

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Freelancing as A New Norm: Transformation of Employment and Challenges for The Education System

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Abstract

This article presents a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of freelancing as a new form of employment in the context of the transformation of the labor market in the early 2020s. The evolution of the content of freelance activity from narrow specialists (I-people) to multidisciplinary professionals (M-people) is considered in the context of the concepts of "liquid modernity" by Z. Bauman and "risk society" by U. Beck. Special attention is paid to the dual nature of the interaction between freelancing and the education system: on the one hand, education acts as an institution for training personnel for independent employment, and on the other hand, it itself becomes a field for freelance activity. New formats of integration are analyzed, including university ecosystems (using the Jobify platform as an example) and commercial EdTech projects. The issue of "secondary educational services" (tutoring, commissioned works, academic fraud) as a shadow segment of the market is considered separately. In conclusion, conclusions are drawn about the need for institutional adaptation of educational programs to the formation of competencies required in the conditions of independent employment and overcoming the ethical contradictions generated by the commercialization of education.

KEYWORDS

Freelancing, independent employment, labor market, transformation of employment, education system, student freelancing, M-people, EdTech, secondary educational services, academic ethics, digital economy, lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

The modern labor market is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The standardized model of employment, which assumes lifelong work in one organization, is giving way to flexible, individualized formats. A key manifestation of this shift has become freelancing — independent employment of professionals not bound by long-term contracts with an employer. According to forecasts, in 2025 the number of freelancers in the world will reach 1.57 billion people, and the volume of the freelance platform market will amount to 8.39 billion US dollars [4].

This article aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of freelancing, its substantive evolution and, most importantly, its complex and multifaceted place in the education system. The interaction of these two spheres has a dual character: education, on the one hand, tries to prepare specialists for the new reality, and on the other hand, itself becomes a field for freelance activity, creating both opportunities for students and ethical dilemmas. The work will consider the theoretical foundations of freelancing, its modern trends, integration processes in the university environment, as

well as problematic aspects requiring an institutional response.

1. Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Freelance Research

Understanding the phenomenon of freelancing is impossible without referring to sociological theories describing the nature of modern society. Zygmunt Bauman characterizes the current state as “liquid modernity,” where social institutions and individual life trajectories lose stability and certainty [3]. Ulrich Beck supplements this picture with the concept of “risk society,” in which people are forced to rely on themselves, building their own “individualized labor biography” [3].

In this context, freelancing appears not simply as a form of part-time work, but as a model of professional and labor relations characterized by the autonomy of the worker and the customer, the absence of permanent labor ties, and independent planning of employment [3]. Researchers D.O. Strebkov and A.V. Shevchuk made a significant contribution to

the sociology of independent employment, defining freelancers as workers of a new type who embody the spirit of the information society [6].

The actualization of freelancing in the scientific and educational sphere is caused by the general crisis of traditional educational institutions. This has led to the formation of the so-called “market of secondary educational services,” in the structure of which such segments as tutoring, academic fraud, and the performance of commissioned works are distinguished [2].

2. Evolution of the Content of Freelancing: From the Universal Specialist to M-people

If at the dawn of the development of freelancing narrow specialists (I-people) were valued, today the market dictates new requirements. The analysis of modern trends makes it possible to identify several key changes in the content of freelance activity.

Table 1.
Comparative Analysis of Freelancer Types

Specialist Type	Characteristics	Demand
I-person	Expert in a narrow field (for example, a developer in Rust)	High in narrow niches, allows setting high rates [4].
T-person	Deep knowledge in one field and practical skills in related fields (an editor who can do typesetting)	In demand in companies seeking to save on hiring [4].
M-person	Combines 2–3 professions, possesses developed soft skills	Indispensable in startups, at the intersection of disciplines, for solving complex tasks [4].

A modern freelancer is no longer simply a performer, but a “lifelong student” for whom continuous learning becomes a necessity [4]. In addition to professional hard skills, self-presentation skills (portfolio), communication, time management, and language knowledge become critically important. Knowledge of English, for example, increases a freelancer’s income by 40–50% and opens access to international exchanges such as Upwork or Fiverr [7].

A separate trend of 2024–2025 has been the shift in demand from long IT retraining programs to short, practice-oriented courses. As noted at the online school Skypro, 75% of students today do not want to change their profession, but to learn how to earn additional income through freelancing or increase their salary in their current position [1]. The driver of this demand has been training in working with neural networks, which makes it possible to increase productivity

“here and now” [1].

3. Integration of Freelancing into the Education System: Searching for New Forms

The interaction between the education system and freelancing is developing in several directions. Traditional universities, whose educational standards are focused on training a “hired” specialist to work in an organization, face the need to revise their approaches.

In his research, V.S. Kharchenko raises a key question: “Are they taught to be a freelancer at a Russian university?” [3]. An analysis of higher professional education standards shows that they only indirectly contribute to the formation of qualities necessary for independent employment, such as innovativeness, the ability to think, and the capacity for self-education. However, there is still insufficient purposeful preparation for building an individual labor biography, working with projects, and searching for clients in classical university programs.

Grassroots initiatives and new formats are becoming a response to this challenge. A vivid example is the startup Jobify, created at Ufa State Petroleum Technological University. This platform combines education and freelancing into a single ecosystem: a student first masters a demanded skill, for example, working with neural networks, and then receives guaranteed access to real orders. Artificial intelligence on the platform helps automate routine work and select projects [5].

Another channel of integration is commercial EdTech. Large online schools (“Netology,” Skillbox, “Yandex Practicum”) respond sensitively to market demands by offering courses aimed specifically at freelance earnings. They teach not only the profession, but also how to sell one’s services,

communicate with clients, and manage projects [1], [7].

4. The Student-Freelancer: A New Social Type in the University Environment

The phenomenon of combining study with freelancing deserves special attention. Researchers identify the “student-freelancer” as a special social type that differs from a simply working student. Such a student has high motivation for professional development and builds their career by relying on their own mechanisms for minimizing risks.

The motives for entering freelancing are diverse: from financial independence to gaining specialized experience that education does not provide. For a student, freelancing becomes a space for accumulating social capital and a “trial run” that allows acquired knowledge to be converted into real projects.

However, this process faces institutional limitations. The flexible schedule of a freelancer comes into conflict with the rigid schedule of a university. In addition, as research shows, the low average income level from such employment and the absence of a regulatory legal framework restrain the professionalization of student freelancing.

5. The Shadow Side: Freelancing in the Market of Secondary Educational Services

The problematic aspect of the interaction between education and freelancing cannot be ignored. This concerns the segment of “commissioned works” (course papers, theses, dissertations), which represents a large market of shadow services. Researchers O.A. Grimov and V.A. Afanasyeva classify this activity as “secondary educational services” and state the tendency toward its professionalization.

Table 2.

Characteristics of the Segments of the Market of Secondary Educational Services

Market Segment	Essence	Development Factors
Tutoring	Legitimate assistance in mastering the program	Crisis of mass school/university education
Commissioned works	Completion of course papers, diplomas, control works to order	High academic workload, imitation of education, lack of time

Market Segment	Essence	Development Factors
Academic fraud	Submission of others' works under one's own name, cheating	Decline in the value of education, orientation toward a formal result

The main driver of this market is financial motivation on the part of freelance performers and students' attempts to minimize their own efforts under conditions of formalized requirements. This segment undermines the foundations of academic ethics and reduces the real value of education, representing a challenge for the entire system.

CONCLUSION

The conducted analysis makes it possible to conclude that there is a deep and ambiguous connection between freelancing and the education system. Freelancing has ceased to be a marginal form of part-time work and has become a significant element of the economy, creating a demand for specialists of a new type — flexible, multidisciplinary (M-people), capable of continuous self-education.

The education system is searching for an adequate response to this challenge. The institutionalization of freelancing as a subject of study remains incomplete. On the one hand, classical universities are slowly adapting standards to prepare the "free artist." On the other hand, effective hybrid forms are emerging — university ecosystems, such as Jobify, and commercial EdTech platforms, which successfully close this gap by teaching freelance earning skills.

The ethical dilemma related to freelancing in education requires special attention. A student-freelancer earning money by writing course papers for their own fellow students is a symptom of deep problems within the education system itself, its excessive formalization and detachment from the real needs of learners.

The further development of the interaction between freelancing and education will be determined by the ability of educational institutions to legitimately integrate the project-based approach and entrepreneurial competencies into curricula, transforming freelancing from a shadow or alternative practice into a full-fledged tool for forming students' professional capital.

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