

## Life fulfillment: The motivation dynamics of freelancers

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### ABSTRACT

People, in general, would have a career preference to become an employee in a big and established company. This career preference is natural, considering many benefits obtained when a person becomes an employee. However, this does not apply to some individuals who choose freelancers. Even though the stigma of being a freelancer exists, it was not an obstacle for people who choose a freelancer in choosing this career. This study's purpose was to understand the reason and the meaning of the career choices of freelancers. This research employed a qualitative approach with the phenomenological method. The data were collected by interviewing six freelancers that have been full-time freelancers for at least two years in the information technology field. The result showed that freedom, flexibility, learning opportunity, financial security, family time, progressive career, and life fulfillment motivate individuals to become full-time freelancers. The essence of the motivational dynamics of a freelance career was to achieve life fulfillment.

### Introduction

Success in life is sometimes judged through an individual career's success. In that manner, it is common for individuals to spend most of the energy, time, and resources that they have to achieve a successful career. Many things can be used as a standard to indicate the success of a career, such as position or rank, salary, and more subjective things, such as work-life balance. Basically, people have a particular orientation toward work with a certain set of priority of values. These values are identified as anchors: technical or functional competence, managerial competence, security, stability, entrepreneurial creativity, autonomy and independence, dedication to a cause, pure challenge, and lifestyle (Schein, 1990).

However, most careers also permit the fulfilling of several of the needs that underline different anchors. The career anchor concept describes such self-image within the internal career (Schein, 1996). Schein's seminal work on career anchors suggests that individuals develop careers within careers after their true abilities, needs, and values crystallize through various real-world work experiences. By achieving congruence between their career anchor and their work, individuals are more likely to attain positive career outcomes, such as job effectiveness, satisfaction, stability, and they likely achieve higher career outcomes than those who have failed to attain it (Danziger et al., 2008; Schein, 1996).

In Indonesia, the success of a career is more measured through position or rank, salary rate, and prestige. The majority of Indonesian prefer careers as civil servants or becoming an employee in a multinational corporation that provides job security, prestige, a big salary, and various kinds of benefits. Sahala and Muis (2014) conducted a survey regarding career

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choices towards 351 students and interviewed 51 students. The research results have revealed that 68% of the respondents have chosen a career in the governmental sector.

When so many people compete to obtain status as employees and permanent workers, some choose an independent career path that prioritizes freedom and flexibility. One type of independent career actor is a freelancer. Scott first used the term freelancer in his book entitled *Ivanhoe* in 1770 (M. Burke, 2008). Scott used the words free and lance (spears, a weapon with a long wooden shaft, and a pointed steelhead), which represent the descriptions of a mercenary. This mercenary is different from the soldiers who work exclusively for the king. He offers his service to anyone who could provide the highest price (M. Burke, 2008). Since then, the term freelancer has been embedded for independent workers who are not bound by an employer's long-term employment contract.

Freedom and flexibility offered by the career choice of freelancers have their unique attractiveness, which is unavailable in conventional careers. Freelancers have the freedom to determine their work's place, time, and style. The tight schedule and SOP do not bind freelancers to work on their assignments. Only through video call, interview, and explanation regarding the job or meeting can be done anywhere. Besides work, freelance career choices' attractiveness, freedom, and flexibility could also become the freelancers' boomerang. This condition has made the career choice as a freelancer to be avoided and considered unusual. Financial insecurity, experiencing loneliness, the obscurity of time limit between social and work life, and inability to relish the facilities acquired by conventional career workers, including health insurance, pension fund, and holiday allowance, are several risks of losing freelancers (A. Burke, 2012).

The phenomenon studied in this research was the growing number of freelancers, which occurs amidst negative stigma from the community and the risk of loss that has to be endured by freelancers. This condition becomes fascinating because the negative stigma and risk of loss should encourage individuals to avoid a freelancing career. Due to that matter, the study aimed to dig deeper regarding the dynamic of motivation of the freelancers. The motivation dynamic will be revealed by understanding their reason, values, and career anchor, which surfed as background for their career decision as freelancers.

## **Method**

This research used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology focuses on searching meanings and the essence of experiences acquired by respondents (Creswell, 2007).

### ***Participants***

This research was conducted by interviewing six full-time freelancers in the I.T. sector with 2-years minimum experience and married status. All the respondents are men between 25-40 years old. The respondents were recruited with the researcher network that fulfills the inclusion criteria, i.e., they have become a freelancer minimum of 2-years.

### ***Procedures***

The interview started with an introduction, an explanation about the purpose of the study, informed consent and asking the research question. The interview question sample is: (1) why do you choose to become a freelancer? (2) what made you believe that becoming a freelancer is the best for you? (3) what difficulties did you experience due to your decision?.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data analysis was performed through the phenomenology approach, as follows (Moustakas, 1994) :

1. *Epoche* is the methodological attitude of phenomenology. One refrains from judging whether anything exists or can exist as the first step in the phenomenological recognition, comprehension, and description of sense appearances. The researchers let the respondents express their thoughts and feelings freely and recorded the data to be analyzed after work.
2. Phenomenological reduction is selecting the information according to the research question. The information that can become the answer to the research question is extracted.
3. Imaginative variation is a stage aimed at explicitly the structures of experience more distinctively and is best described as a mental experiment. Features of the experience are imaginatively altered to view the phenomenon under investigation from varying perspectives. The information extracted from step 2 is then categorized into several emerging themes.
4. Synthesis of meaning and essence, at this step, the result of step 3 then synthesized and transformed into the most dominant meaning that emerged.

Credibility in this research was conducted through member checks and peer examination.

## Results

The analysis of the motivation dynamic of freelancers resulted in three main findings. The first is related to the reason to choose a freelancer career, the second is the challenges, and the third is the strategies as a freelancer.

### The reason to choose a freelance career

Becoming a freelancer is based on many reasons, both personal and family reasons. The reason includes family time, financial security, progressive carrier, freedom and flexibility, learning opportunity until life fulfillment.

**Family time.** Family is the strongest reason that causes individuals to stop working as employees and shift into full-time freelancers. The decision to become freelancers has made the respondents fully contribute to the family, especially individuals who already have children. The need for freedom and flexibility in working increases because the respondents want to be fully involved in their children's growing process. Even one of the respondents claims that he wants to use most of his time to enjoy his children's childhood.

*Most of the kids did not remember their childhood with their parents. If it's up to me, I want to make my children aware that I was there with them during their childhood. The father departs at this hour, the mother works at that hour, just like that. When our daughter was born, the mother had the same thought because that was what she wanted; she resigned directly. So, we both decided to resign (P1).*

They are aware that along with the time goes, the children will grow and develop into teenagers who in the future will prefer to spend their time with their peers.

*That's why I have more pleasure in freelancing because I can see them. Some friends express that they do not know how their children are growing; they only know that they will go on vacation every weekend, just that. For me, I am always grateful whenever I able to interact with my children every day (P2).*

**Financial security.** Even the desire to establish togetherness with family (family time) becomes the strong motivation for respondents to choose a freelance career. They realized that this could be obtained by first acquiring financial security by building their own business.

One of the respondents has confessed that he uses the fee acquired from freelancing as the starting budget to open a business in photography.

*The problem is I am currently developing it. There are so many challenges for the business to become established... it takes a long process, and to boost it, I save and recollect my income from photography as the capital for the business. However, I do design for a living. Thus, I have no intention to become an employee (P3).*

**Progressive career.** A progressive career is another motivation for developing a career, either by creating an agency, building a start-up, or opening an unassociated business with the I.T. sector. Some respondents have claimed that becoming a full-time freelancer who works independently is not the final purpose of their careers; instead, it becomes the opening path to perform development.

*I work... my work is only to get me to afford me in photography and videography sectors. After gaining enough budget, I want to focus on photography and videography (P3).*

This condition has shown that when becoming a freelancer, the respondents can determine their direction of career developments.

**Freedom and flexibility.** Freelancers' freedom and flexibility are used to acquire financial security, which affects family time and progressive career and emerge a learning process that freelancers use to improve their skills and capabilities (learning opportunity). As independent career workers, freelancers have the liberty to choose the type of project that will be worked on. This condition means that the respondents are liberated from the monotonous and routine types of work. The variation of projects being worked on has prevented the freelancers from work saturation experienced when they become employees.

*Well, why did I become a freelancer for almost five years? Because I did different things in different places. That's what makes my job as a freelancer (P4).*

**Learning opportunity.** Besides the variation of projects, the learning process occurs because freelancers use strategies to maintain the continuity of projects in the future. Almost all the respondents claim that working as independent career workers does not provide job security; freelancers must improve their skills and capabilities to stay competing and maintain their existence among the competition with the other freelancers. Through the continuous improvement and development of their skills, the freelancers will develop the market segment in the other sectors, which will support their career as freelancers (progressive career) and their financial security.

*I can take one client and another for tomorrow with different freelancing tasks. Changing clients means different jobs, although they are still in the same programming scope. However, they are similar jobs, although the contents and logics are different, such as programming, issues... and ways of solving. On the contrary, the job is monotonous with the office, just around the same thing (P2).*

**Life fulfillment.** According to the descriptions above, freelancers focus on their families and career developments. Therefore, freelancers refuse to sacrifice their time with their families to establish a career merely. In that order, it can be concluded that by freelancing, the respondents can keep working and fulfilling both important aspects, namely family and career, without sacrificing either of them. The fulfillment of both aspects (career and family), which at the end make the freelancers capable of achieving life fulfillment. The condition is when respondents can establish family together (family time).

*That's why I have more pleasure in freelancing because I can see them. ... For me, I am always grateful whenever I interact with my children every day (P2).*

And on the other side, they will be able to perform career development (progressive career).

*I can take one client and another for tomorrow with different freelancing tasks. Changing clients means different jobs... (P2)*

### **The challenges as a freelancer**

The achievement of life fulfillment will not be obtained freely by freelancers. The freelancers have to face challenges as follows: uncertainty, conflict with clients, and self-motivation,

**Uncertainty.** The challenge faced by freelancers is the uncertainty in project continuity. This condition is the early challenge freelancers realize when becoming independent career workers.

*According to my experience, the number of freelancers is higher than the number of jobs. Thus, the number of offered jobs can be fewer than the number of freelancers. When I look at a job offer in Upwork, for example, 50-100 people have already bid for the project when I click the job. Meanwhile, the job only requires one person. Sometimes some projects require three people, but they are rarely available. It can be said that this work is similar to job hunting. Based on luck as well (P5).*

**Conflict with clients.** The second challenge comes from the relationship between freelancers and clients, namely the risk of conflict that involves agreements regarding fees, project completion, and the adjustment of different time zone and languages. According to the interview results, some freelancers have experienced conflicts that cause their work results to be unpaid by the clients.

*I had experienced it at my early start, but yeah, it was only in the beginning. I did not have total comprehension at that time. It was at that time I gave a full refund. I returned the entire payment to avoid losses by the client. It was not big money at that time. The payment was smaller at the early stage. I considered that I prefer to return the payment rather than have a poor reputation and feedback (P2).*

**Self-motivation.** The third challenge is that freelancers have to be able to motivate themselves. This condition felt very challenging for some freelancers. The absence of rigid routine, binding rules, and leader control have required the freelancers to conceive capabilities of controlling and motivating themselves to work. Moreover, when freelancers decide to work at home, various things could become distractions.

*There are so many distractions at home. Starting from yourself, when we wake up, we want to have five more minutes of extra sleep, and we know exactly that five minutes are not the pretty real-time there. After waking up, we got to take a bath, eat, and do other stuff, starting work hours later. For example, we start the work at 9 o'clock. Two hours are already wasted, thus, what should be done by 5 o'clock will be delayed to 7 o'clock. In the middle of the afternoon, we have to pray first, find something to eat, and spend about three more hours. The delay continues until midnight; the work finally comes to a finish. Let alone in the middle of working; our kids will say, "Dad, the water gallon is running out," etc. These conditions will not happen if we work in the office, just like that (P1).*

### **The strategies as a freelancer**

To face those challenges, freelancers need to formulate strategies. Self-branding, using protection platforms, and expanding market share are applied strategies to face any challenges.

**Self-branding.** Freelancers always attempt to establish a positive reputation on clients and implement self-branding. Self-branding is conducted by actively participating in the existing freelancers' communities, including online communities.

*If compared to him, I might still be below his skill level. But I can breach because I can wrap myself and sell it to the clients. The proof is that you could see me now is not unintended. It was intended, hahaha; I intentionally manage my posts towards the desired rhythm. So, if I post something, I would rarely post a simple thing like, "Hi, I am having lunch right now." I will post something with value, professionalism, or even if it's not professional, there's a value that makes people know my quality. The job will come by itself... I have to do nothing because the branding is already strong (P6).*

**Using protection platform.** Some freelancers have entrusted themselves to the platform that hosts them as an intermediary and protection between freelancers and clients to overcome the paid problem.

*Well, I don't know-how. It's just that it fits; that's what...in X (protection platform) because the model is a joint account. So, when he wants to offer a job, the client first deposits the money in X. If it's finished, the X will be transferred to the freelancer. So, it's safe (P1).*

**Expanding market share.** As technology and the market grow, improving skills and masteries is necessary. The most important reason is by improving skills and capability, they can provide another service, thus indirectly expanding the market segment for their services.

*Skill upgrade is mandatory. Don't you ever feel like you know the programming language of Delfi, THP, in which, for those who know, those are old programming languages? Actually, if I stayed there, I could still find local jobs. But I won't find them on a foreign scale... the market has become really narrow. If I want to be continuously searched by people, I must learn the newest technology. For example, I'm using Java; the Java then comes to its end while Python and Reals occur after that. I'm focusing on Python and still stay on it because I just love it. I want to add google programming language (P6).*

## Discussion

According to the findings, six themes can explain the dynamic of motivation of freelance career choosers, namely freedom/flexibility, financial security, learning opportunity, family time, progressive career, and life fulfillment. The dynamic between themes can be comprehended through the scheme in [Figure 1](#).

Due to the availability of freedom & flexibility, freelancers are not only acquiring the liberty in determining the rhythm and style of work. But freelancers are also liberated from stiff and rigid work routines and acquire liberty in determining the amount of fee over their services by selecting the types of project and client that will be approved. This condition makes the fee obtained through freelancing higher than the received salary when becoming an employee. Higher fees emerge from the feeling of financial security for freelancers.

Financial security is the feeling of security in finance when deciding to become a freelancer. This secure feeling also occurs due to the core family (wife), who never complains about the current income. This condition strengthens the belief to maintain the status as a freelancer. Although the freelancers do not consider job security as much as conventional career workers, financial security becomes one of the factors considered when deciding to become a full-time freelancer. This condition can be understood due to the status of a family head responsible for fulfilling family needs. Financial security makes the freelancers relish their family together (family time).

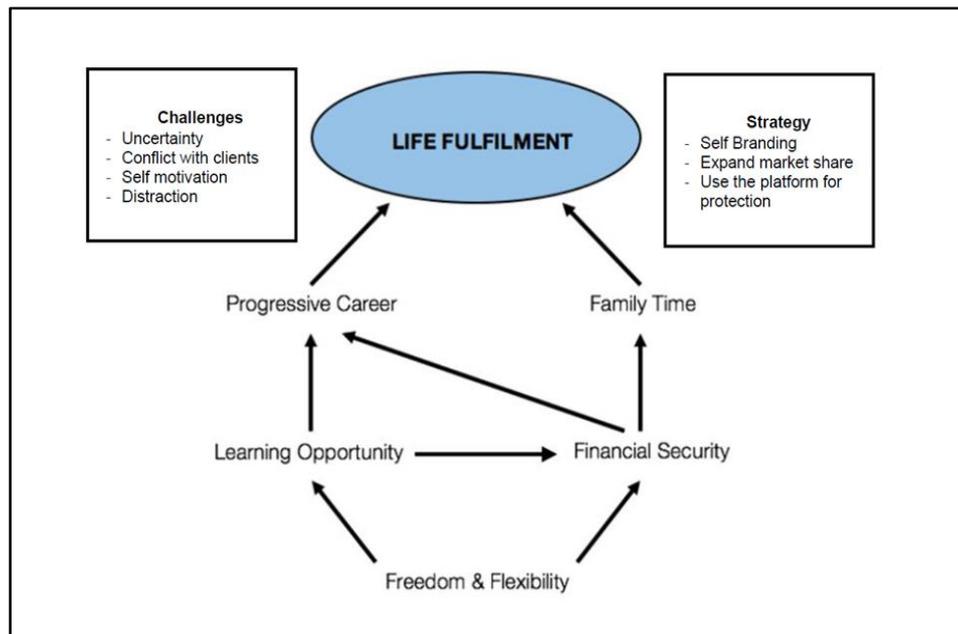


Figure 1. Motivational Dynamics of Freelancer

In principle, individuals are born as active creatures, eager to know, and always want and capable of learning and exploring new things in their neighborhood (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals who decide to become full-time freelancers realize that they have full control to decide their life path, including their career. Freelancers sometimes acquire the name of a boundary-less worker, which means that they have fewer restrictions and bigger freedom than the conventional career worker (Kazi et al., 2014). Freelancers do not have a standard limit in choosing the job or project; they could work anywhere and anytime without a rigid and binding routine. The main factor that affects individuals deciding to become full-time freelancers is freedom and flexibility in managing work (Hilbrecht & Lero, 2014). The choice to become independent workers is sometimes misunderstood as the choice that occurs due to freelancers' incapability to compete in the labor market. The fact shows that the choice to work independently while prioritizing freedom, flexibility, and independence is the option of lifestyle that is mostly compatible with the needs, condition, and purpose of life of individuals who have decided to become a freelancer.

According to this research results, the first reason individuals have decided to become freelancers is that this career choice offers opportunities for individuals to manage and organize their careers according to the needs, conditions, and values that exist on the individuals. For example, individuals who have a career purpose of becoming a businessman will feel that becoming a freelancer is the correct decision rather than becoming a permanent employee. This condition is due to the condition when becoming the permanent employee in which individuals use most of their portion of time to work. As a result, they will no longer have sufficient time to focus on the business that wants to be established.

In the flexibility and liberty offered by independent career choice, there is a risk of uncertainty that has to be ensured by the freelancers. They faced uncertainty in the continuity of projects received in the future. This condition becomes important because it is associated with financial and economic securities, even more for married individuals. Economic and financial securities become the element that needs to be considered by remembering that individuals with families are responsible for fulfilling their life needs and welfare. However, this condition has become a misconception among the community that becoming a freelancer is the optional career choice selected by individuals with low capability and skills (Goetz & Fleming, 2012). Along with this kind of perception thus, it would be common if a choice to

become a freelancer is considered to be unable to provide financial and economic securities for the freelancers themselves. However, this condition will change when the choice of becoming a freelancer does not only enthrall low-skill workers but also the professionals who choose more flexible and free work styles (Syrett, 2016).

According to this research, the professionals who decided to become full-time freelancers perceive that becoming an independent career worker is the choice that brings more financial profits rather than working as an employee. The amount of fee received as a freelancer is perceived as more satisfying than an employee's salary. Moreover, the high fee is received through the more enjoyable working process due to freedom and flexibility. However, it has to be remembered that the uncertainty of future project continuity is a challenge for every independent career worker, including freelancers. To overcome this uncertainty and finally achieve financial security, a freelancer has to own and implement specific strategies (Hipp & Chartrand, 2009). One of the strategies that can be done is expanding the market segment regarding the offered service towards clients. This effort can be performed by continuously improving and developing the skills and mastery/capability.

The project-based work has allowed freelancers to handle various projects and meet various types of clients. This condition indirectly manufactures the learning process. Freelancers use the freedom to control the variation of projects which will be handled to improve their skills and capability. Freelancers in their sectors own more qualified skills and capabilities. Thus, they will have a good reputation for the clients, and a more positive reputation is established. Therefore, this condition will improve the probability of freelancers being trusted to handle future projects. In that order, self-control and self-motivation in a freelancer are required. This condition is another challenge that has to be faced by a freelancer. As an independent career worker liberated from rules and control of company and organization, a freelancer should own proper control and self-discipline to stay productive.

If flexibility and freedom are appropriately managed, they will support freelancers in acquiring success in their careers and life. This condition can be achieved if freelancers can control and motivate themselves to stay productive amidst the obtained freedom. The success of a career can be embodied through financial security (Sumaryono, 2016). Flexible and free work styles allow freelancers to manage their times and rhythm. Therefore, they can allocate their time for work and other things or activities, such as family, hobbies, or business (Hilbrecht & Lero, 2014). By obtaining full control to manage and organize rhythm, style, and working hours, the freelancers can be liberated from all work routines that generally take most of the time in a person's life. The absence of the company's binding rules and routine has allowed the freelancers to use their time to conduct activities following important and meaningful things for themselves. This condition makes the freelancers acquire life satisfaction (Davis et al., 2014).

Gaining the opportunity to establish a successful career without sacrificing family life is the strongest source of motivation that encourages individuals to become full-time freelancers. In this context, freelancers reach the success of their career in financial security and psychological success that manifests in family happiness and peace of mind because they do not abandon their personal lives due to career and work (Kartinah, 2005). However, it has to be considered that this condition could only be achieved if freelancers can properly manage the acquired flexibility and freedom.

From the perspective of career anchors theory (Schein, 1990), the freelancers mostly anchor their career into autonomy and independence. However, they also develop their entrepreneurial creativity with this autonomy and independence. These two anchors are dominant among freelancers as something that they will not give up in their careers. On the other hand, they are willing to sacrifice, especially the anchors of security and stability. The other five anchors, namely technical or functional competence, managerial competence, dedication to a cause, pure challenge, and lifestyle, are somewhat a compromise and still can be surfed while pursuing a career as a freelancer.

This study has covered the meaning of being a freelancer but has not differentiated between freelancing and an entrepreneur. The data collected in this study implies some characteristics of entrepreneurship, but it needs further study to differentiate between freelancers and entrepreneurs. Some characteristics, like freedom, financial security, and uncertainty, are related to freelance and entrepreneur. However, becoming an entrepreneur is more complex than freelancers. Further study is needed to clarify the defining line between freelancer and entrepreneur or explore the overlap between the two. This information is important for the readers so that if they are interested in becoming freelancers, they would consider the consequences accurately.

## Conclusion

The increasing number of independent career workers amidst the trend of career choices in Indonesia, which is dominated by becoming a permanent employee, is an interesting phenomenon to be studied. It has been discovered six sources of motivation encourage individuals to choose freelancing as a career: freedom or flexibility, financial security, learning opportunity, family time, and progressive career. These six factors are the path for freelancers to achieve life fulfillment. Life fulfillment is achieved when individuals establish and develop their careers without sacrificing another life aspect: family. However, achieving life fulfillment is demanding; freelancers face various challenges, so they need to formulate the right strategy.

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