

## Against the Grain

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### Gig Cataloger: Working as an Independent Contractor on an Outsourced Reclassification Project

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# Gig Cataloger: Working as an Independent Contractor on an Outsourced Reclassification Project

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## Introduction

Outsourcing libraries may get to know the vendors they've hired, but they still may not know much about the people performing the work. More broadly, many librarians may be unfamiliar with the particularities of gig work, which consists of short term, temporary, or contract work, rather than the regularly-staffed work that is performed inside libraries. However, libraries that outsource projects are indirectly creating gigs, and some of that gig labor is provided by other librarians. For most of 2018, I worked as a contract cataloger for a cataloging vendor that had been hired to perform a reclassification project for an archaeological research institute in Europe. The project and the experience of being an outsourced librarian can illuminate what happens on the other side of an outsourced project.

## Getting Started

Although I had cataloged in libraries and for a database producer for a total of ten years, working from home as a contractor was a new experience. Before I started the contract position, I was already working two part-time library jobs. I was a part-time adjunct cataloging librarian at a community college and a part-time reference and readers advisory librarian at a public library. The two positions together averaged 35 hours per week; I didn't consider myself underemployed, but I was hoping to make some extra money that I could use to travel. I saw an ad that a cataloging vendor had posted on the AUTOCAT listserv, and I answered it. Compared to my experience interviewing for jobs in libraries, the hiring process was minimalist. The vendor and I exchanged several emails, through which I provided my resume and presented my experience, and then I was accepted onto the project, which was already underway. Those contractors who committed to work 40 hours each week received a bonus monthly stipend, with the suggestion that it might be used toward a health insurance premium, but I agreed to commit to ten hours per week, the vendor's minimum requirement.

## The Project

The vendor had been contracted to perform a reclassification project, from a local system to **Library of Congress** Classification. Once I was on the project, getting started was simple. The vendor provided access to the library's catalog, ClassWeb, and **OCLC** Connexion. Because I performed the work using a laptop that I already owned, I had no start-up costs. A small stipend was appended to my first paycheck to cover my set-up time, which consisted of reading all the project guidelines and following written instructions to install the library's catalog client on my laptop.

The records to be addressed were provided on spreadsheets. The library's records were of varying quality and lacked **OCLC** numbers; had they had **OCLC** numbers, much of the work probably could have been automated. The holdings were spread across several locations, some of which were excluded from the project. The task for us contractors was, for the relevant holdings, to find a matching record with an LC call number in WorldCat, if possible, and if not, to assign a new call number and record it in the bibliographic and item records. We did not shelve. Pay was per completed call number, paid monthly. Any call numbers applied to erroneous locations (those excluded) were unpaid, and we were not allowed to make any other changes to the records, although our permissions did not actually prevent us from making edits to other fields. Any security protocols that were in place for the library's benefit were invisible to me and not explained, and I did not attempt to test the limits of my permission levels.

As contractors, how we completed the work was up to us. Each person working on the project probably developed their own approach to complete the work efficiently, but I never had any contact with any of the other contractors. I looked first for a **Library of Congress** call number in the library's bibliographic record, which a few records did have. When that was the case, I merely created a Cutter number and copied the whole number to the relevant item records. Lacking an LC call number, I next looked for a **Library of Congress** Control Number (LCCN) and, if it existed, used it to search in Connexion. The next option was to search by title or, if necessary, by transliterated title. The majority of records were in English, but a significant minority were in Greek; the Greek records paid a higher rate because of the additional time needed for transliteration. I don't read more than a few words of Greek, but having become familiar with the Greek transliteration tables while previously cataloging at a theological library, aided at the time by auditing two semesters of Biblical Greek, helped me to work quickly enough with these records to earn a reasonable hourly rate.

If I found that a record existed in WorldCat with an LC call number, it could be copied. If not, I examined the subject headings to assign a call number using ClassWeb. Google Translate was useful for trying to determine the subject of non-English records, and I used Wikipedia to help me quickly locate categories for people and places. Although the more challenging

records — those that weren't for English materials or that required a little research — would have been the more interesting in other circumstances, being paid by the record made the simpler records preferable. While working, I was always cognizant of what, approximately, I was earning per hour. At the same time, I did enjoy working with a new-to-me library's collection that familiarized me with areas of the classification schedules that I had not used heavily before.

When the library's system would be down for scheduled maintenance, we were clearly advised in advance, but, as is normal, there were occasional system problems that interrupted work. For someone like me, who was tightly scheduled and paid by work completed, these interruptions were a little annoying to work around, but they were fortunately rare in the course of the project. For the library, not paying workers for downtime outside their control was an advantage.

Most of the work was straightforward. When I did have questions, all contact with the cataloging vendor was by email. All the documentation and instructions I had been given had been written by the vendor (apparently based on information provided by the library) and requests for clarification sometimes had to go from the vendor back to the library. The vendor always responded quickly and gave us an alternate contact when he would not be available, but the library seemed slower to respond to his questions. The time zone difference contributed to this slowness. Although there could be a time lag of up to a day to receive an answer, the delay wasn't too disruptive. I could simply skip over the relevant records and work on others until I received an answer. However, clear and easily-understood instructions were fundamental for making the project both financially viable for the outsourced labor and satisfactorily accomplished for the library. It's not in the financial interest of the labor to spend more than minimal time reviewing instructions or asking questions — that time is unpaid time.

## Results and Impact of the Project

A feature of working as outsourced labor is being removed from the results and impact of the work. The reclassification project was finished by the library's desired deadline. From my perspective, we contractors knew when the batch of work available to be done was the last of it, and once that was finished, there was simply no more. My work on the project ended as quickly as it started. The impact to the library is unknown to me, though presumably it

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was a good result. All the feedback during the project had been addressed generally to all the contractors, reminding us of various guidelines or updates to them. While this communication implied that the vendor, the library, or both were reviewing our work and perhaps adjusting for consistency, my role in the project was removed from that aspect. I did not receive individual feedback to know whether I was doing particularly well or needed improvement, from which I surmised that I was doing well enough. Of course, we were thanked by the vendor, both during the project and at the end. While the end of the project was anticlimactic, if the library had any disappointment in the results, I didn't have to handle it. Being able to complete the work and be entirely free from involvement afterward allowed me to redirect my time quickly.

### The Logistics of Being an Outsourced Librarian

Traditional library jobs don't tend to involve working from home with regularity, and this was my first experience with it. Because each of the two other library jobs I had required a 45- to 60-minute commute each way (and were about the same distance apart), the lack of commute made fitting in this third source of income much more possible. My typical schedule was to work for three hours in the morning on each of the two days a week that I worked an afternoon or afternoon/evening shift in the library, and then four hours in the morning on one of my days off. Without disciplining myself to work a set schedule, I could not have kept up with the commitment. However, I did take advantage of the flexibility to rearrange my contracted hours worked whenever I wanted to take a few days off.

My tax situation, already somewhat complicated by having more than one job, became more so when I started receiving some income as an independent contractor. Conveniently, I started the project at about the same time as I was meeting with a tax preparer to file for the previous year. The preparer explained that in the current year, I could file quarterly estimated taxes or, because I had other jobs at which I was classed as an employee, increase my withholding at one or both jobs. Based on my general estimate of how much I thought I could earn, he suggested an additional amount to withhold. I chose this latter route. I was apprehensive that I wasn't withholding enough, but my occasional back-of-the-envelope math seemed to indicate that I was. Fortunately, when I filed my taxes for that year, I didn't owe a penalty. In fact, the changes to the U.S. tax code for 2018 unexpectedly were in my favor, and I received a refund.

Beyond taxes, my finances in general became more complicated when I began working on the project. Some financial drawbacks common to gig work, such as paying for my own sick days and purchasing my own health

insurance, were mitigated by having limited benefits provided by my two part-time library jobs and health insurance coverage through my spouse's work. What was difficult was comparing the profitability of the three income sources with one another and with other possible jobs or gigs. Each had different pay and benefit structures, different availability of hours, and a different number of hours spent commuting. Gauging whether another opportunity was more or less lucrative was difficult, and I could only roughly estimate my overall annual income.

### Further Analysis

At *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, **Emily Ford** surveyed the literature on librarians working part-time jobs, as well as her own experience, and found that the advantages included diversity of work experience and flexibility (particularly when an individual needed only one part-time job), while the drawbacks included lack of health insurance, commuting, poor integration into the workplace, scheduling (when an individual had multiple part-time jobs), and lack of paid professional development time.<sup>1</sup> Compared to my part-time library jobs, the contractor position magnified some of the benefits and some of the drawbacks. My other two library jobs were both flexible and accommodating, but the scheduling problem did occur because changing my schedule at one job nearly always required asking for a schedule change at the other. In the contract position, by contrast, the flexibility was an enormous benefit because I set my own schedule. Although I tried to keep a regular schedule for my own benefit, it was not required, and I did not need even to notify anyone else when I was working. If I wanted to earn more, I could simply choose to work more hours. Having no commute was also a huge benefit. Because the contract position did offer the stipend to workers committing to full-time hours, it provided more for insurance than most non-traditional jobs.

However, in terms of integration into work culture and professional development time, the contract position offered nothing. I want to stress that I had no negative experience with the work culture, but there simply was none. For supplemental work, this lack was not problematic and at times even beneficial. No time had to be spent on anything other than the actual task. Similarly, it was beneficial not have to invest time in professional development as part of a side job. Had contract work been my only work, though, these benefits would have been negatives. I don't know how I would continue to be a successful librarian without interaction with colleagues and professional development. Similarly, I don't know how I could have performed this contract position without the experience and professional development investment provided by previous positions.

Books and articles on the gig economy as the future of work proliferate, but the role of gig work in the job market is uncertain. For example, *The Gig Economy* (a how-to business guide first published in November 2016),<sup>2</sup>

*Gigged* (a journalistic approach published in June 2018),<sup>3</sup> and *Temp* (an economic history published August 2018)<sup>4</sup> present a range of very positive to very negative views of gig work within just two years. Even the most positive author, **Diane Mulcahy**, writing in *The Gig Economy* about how to thrive as a gig worker, suggests that one way to succeed is to perform gig work in addition to a full-time job.<sup>5</sup> My experience echoed this suggestion. When, about halfway through the contract classification project, I had the opportunity to take a regular full-time position, I did so. I applied for and was offered a full-time position at the public library where I had been working part-time, and I decided to take it even though the salary was a little less and the hours a little more than I had between two part-time jobs. I left my adjuncting job but continued with the contract position until the project concluded at the end of the year.

Without knowing it, I may have been part of a larger employment trend. According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey conducted in May 2017 and released in June 2018, the number of people in the United States who, in their primary position, are contingent workers (those expecting their jobs to be temporary) or are alternative workers (those who are independent contractors, on-call workers, or who work for temporary or contract agencies) is actually smaller than it was in 2005.<sup>6</sup> It's possible that a greater number of gig-economy workers exist in the U.S., but, like myself, they are supplementing another job. Library employment also appears to have a shrinking number of employees hold multiple jobs without any one being full-time. *Library Journal's* "Placements & Salaries 2018" survey found that "[o]nly 15% of employed 2017 graduates took part-time positions...down by half from...2015....The majority of this year's part-timers hold only one position, with 40% reported holding two."<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

As supplemental work, working as an outsourced contractor allowed me to earn extra money using skills I already had and equipment (a laptop and an Internet connection) that I had already invested in. I had no commute or any additional overhead, and I could set my own hours. I was glad to be of indirect service to a library's patrons. The experience was positive, and although I wasn't drawn to gig work as a career path, I would be open to taking on another such project in the future for supplemental income. From the perspective of a gig worker, what libraries can do to make an outsourced project attractive is to keep the work straightforward, provide clear and thorough instructions, and attempt to maximize flexibility and potential earnings for the worker. The workers that libraries employ and invest in may be the same workers to whom libraries are outsourcing. 🍷