

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

By 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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Review

One of Amazon.com's Best Business Books for 2004

"I know of no other book that provides the insightfulness, the detail, and thoroughness of *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies*. It synthesizes a great many theoretical strands and is truly brilliant. It will be the definitive text to which scholars and policy makers will turn for better understanding of this complex topic."--**Vicki Smith, *Administrative Science Quarterly***

"In this masterful and insightful book, Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda study the intricate and often counter-intuitive consequences associated with the changing nature of work. . . . *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies* makes an invaluable contribution to the study of contemporary organizations and the transformation of work. . . . [A] must read."--**Sarosh Kuruvilla, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review***

"This book fills an important gap by providing one of the first major research ethnographies of the high-tech sector, a major component of the knowledge economy. . . . It succeeds in providing the thick description that this field has needed for some time."--**Vincent Mosco, *Labour/Le Travail***

"The authors document a serious study of a specific community: the high-technology IT world of Silicon Valley at the height of the 1990s boom years. While the book is not a guidance manual for contractors or consultants, the dilemmas, contradictions, and situations recounted by the different actors would resonate and provide useful guidance for consultants and hiring managers in the development sector."--**Frances Rubin, *Development in Practice***

"Barley and Kunda provide a valuable study that is sure to appeal to those interested in the various manifestations of contingent work or the inner workings of labor markets."--**Jeremy Reynolds, *American Journal of Sociology***

From the Inside Flap

"If we are lucky, once a decade or so a classic ethnographic study comes along that captures the essence and the interesting nuances of an emerging, strategic occupation or work group. Barley and Kunda's *Gurus, Hired Guns, and Warm Bodies* is destined to be our classic for this decade. No one should be allowed to write about these itinerant professionals or propose new policies or labor market institutions to regulate or serve them unless they first read this book!"--Thomas A. Kochan, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

"This important book is the best account so far of the new and growing world of contract labor."--Peter Cappelli, University of Pennsylvania

"Few developments have been as heavily hyped and as poorly understood as the trend towards "contingent employment" among the professional/technical/managerial classes. We know from statistical studies that many professionals, especially technical professionals, are hired as temporary, contract workers--but we have known very little about why they work this way or about the conditions of their labor. Barley and Kunda put flesh on the bones of these skeletal figures, exploring the diversity of motives and working conditions, as well as regularities in how they evaluate jobs, build careers, and navigate tricky relationships with employment agencies, high-tech firms, and professional peers. *Gurus* significantly expands our understanding of what is sometimes called "the new economy," exemplifying the value of organizational ethnography and, especially in its superb account of life in labor markets, contributing distinctively to economic sociology. Moreover, the authors' prose is so clear and graceful that *Gurus* should become the book of choice for teaching sociology and organizational behavior to budding engineers and natural scientists."--Paul DiMaggio, Princeton University

"This is social science at its best: Barley and Kunda's ethnographies of itinerant technical contractors provide nuanced and compelling insights into the changing nature of work and employment today, and a revealing glimpse into the organization of the knowledge economy."--AnnaLee Saxenian, University of California, Berkeley

From the Back Cover

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