



Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies: Itinerant Experts in a Knowledge Economy

Stephen R. Barley, Gideon Kunda

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Over the last several decades, employers have increasingly replaced permanent employees with temporary workers and independent contractors to cut labor costs and enhance flexibility. Although commentators have focused largely on low-wage temporary work, the use of skilled contractors has also grown exponentially, especially in high-technology areas. Yet almost nothing is known about contracting or about the people who do it. This book seeks to break the silence.

Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies tells the story of how the market for temporary professionals operates from the perspective of the contractors who do the work, the managers who employ them, the permanent employees who work beside them, and the staffing agencies who broker deals. Based on a year of field work in three staffing agencies, life histories with over seventy contractors and studies of workers in some of America's best known firms, the book dismantles the myths of temporary employment and offers instead a grounded description of how contracting works.

Engagingly written, it goes beyond rhetoric to examine why contractors leave permanent employment, why managers hire them, and how staffing agencies operate. Barley and Kunda paint a richly layered portrait of contract professionals. Readers learn how contractors find jobs, how agents negotiate, and what it is like to shoulder the risks of managing one's own "employability."

The authors illustrate how the reality of flexibility often differs substantially from its promise. Viewing the knowledge economy in terms of organizations and markets is not enough, Barley and Kunda conclude. Rather, occupational communities and networks of skilled experts are what grease the skids of the high-tech, "matrix economy" where firms become way stations in the flow of expertise.

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