example of going after your dream, because I do feel like that's what I've done... I want [my son] to be able to be anywhere in the world and identify an opportunity and then be able to grow something from that. Because, I guess, there's opportunity everywhere, no matter where you are. Even, well, especially with the internet. You can do anything from anywhere, almost. I guess that's what I want him to learn. I want him to have the idea, but I want him to know what the steps are to make that happen."*

Thus, while independent work allows working women a way to fully engage with work and motherhood, it is not a perfect solution. Societal pressures are still at play, categorizing women as either mothers or workers while engendering guilt for either being too focused on motherhood or working too hard. Nevertheless, working mothers like Faye feel that the skills they learn while working independently might be valuable for their children in a way that working for a traditional organization may not provide; working independently allows Faye to be a self-sufficient parent. Working this way, in turn, may teach her children how to identify opportunities for themselves even when traditional boundaries might hinder their progress.

Holistic autonomy, then, is the ability to manage & integrate personal and professional values into everyday choices. While the specific values differed widely amongst our workers, each individual described strong principles that were enacted through working independently and that they felt could not be achieved through traditional work. This enabled workers to feel like their authentic selves across domains. As Nadine, a novelist, wrote in a diary prompt, "I'm doing what I feel like I was made to do and that is satisfying in a way."

In short, our workers desire various forms of autonomy. Control over their day-to-day schedules is compelling for managing their personal lives. The ability to physically modify and move their work environment enables them to feel more productive, both in day-to-day work and over the course of their careers. The operational ability to "own" their work and choose which jobs to "own" allows workers to engage with their work meaningfully while balancing shifting professional and personal priorities. Finally, the ability to live by their personal values through their work enables workers to feel they are living their complete identities; many could not imagine doing any other type of work. Thus, independent work offers much more than simply autonomy over one's time; it offers agency over one's space, work, and identity.

## **Autonomies and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The pandemic dramatically affected almost every aspect of our participants' lives. For many participants, mental health was the lowest they had ever experienced; this had interwoven effects on their work and personal lives. Our workers spoke extensively about the year's effects on not just their work, but their social networks, their neighborhoods, and their feelings of security in an increasingly divided country. In this section, I focus on how the pandemic affected the autonomies that brought them to work independently. While this is often centered around their work itself, due to the multifaceted nature of the pandemic and other events of the year, I at times refer to non-work-related settings in order to illustrate the interconnections between the promises of independent work and life circumstances that make those promises desirable and possible.

### *Leveraging Temporal Autonomy*

The degree to which temporal autonomy was affected by the pandemic differed greatly between workers with young children and those without. Workers without children often reported minimal changes to their temporal autonomy. If anything, workers often found themselves with much more time. This time was used to exercise, sleep more, create, take on more jobs, or simply relax. Some workers felt the pandemic was an invitation to connect with nature or fix dissatisfactions; while the pandemic certainly upended aspects of their work, this was perceived as an opportunity:

*"What kept me going was the fact that I could see the quality and value of my work steadily rising. But then Covid struck. It's been 6 months now. This week has been particularly hard. I have been questioning myself and my abilities. Self doubt has crept in. I think what keeps me going now is that my skill set hasn't changed. So I'm continuing to remind myself that there is still value in the work that I do. If I need to adapt I can adapt, but I will keep moving forward."*

*Diary entry*

*"I feel like what has worked in the past doesn't really work now. And certain things have actually added stress. And, the point right now is to take away as many things as*



*possible that are stressful in your life. And, even it's like chaotic or stressful that you can control, just deal with it. Now's the time to deal with it, because you don't want that one little thing nagging you in the back of your mind."*

*-Beth, Filmmaker  
Interview*

Like many workers, Beth described how the pandemic has led to "self-doubt" and stress. However, many of our workers described their ability to adapt, change, and hopefully improve their situations. The pandemic, in all its chaos, is an opportunity for individuals to identify what is not working in their lives and subsequently address it.

This somewhat optimistic perspective is in stark contrast to workers with young children at home, who had different forms of stress to manage. Whereas before workers with young children had several scheduled hours a day of child-free work time, daycare closures and virtual schooling led to increased constraints on their time. For example, Barbara's described her new daily practices:

*"The constant problem I have is a lack of routine because of COVID. I had a routine before this, but I always seem the last in terms of addressing my personal needs. I am so busy trying to manage two kids' school days and squeezing in work between that, and dinner and housework, that when I 'get' to work, I'm too exhausted."*

*-Barbara, Legal Services  
Diary Entry*

Not only is Barbara expected to maintain her previous level of work, her customized routine has been completely upended. Mothers described integrating childcare, tutoring, meal prep, and recess into their days - on top of the work they had always been expected to complete. Parent workers, like Lilly, often leveraged their temporal flexibility to manage these additional responsibilities:

*"I mean, I get up early. That's the main way... That really starts the day off right, because if I can get in three good hours before - or at least two good hours before they get up, I've already done more than I would ever do just sitting out amongst them for six hours."*

All of our working parents described getting up early as the only way to squeeze any amount of productivity out of the day. Unsurprisingly, workers with children too young to mind themselves often feel out of control, precarious, and overworked.

### *Adapting to Environmental Chaos*

Nearly all of our workers had dramatic environmental changes - both for their immediate workspaces and for the ability to mobilize their work throughout the day. Whereas before, workers would spend part of the day in coffee shops or libraries, often with friends or other professionals, they are now forced to work from home for the entire day. This often leads to creative blocks, mental frustrations, or a lost meaning of fulfillment in their work.

Workers who live with others find their carefully curated spaces to be infiltrated with chaos. In response, workers have devised creative strategies to return some functionality to their space. For example, Danielle described blocking out the outside world:

*“Prior to Covid- I would work in a coffee shop- a place I can walk in and leave without feeling the need to clean it up, or pop in a load of laundry- but now- even when I have the house to myself- the house itself can be a big distraction... the object that saves my bacon (and my sanity)? My big over-the-ears noise-canceling headphones streaming the Focus at Will application (wordless ambient music). Once I clap those things on my head- I feel zeroed in on what’s in front of me- and because they plug in, I am literally anchored to my computer. Which... some days, is the only way I can sit still and settle in.”*

*-Danielle, Research Contract Consultant  
Diary Entry*

While Danielle “anchors” herself to her computer as a focusing strategy, several of our workers set sail for more conducive environments. Nadine, for example, lived in a small studio where, during the pandemic, she simply could not find a space to work:

*“And for most of COVID, my husband and I were living in a 450 square foot duplex, and we were both working from home and it was just really hard for me to concentrate... And so my husband was using the dining room table as his desk, and so there was room for me to sit at the table, but I can't concentrate if he's right there. So then I tried out the basement, but I got really depressed. And then I was trying to work outside just on the patio, but our neighbor was a widower and he would be out on the phone crying because he's so sad that he misses his wife... I could not focus because I felt so bad for him. So I just couldn't find a spot that felt reasonable... So this set up feels like - Again, it's funny to show it to someone else. Because it's in between two bikes in this dirty garage, but it feels like so luxurious.”*

*-Nadine, Writer  
Interview*

Many workers like Nadine saw the pandemic as an opportunity to change their living situation to something more fulfilling, either in the amount of space, experiencing a new part of the country, or returning to a more supportive community. Nearly half of our participants moved to new houses as a direct result of the pandemic, and even more were considering moving.

### *Adjusting Operational Autonomy*

Operational autonomy rests on the assumption that there are jobs to choose from; an assumption that the pandemic dramatically affected for almost all of our workers. Predictably, workers in certain industries that are health- or research-adjacent have seen much more work, often that they feel they cannot turn down. Danielle, for example, was overloaded:

*“And my work had actually ramped up quite a bit. Like, I was billing over 75 hours right up through COVID. And billing hours aren't working hours, so it was a lot to try to juggle. So at that point, I was spending all day with [my son]. My husband would get home from work. There'd be that transition time where he'd be doing dinner. And then I would work for a couple of hours, go to bed for a couple of hours, and then wake up at, like, 3:00 in the morning, to try to get in the work that I was doing. And then I'd start it all over again. And that way it was, like, there is no balance in this work/life. There's really no sleep in this work/life. And that lasted for, I think, four months.”*

*-Danielle, Research Contract Consultant  
Interview*

Whereas before, workers were able to prioritize jobs in tandem with their personal lives, the pandemic has caused workers who have work available to feel like these choices are no longer possible. Often, this is out of fear that work will dry up later. Faye, for example, described a curious tension she and her colleagues were experiencing:

*“But also there's like a dissidence happening because the world is on fire and it's causing uneasiness about our jobs and our clients, and are all of our clients going to disappear, or what's going to happen? Because design is always the first thing to get cut, usually... But at the same time, I've never been more busy. People are just calling wanting to hire me to do stuff. More than normal, a lot more than normal... it's like I'm being slammed and simultaneously super worried about whether or not I'll have work. This is confusing.”*

*-Faye, Graphic Designer  
Interview*

Although she has far more work than normal, Faye still feels precarious. The threat that work might disappear results in her, and other workers, feeling both overworked and strapped.

While some workers have too much work, the opposite is true for other workers. Catering, for example, saw a brief period of increased work as restaurants closed, but as restaurants reopened, Isabel has seen all of her work disappear:

*“So once restaurants start opening up, once grocery stores became a little bit more easier to navigate, then our work slowed down and the summer, it was a complete, almost total dead stop... I'm used to the summer getting slow, but this was just like, it went from being - feeling like it was the holidays, like December are always our busiest month. We're working on - There's so many holiday parties and whatnot. It went from feeling like December for about three months straight to just nothing. So that was a big shock.”*

*-Isabel, Chef  
Interview*

Several workers, including Isabel, have found help with government assistance, a partner's income, or savings. Interestingly, as I discuss next, most workers who have lost work were able to successfully pivot the fundamental forms of work they perform.

## *Realizing Holistic Autonomy*

Workers identities did not change during the pandemic, but it has challenged various aspects of their identity. Given physical distancing requirements, many workers lost access to their friends, neighbors, and coworkers. This has had devastating mental health effects on many, but also has affected workers' ability to work. Nadine, for example, is incredibly social; she described having to sit in another room from her husband and leave her phone far away in order to get any work done because she would prefer to just talk to people. She is passionate about several hobbies, most of which are community-based. When the pandemic started, she abided by physical distancing recommendations, severing close ties to the various communities she engaged with regularly. This had multifaceted effects on her work:

*"I don't think I fully understood the connection before, but I think, so my ideas come from being around other people. And so, I pull from stories that friends have told me or funny things I hear. Like this is an example, when I was writing my novel that just came out, I was in grad school class, and we were talking, somebody wrote an essay about bologna. And it was this sentimental essay about eating bologna sandwiches with their family when they were a kid. And then someone else was, 'Hey, do that bologna is used for vandalism? It has so many preservatives that people stick it on cars, and then the preservatives eat the paint.' And so, I was just like, 'Oh my God, that's amazing.' It was perfect for a plot point in my novel, and I ended up having this whole bologna vandalism thing in my novel... when we were all in lockdown, it was like there was nothing coming in. And I think that's part of why I was having depression and trouble writing... I think those connections are just vital to my writing, because if stuff isn't coming in, what's going to come out? Nothing good. And I think I surround myself with people that match my interest in aesthetic, and so it's particularly juicy when I talk to my friends... I think I always thought I was an extroverted introvert. I spend a lot of time alone. I need to spend a lot of time alone but if I also don't have that friend input, I just feel I wither. And there were many weeks where there were only a couple friends that I thought all that would come over to the yard. And I remember feeling why I like these girls, but this is not enough. I need a variety. Yeah, so I just think it's essential that I have lots of contact with lots of people for my mental health. And I didn't really ever know that before. I mean, I knew it but not really."*

*-Nadine, Writer  
Interview*

Nadine always considered herself an “extroverted introvert,” but the pandemic has made her realize how crucial her social connections are to her mental health. Like many, Nadine fell into a depression when she lost the ability to socialize. Of course, depression in itself made it more difficult for her to write. However, it was really the loss of inspiration, previously drawn from engaging with her communities, that led to her writing troubles and depression. This recognition about her identity helped Nadine to develop several strategies for engaging with her communities while distancing, in turn helping her to write again.

While it’s been a hard year, many, such as Beth, believe their identities as independent workers has helped them navigate the pandemic:

*“The uncertainty of Covid doesn’t scare me like it did earlier in the year. Sometimes I like to think that I’m perhaps more equipped to handle, or simply adapt to changes due to the pandemic because I’m not a stranger to uncertainty. As a freelancer I’ve always lived with a certain amount of unknown.”*

*-Beth, Filmmaker  
Diary Entry*

Thanks to their practiced abilities to learn new types of work, skills with various levels of work, and interest in adding to their repertoire, workers were well-equipped to pivot the ways in which they found work, changing the nature of their work, and finding work in new places. For example, several workers developed online marketing skills that had previously not been needed. Others found new markets or applied their skills to new ventures. While these pivots were challenging, workers largely felt prepared to identify and enact these - often dramatic - changes to their work.

That said, parents with young children have struggled. Whereas before, working independently allowed for thoroughly-developed professional and parental roles, independent working parents during the pandemic reported having a harder time maintaining their discrete identities:

*“There was zero time to shift into different modes... So just trying to kind of balance the politics of home and working from home with marriage and family is a whole different avenue of challenge in this set up... I feel like it's a frog boiling alive.”*

*-Danielle, Research Contract Consultant  
Interview*

While many workers without children were able to pivot, parents with young children are simply trying to stay afloat - often feeling as if they are failing at everything.

Despite these struggles, very few participants have seriously considered switching to a more traditional form of employment. Many workers entertained the idea, even prior to the pandemic, about moving to a more consistent position. However, the appeal of independent work always prevailed. During the pandemic, some workers even felt more secure in their choice to be independent:

*“It's actually more so I feel more strongly about being independent... I don't know. I think maybe there's a shift in the available jobs as well that makes me feel that way. That maybe this is just like a safer bet. And just again, I don't know. I just feel like there are more people doing the same thing. I feel like there was [inaudible] we talked about a little bit about that sustainability aspect and I feel like growing up and I feel the same way where people were home, people were crafting, they were getting back to their roots in art. And there were a lot of other people that started up their own business initiatives. And I just think there's going to be a lot more future of that independent thing, corporations don't support you the way they used to with pensions and 401(k)s anymore. It does seem like people jump around a lot more, freelance is definitely a more popular option for working.”*

*-Tara, Custom Clothing  
Interview*

Tara has always felt that working independently enables her to live by her values; she believes that during the pandemic, others realized how important it is to do the same. Additionally, Tara believes the growing popularity of independent work makes it seem like a more viable option to workers, who are no longer supported by traditional workforces. While some workers briefly considered

switching to the traditional workforce, more are aligned with Tara; the autonomy enabled through independent work is far more valuable than the ease of working for someone else.

In sum, each of the autonomies promised by independent work has been affected by pandemic-related life changes. Temporal flexibility has increased for many workers. Workers without children have leveraged this, along with more time available, in many forms of self-care activities. Workers with children, on the other hand, have used their temporal flexibility in tandem with personal sacrifices to manage children at home. Environments have also changed dramatically; while work spaces became more chaotic, many workers have responded swiftly, evaluating what was no longer working and creating new, more functional environments. Operational autonomy has reduced as work evaporated or felt precarious, but our participants' identities as independent workers have largely remained strong.

### **Autonomies and Independent Work: A Case Study**

Despite the year's challenges and its effects on autonomies, most workers want to keep working independently. Some briefly considered taking permanent jobs or wishing they had more financial stability, but most described these feelings as fleeting. Working parents, the most challenged, are still simply trying to stay afloat. The temporal autonomy provided by independent work is the only thing keeping their homes together; any further changes to their day will risk toppling the entire system. Most non-working parents have not seriously considered leaving; several feel more strongly about remaining independent. They view the pandemic as something temporary, have had few aspects of their job affected, or have pivoted successfully. As I illustrated above, most workers have responded adeptly to the challenges the pandemic had brought them. The promises offered by independent work, though challenged, still remain. In fact, independent work has, in many ways, better prepared our workers for surviving the pandemic.

However, one worker is deeply considering finding a permanent position. Interestingly, this individual has had several forms of autonomy removed or dramatically affected by the pandemic. In



order to illustrate how these autonomies are crucial to work, this section focuses on this specific individual, how the pandemic greatly reduced each form of autonomy, and how she feels about independent work as a result.

### *Autonomies Removed*

Isabel works as a freelance chef for a variety of catering companies. Isabel came to freelance work after a challenging internship. Working under a difficult chef was frustrating; she felt like she failed to learn anything and was certainly not feeling fulfilled by her work. After the internship, a group of friends who had previously graduated from her cooking school took her in and showed her the ropes of freelance work. Isabel loved this arrangement. Working with her friends was fun, and she always had work available. In her words:

*“That's kind of how I fell into being an independent contractor. It allowed me to do what I wanted to do. I didn't have to learn things that I didn't really want to learn and deal with. And it also gave me flexibility because I have always liked to travel. I've always had friends in different places that I like to go see, and so it allowed me to set my own schedule and say, I will work this job, I won't work this job. It's tough because when I'm not working, I don't get paid, but it does give me the flexibility to take a week to go see a friend or travel. Take a course somewhere, do something. It gave me a lot of freedom, which was like actually the biggest draw.”*

Isabel had some amount of temporal autonomy; while her hours of work were somewhat restricted by the time and length of events she was hired to cater for, she did have the ability to choose when she worked and when she travelled, took a class, or did anything else she felt like doing. Whereas many workers were able to leverage temporal autonomy for their newfound pandemic lifestyles, Isabel's existent temporal autonomy was removed. Before the pandemic, Isabel appreciated the ability to work when she wanted and travel when she wanted. Though she was very close with her workers, she also had a fulfilling personal life. However, the pandemic tore that away:

*“But the need to have time to myself to travel and have that other life, that didn't matter anymore because I wasn't going anywhere.”*

Isabel feels that her personal needs, separate from her work life, are no longer valid reasons to take time off. Her temporal autonomy centered around travelling, which is impossible during a pandemic. Before, Isabel could work when she wanted; now she feels like she has no choice but to work.

As a chef, Isabel chooses to work in her clients' kitchens. Isabel could have worked in industrial kitchens or for a venue, but she values working closely in home kitchens and, in a sense, celebrating important events with her clients. Unfortunately, the pandemic shifted this work environment to a much less fulfilling setting:

*“It's hard because a lot of what I really like- and catering is really chaotic... The one sort of thing that helps me through is not only do I get to see people enjoying my food, but I get to really get to know my clients... And some of them, you're celebrating with them. You come back every year for birthdays, for anniversaries, graduations, you watch their kids grow up... And when I'm really stressed out and I have to remember that, that this is someone I care about, this is someone I really like, I want to do a good job. I want to provide them a nice meal for their celebration. And so without that, it's a very cold, different feel to it. It's a totally different vibe... I think I hadn't realized just how important that was, how important an element that is.. And without it, it's really weird to have all of this food come together in my kitchen and then get boxed in my work kitchen, which is not a warm, friendly place. It's not a home kitchen at all. It's stainless steel, white walls... And so to do all that in the kitchen and make this food, there's kind of less love in it and to put it into a compostable box, like a cardboard box, basically, package it up and leave it at the front door and then scamper away. It was a really weird - It took a lot of the kind of love out of what I do.”*

Isabel is deeply passionate about her work. Working in catering is a way for her to enact care, and she treasures the opportunity to develop close personal relationships with her clients. She typically works in clients' home kitchens; intimate spaces that involve high levels of trust to navigate freely. As she describes, this is a far cry from the cold industrial kitchen where she now prepares boxed meals. Her environment, once fulfilling, is now desolate.

Unsurprisingly, her work itself has had to change; as she stated, “it basically became illegal to be caterers.” Before, Isabel had operational autonomy. She was in charge of what jobs she took and over the work she engaged with. Now, she has to be open to what types of work become available:

*“I cook lunches for a little micro school, which is what some of the families, at least in this area are doing. And that's something I've never done before. I never even considered making lunches for four year olds, box lunches, but it pays the bills. It helps. I think things are starting to pick up, but it's just so unclear what our next steps are. Like what's going to come where we're going to be needed. We've had to be really fluid and really open to like, okay, that's not working anymore, we're going to have to start doing this now. And that's sort of going to keep going I think for a little while until things, if things straighten out.”*

Being open to work, particularly after so much has disappeared, is frightening. It needs to work, for now - Isabel has to earn a living somehow. However, the looming uncertainty combined with the removed autonomy has Isabel yearning for more stability.

In particular, Isabel has been struggling with the newfound challenges in her work. Working in food service is always challenging. As Isabel described:

*“When I go to work when things are normal, I'm thinking about the food and what I need to do, the steps I need to take, the timing, all of that. When the guests are going to come, how we're going to present certain things... part of what's thrilling and stressful about catering is that it's partly a performance... You have to have stuff done and ready, you have to be social and smiling and helping them with whatever they need help with. You also have to get the food out in a certain way at a certain time. And so there's that kind of adrenaline going.”*

Before the pandemic, Isabel's work was adrenaline-fueled. Each event was a “performance,” and participating in the dance of preparing food, helping guests, and entertaining was challenging and rewarding. During the pandemic, her work remains challenging, but in an entirely different way that is at odds with her personality:

*"I'm very neurotic. I like to visualize things. I like to know what's coming. When I have a job two weeks ahead, I will spend almost every day worrying about how am I going to do this? How am I going to do that, how am I going to do that? Visualizing, making notes, I'm very neurotic about that sort of thing, and so this [new work situation] is not conducive to that."*

Isabel likes to plan – she identifies as a “neurotic” person. Working as a chef in home kitchens is challenging, but planning every component helps Isabel conduct a successful event. Orchestrating all of the tiny details - when guests are arriving, how long things take to prepare, when they need to be out - was a thrilling challenge. Visualizing each of these minute these details in advance was reassuring for Isabel and in line with her identity. However, working as a chef during the pandemic is not conducive to planning. All of the quickly changing regulations, such as grocery store guidelines, dining restrictions, schools opening or closing, etc. dramatically affect the way that Isabel engages with her work. Planning no longer makes sense; now, Isabel has to go with the flow, which makes her feel precarious. Her work is no longer aligned with her identity, and that is destabilizing.

During the pandemic, Isabel’s temporal, environmental, operational, and holistic autonomy have been removed. Isabel can no longer use temporal autonomy to travel and environmental autonomy to work in intimate kitchens; it is no longer safe. She can’t utilize operational autonomy to choose which jobs to perform, as jobs are tight and doing so is no longer financially responsible. Finally, her holistic autonomy to engage with her work in a fulfilling manner aligned with her personality is removed; whereas before, Isabel could leverage her “neurotic” personality to plan events in advance, now she has to be completely responsive to whatever jobs might open themselves up. While stressors before the pandemic were adding pressure to some of these autonomies, the pandemic has stripped them entirely. Isabel no longer has control over her time, her environment, the jobs she takes, or enacting her identity; without these, she’s beginning to yearn for the promised stability of working for an organization:

*"I mean, my feelings about being an independent contractor in general have changed. I started being an independent contractor so that I could have my own life, so that there would be what I felt was a good work life balance. I could work when I wanted to, and I could have my life on the side...And so, I don't know. And so I've been lately in the last year or so, maybe even longer, kind of dreaming of actually having it not be quite so personal and maybe just being a cog in a wheel and working for a corporation where nobody knows me and nobody knows my business and I don't know any of their business. And paychecks are doled out every week or every two weeks, you know exactly how much you get paid, you know exactly your hours... I feel like there might be more money or even if there isn't, even if I'm making not as much per hour, just to have it regular and have it be predictable and consistent, that really appeals to me right now."*

None of our other workers had all of their autonomies so dramatically affected by the pandemic. While many felt they had reduced options for the type of work they chose, most leveraged autonomies inherent in independent work to deftly respond to the pandemic. When all of these autonomies are simply removed, however, independent work becomes much less appealing. Thus, it appears that the primary appeals of independent work lie in multiple forms of autonomy that, together, provide a sense of control, value, and engagement with work and identity.

## **DISCUSSION**

These findings validate and extend upon current literature examining the motivations for working independently. Consistent with prior work, the ability to manage their own schedules and environments was a primary motivation for our workers toward engaging with independent work. Workers valued the ability to work when it was more efficient and by project, rather than when hours dictated, as well as changing space (locally or geographically) when the present conditions no longer worked.

I contribute to the literature a refined framework clarifying the various forms of autonomy that drive appeal for independent work. Prior literature has identified temporal and some amount

of environmental control as strong motivators for independent workers; in addition, I identify and define operational and holistic autonomy. The ability to have autonomy over *how* and *what* work is performed - operational autonomy - means that workers feel more motivation and ownership over their work. Our workers were largely able to earn more doing the work they enjoyed doing, rather than being forced to take jobs with unlikeable people or at the expense of other responsibilities. The ability to choose *how deeply to engage* - holistic autonomy - provides workers with a sense of identity; for example, an enmeshed identity with their craft or a shared identity as a parent and professional. Though these autonomies were affected by the pandemic, workers largely demonstrated resilience. Although feeling precarious, and many had to accept financial assistance, most were used to the uncertainty the pandemic exemplified. The ability to dabble in tertiary work provided skills enabling workers to pivot affected jobs successfully. Ultimately, this framework for autonomy helps to identify what workers find valuable in their work: control over their time, space, work practices, and individual values.

It appears that women may find these forms of autonomy particularly compelling and missing from the traditional workforce. Women have long faced additional barriers in the workforce, resulting in lower pay, fewer promotions, and guilt [15,32]. Independent work may ameliorate some of the issues that women face; working independently allows them to work where and when they choose without being perceived as an undedicated employee [4]. They can avoid discriminating clients, meet their earning potential, and know the true value of their work. By working for themselves, working mothers may circumvent the “false choice” narrative and maintain a professional identity while remaining fully dedicated at home [38]. Independent work did not remove the societal pressures women face or their characterizations as either stay-at-home moms or career women, but it did alleviate some of the pressures they might have faced in traditional organizations.

The stories we heard reveal how deeply these autonomies are valued and the extent to which they can be threatened. The desire to work independently remained remarkably intact throughout the pandemic; only one of our workers truly considered returning to the traditional workforce, and this worker had each form of autonomy removed by the pandemic. Assuming some bottom level of economic viability via support through a partner, parents, or government assistance, we see that these forms of autonomy maintain appeal. In fact, people will continue to find meaning as these autonomies crumble until they disappear entirely with little hope of returning.

This framework reflects the control that individuals desire and enact over their lives. However, it also reflects deeper values surrounding the meaning of work itself. The value that independent workers place in these forms of autonomy are similar to the values inherent in pre-Fordist work preferences. The industrial revolution turned skilled craftsmen work toward a system of mass production utilizing unskilled labor to perform repetitive, specialized tasks [36]. Gramsci, critical of this turn, characterized Fordist practices such as the assembly line as mechanizing work and removing the need for intelligence and initiative [13]. Even in his time, Ford saw extremely high turnover rates due to the monotonous, and ultimately unfulfilling, nature of assembly line work. Later scholars continued the call for, and demonstrated potential benefits of, more distributed workplace hierarchies [40]. Modern scholars have indeed indicated many components of Fordism are no longer integral to how work is conceived and structured. Although current industrial practices are a far cry from Huxley's Ford-inspired *Brave New World*, workers in our sample feel elements of Ford's vision remain. Our workers are highly skilled, as are their counterparts working in formal organizations; yet, in some ways these independent workers feel that working for today's companies is just as de-skilling as Fordist assembly-line practices were to craftsmen at the turn of the century. Our workers value autonomy over their time, environment, work, and ultimately, their identity; to them, independent work is how those autonomies can be

fulfilled. Understanding the values and various forms of autonomy important to modern workers are worth interrogating further. These insights have implications for our understanding of the future of work in an increasingly digital, flexible, and complicated age.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This paper focused on high-skilled independent knowledge workers, who compose only a portion of the nontraditional workforce. A better understanding of the full landscape of independent workers, particularly the gig-economy, is necessary to understand the appeal of various forms of independent work, as well as if and how these promises are actually fulfilled. Low-wage flexible work is quite different from the skilled workers I investigate here. However, the discourse proclaiming temporal autonomy as a benefit in independent knowledge work are also used to “sell” gig-work. These individuals, expecting to find freedom, become low-wage workers slave to market forces. Thus, understanding autonomies in independent knowledge work may further clarify the clash between discourses surrounding gig work and the lived experiences of gig workers [29].

This research, like much of the literature, focuses on the experiences of predominantly white women. Future research should also explore independent working men to see what led them to independent work, if they experience autonomy differently, and (if applicable) how they integrate parenthood with their work. More importantly, this research identified the importance of independent work in enabling individuals to live their values holistically, even in the face of societal forces disadvantaging those same values. In this group of women, we see the various types of values that workers wish to enact through their work and how these values clash with societal norms. A nuanced and intersectional exploration of the myriad experiences of workers, including non-white workers as well as those who do not identify as women, is necessary to fully grasp the shifting landscape of independent work.



## CONCLUSION

Current literature suggests that the primary benefit of independent work centers around temporal and environmental autonomy - the ability to work when and how one chooses. My work confirms that these forms of autonomy are highly valued by independent workers. However, it is far from the only benefit. Independent workers also find their work structures enable autonomy over their work practices and the values they perform while working. Although many workers found themselves in precarious situations during the pandemic, they maintained that the autonomies gained through working independently were still more valuable than the sense of security a traditional workforce might provide. This broader framework of autonomy helps shed light on the various values individuals hope to enact on a daily basis. A continued exploration of these values will help our understanding of the future of work, particularly as it relates to how, when, in what ways, and for whom workers choose to work.

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