



Credit: Julie Su

The Rise of the Freelancer: A Workplace Reimagined

by Laju Edema | BComm (BTMA) '24

Over 50 years ago, John F. Kennedy said something that is still relevant today. He said: "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present are certain to miss the future" (Ross, 2017). What is interesting about this quote, is that it does not negate the difficulties that come with adjusting to change. Rather, it provides a practical approach to it: acceptance and advancement. Change is the only constant, or as JFK put it, "law of life." Because of this, searching for opportunities and methods of advancement is an act of self-preservation. COVID-19 has changed the way we work, and perhaps more permanently than one might think.

The telework industry is growing into a worldwide phenomenon. In March 2020, we saw a 40% increase in the number of Canadians who worked from home (Langton, 2020). This is no surprise, considering the benefits: unnecessary meetings can be condensed into an email, there is no commuting time, and the cost of owning office space is immensely reduced. The quality of the output does not suffer, either. One Stanford study found that people who worked from home were 13% more productive than their office-based

co-workers (Birkinshaw & Cohen, 2020). In fact, 4 in 10 Canadians are in jobs that could be carried out efficiently at home, with positions in finance, education and technical services forming the majority (Deng, Zechuan et al, 2020). One crucial benefit to remote work which the current and future generation of workers should leverage. With telework, employers can hire people who are experts in their field, location negligible.

Most individuals have some sort of talent or skill. Freelancers are people that capitalize on their skills by independently working with different clients, providing a service that they are experienced in. The burgeoning industry of telework breeds an advantage to freelancers as they are the aforementioned experts in their field that can provide quality and niched work to a variety of clients, all without the commitment of an in-house role. It can be quite profitable too. A study by MBO Partners found that there are more than 15 million full-time freelancers, with 1 in 5 earning more than \$100,000 per year (Samrega, 2019).

There are challenges to working as a freelancer and it is important to consider them. A freelancer may find themselves asking the question that many entrepreneurs do before they embark on a venture: "What does the world have plenty of, and what does it need?" It is common for freelancers to struggle to understand what service will actually utilize the skills they have. In an industry that is based on what one knows, it is tempting to adopt a jack-of-all-trades attitude and reason that the more services one puts out there, the more profit there is to be made. A jack-of-all-trades is the master of none, and to provide the most value, mastery is the key. The way to stand out in even the most concentrated of niches is to specialize as much as possible (Cordova, Alexander, et al. 2017). Specific expertise is more valuable than general knowledge, and in terms of profit, exclusivity creates demand. The less competition one has, the higher rates one may charge. With that approach in mind, the risk of burnout from stretching oneself too thin is mitigated and the focus is not on how much one can do, but how much value one can provide.

In the face of uncertainty, the most many of us can do is position ourselves for the best outcome and hope that it works out. Setting oneself up for the best possible future requires dedication to constant improvement and learning. This not only equips one with the skills they need to bring a positive impact to the workplace, but it also prevents stagnation. Developing marketable skills is empowering, especially in such a highly competitive job market. It is a response to change that is rooted in adaptation and advancement. Marketable skills give one an edge, and it is important to showcase that edge in a strategic manner - freelancing is such an option (Cooper, 2013). At the beginning of one's career, freelancing is a way to showcase these skills, and moreover, freelancing solidifies one's professional online presence in the most crucial stages with a portfolio and reviews from real and satisfied clients.

Self-assessment, learning, refinement, and working are all elements in a successful freelance career, but more importantly, are key steps in a journey of self-discovery. As the job market becomes more competitive and saturated, many have already learnt the importance of having specialized and marketable skills. Just to increase their chance of employment, more people find themselves returning to school to supplement their degrees with extra certificates and skills. Seeing opportunity where others see obstacles and chaos has always played a pivotal role in surviving and thriving in environments of upheaval. No single person can raise an entire economy out of a recession. A single person can only decide to do their best with what they have. If change is the law of life, then there will always be the opportunity for innovation to come alongside it.