

The Future of Work: The Digital Hustle

The latest entry in a special project in which business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace.

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When I spot her outside the Dunkin' Donuts in Washington where we agreed to meet for our interview, Tiana is glaring at her phone with furrowed brow. When she notices me, her face softens. "Sorry," she says. "They just changed my hours for tomorrow and now I have to figure out who's going to watch my son." She makes a quick call to her sister, and they compare their shifting schedules to figure out how to hand off her son between shifts.

After a quick post online to check on the possibility of switching shifts, Tiana turns back to me and explains that through Craigslist she recently found a part-time seasonal job to supplement her hours stocking shelves at a big box retailer. While excited for the extra cash, coordinating care for her son and an hour-long commute on unreliable public transportation are proving complicated. When I ask her if she ever shuts off her phone, she shakes her head and says: "I never turn it off, unless it's about to die. I use my phone so much it dies at least once a day!"

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In the cross-hairs of increasingly precarious low-wage work, and ubiquitous personal technologies, workers like Tiana (a pseudonym) use their phones to cobble together their livelihoods. In interviews with more than 40 workers in low-status service, retail and manual jobs in three cities I found these workers relied on their smartphones—and sometimes free Wi-Fi at restaurants and libraries—as essential tools in their digital hustle. They used their phones to find and coordinate work and care, and to [alleviate stress in emotionally draining jobs](#). For many, making ends meet means constantly checking and participating in online networks and message boards to find work, as well as phone calls and text messages to coordinate their gigs. So why do some people still see [smartphones as a luxury for the poor](#)?

Many have marveled at the “leapfrog” adoption of mobile phones in the developing world that has allowed households to skip landline phones. Households in [Africa](#) and developing countries elsewhere are reaping the benefits of [mobile phone money transfers](#), [on-demand crop prices](#), and “micro-enterprises” that let rural residents buy airtime, and even charge their phones in villages without electricity. These advances have been celebrated as giving citizens the power to work around corrupt and slow-moving governments, and to pursue development that’s not dependent on chronically underfunded public infrastructure. But just how different is this from developments in the United States?

Indeed, [many in America’s working class](#) are leapfrogging over expensive home computers and taking up smartphones. However, this adoption hasn’t been driven only by the simple convenience of these devices. As hours become less reliable, as workers rely more on contingent employment in the “gig” and “sharing” economies, and as more single moms like Tiana need to [coordinate “patchworks” of care in the absence of affordable professional child care](#), smartphones act as a Band-Aid. It’s no coincidence that these devices have become more popular among low-wage workers as their lives get more complicated to manage. In the absence of safety nets provided to the working poor by public institutions, workers use their phones to “[do security](#)” for themselves.

Tiana’s phone is an important tool, yet throughout our interview she blamed herself for “being an addict.” During her breaks at her job, she uses an alarm to remind herself to put her phone away and get back to work because, “I’ll just sit there texting my sister about my son, checking my bank accounts, and totally lose track of time.” Employers are also worried about their employees’ phone use at work. Most of the workers I talked to reported restrictions on using and even carrying their phones while they’re working—although many found ingenious ways to subvert these rules. While some trendy high-status workplaces encourage their employees to nap and exercise throughout the day, [low-status workers face increasing amounts of employer surveillance and tight restrictions on their activities at work](#). Efforts to strictly control workers’ use of their devices at work ignore the important role these devices play, and fail to recognize the conditions driving this behavior.

The challenge for activists and policymakers interested in supporting low-wage workers is to acknowledge the importance of smartphones as tools that help manage the demands of everyday life at a time when society holds many people solely responsible for weaving their own safety nets. It's imperative that we support efforts by the federal government to [help with the high costs of maintaining service](#), and organizations seeking to [broaden access in vulnerable populations](#), while resisting the fiction that smartphones alone can fix these important issues.

For the [Future of Work](#), a special project from the [Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences](#) at Stanford University, business and labor leaders, social scientists, technology visionaries, activists, and journalists weigh in on the most consequential changes in the workplace, and what anxieties and possibilities they might produce.