

**THE RISE OF THE FREELANCE ECONOMY: A POLICY-FOCUSED
APPROACH TO EMPOWERING MEDIA FREELANCERS IN THE
UAE**

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Abstract

High-quality freelance media professionals are currently in high demand and stand for years to come. The difficulties faced by media professionals in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to new job openings where innovation can freely express itself in the marketplace.

Media professionals have never had a better chance to operate autonomously as independent contractors, freely supplying the market with their creative talents. Even if there were freelancing jobs before the COVID-19 outbreak, the confining scenario has created many new self-employment opportunities. With more independent workers emerging every year, freelancing has become a global trend.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), with its unique approach, is no exception to this global trend. The government is consistently paving new paths for independents, and networks of these entities are expanding both nationally and internationally, making the UAE a fascinating case study in the world of freelancing.

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on policy analysis. This paper's primary data sources are government policies, laws, regulations, and reports that address various aspects of freelancing within the media sector in the UAE. These sources are gathered from governmental sites, legal databases, and associated publications.

By exploring the UAE's government policy, laws, and regulations on the freelance workforce, the advantages and disadvantages of freelancing, and the future of freelance media workers in the UAE, this research determines the present and future states of freelance media workers in the UAE.

Keywords: *freelance, gig economy, media, UAE, remote work, government policy, creative freelancers, marketplace*

1. Introduction

Over the past half-decade, traditional work structures have increasingly shifted, as freelancing emerges as a legitimate career choice worldwide. This transformation reflects a departure from the historical perception of freelancers as a surplus pool of unskilled labor toward recognizing them as professionals with specialized expertise contributing to innovative and strategic endeavours (Burke, 2015)

The Malaysian oil and gas industry, as explored by Khalid et al., (2019), underscores a broader transition toward freelancing as a sustainable career model. Amid economic downturns like the 2014 oil price crash, displaced professionals turned to freelancing as a viable alternative to traditional employment. This shift highlighted the importance of flexibility, autonomy, and skill specialization in navigating economic volatility. A similar transition gained unprecedented momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and social distancing measures disrupted traditional work environments, pushing businesses and professionals alike to adopt remote and flexible work models. For media professionals, the pandemic acted as a catalyst, transforming freelancing from a secondary option to a primary mode of operation. Creative freelancers—journalists, content creators, and designers—found themselves at the forefront of this shift, leveraging digital platforms to sustain their work amidst widespread industry disruptions (May et al., 2022)

Unlike technical fields such as oil and gas, where freelancing is often project-specific and skill-bound, media freelancing thrives on intangible qualities such as creativity, adaptability, and networked collaborations. The pandemic amplified these qualities, as media freelancers adapted to new modes of digital storytelling, remote production, and globalized content creation. Dunn et al. (2020) explore the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online

freelancers, emphasizing the critical role of digital platforms in sustaining freelance livelihoods during times of economic uncertainty.

The study reveals how platforms such as Freelancer, Upwork, and Fiverr enabled freelancers to adapt to the pandemic's challenges by offering a centralized ecosystem to connect with clients and secure projects. These platforms acted as lifelines, especially for freelancers in sectors experiencing increased demand for digital services like graphic design, software development, and content creation. By facilitating seamless client interactions and providing diverse project opportunities, digital platforms proved indispensable for maintaining freelancer income during volatile economic periods.

Freelancing has also been framed as a refuge during times of economic uncertainty. Huang et al., (2020) describe the gig economy as an "escape hatch," particularly in downturns, allowing workers to sustain livelihoods through adaptable short-term engagements. This adaptability is increasingly relevant in creative and media sectors, where project-based work dominates, driven by market demands for cost efficiency and innovation (Hayes & Silke, 2018; Mathisen, 2019)

In the media industry, freelancers often embody the dual roles of "entrepreneurs and idealists," blending innovative strategies with personal aspirations (Mathisen, 2017). As entrepreneurs, they navigate market demands, cultivating client relationships and managing their own branding, often through social media (Gandini, 2016). As idealists, they pursue meaningful projects, valuing autonomy over routine assignments. However, these roles are not without challenges. Freelancers frequently contend with economic precarity, marked by fluctuating workloads, inconsistent payments, and the absence of traditional employment benefits (Luik & Aritonang, 2022)

Technological advancements have further amplified the gig economy's scope. Digital labor, as discussed by Hayes and Silke (2018), intertwines freelancers' professional and personal lives, often blurring boundaries through social media engagement and round-the-clock connectivity. This dynamic has redefined labor markets, particularly for younger freelancers who leverage digital tools for visibility and reputation management, despite facing precarious conditions and reduced incomes compared to their established counterparts.

Freelancers' resilience amidst these challenges underscores their critical role in fostering innovation and responding to market demands. The freelance lifestyle, characterized by autonomy, creativity, and flexibility, continues to gain traction as a legitimate career path. However, the growing reliance on freelance labor necessitates broader policy interventions to address systemic vulnerabilities and ensure sustainable growth within this evolving workforce.

The Creative Access Report (2023) highlights the pivotal role of freelancers in the creative industries, stating:

Freelancers are all too often the lifeblood and the lifesavers of a creative organization: They're the flexible extra resource we bring in when the workload suddenly increases and there's no time (or budget) to hire; they are individuals with incredible specialist skills who can change your organization but you could never afford to hire permanently; they're the crew on a theatre or TV production who make mind-blowing, award-winning work or in the case of many sectors in the creative industries, like film and TV, they are quite literally your entire workforce. (Creative Access, 2023, p. 3)

The United Arab Emirates policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic reflect a strategic shift toward fostering economic resilience and workforce flexibility. These measures include enhanced support for freelancers and gig workers, who have become vital contributors to the post-pandemic recovery. The UAE's policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic highlight a strategic pivot toward fostering workforce adaptability and resilience. A study by AlMarar et al. (2021) illustrates how entities like the Ministry of Education implemented remote working frameworks, enhancing employee satisfaction, productivity, and overall organizational readiness during the crisis. Similarly, Kurdy et al. (2023) emphasize that remote working arrangements in the UAE had a significant positive impact on employee productivity and job satisfaction, although challenges in work-life balance persisted.

Globally, the rise of freelancing and the gig economy has prompted governments to adopt regulatory frameworks aimed at balancing the benefits of flexible work with necessary protections for workers. Freelancers often lack traditional employment benefits, such as healthcare, retirement plans, and job security, necessitating tailored policies.

The European Union (Directive on Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions, 2019) establishes minimum rights for gig workers, including clarity on working conditions and pay structures. Complementing this directive, Spain's Rider Law has emerged as a transformative measure in the European Union, reclassifying food delivery workers as employees rather than independent contractors. This reclassification ensures that gig workers in the food delivery sector gain access to employment benefits such as social security, healthcare, and paid leave, thereby addressing the precarious nature of platform-mediated work. According to Kerikmäe et al. (2022), this law represents a significant precedent in redefining labor rights for platform workers, aligning national legislation with broader EU objectives to enhance protections for gig economy participants. The authors emphasize that Spain's approach reflects an evolving legal landscape where courts and legislatures increasingly recognize the unique vulnerabilities of gig workers and seek to integrate them into traditional employment frameworks, challenging the gig economy's reliance on informal labor.

In the United States, state-level initiatives like California's Assembly Bill 5 (AB5) have redefined freelancers in specific categories as employees. This

legislation was designed to address worker misclassification, particularly for app-based drivers, ensuring that gig workers gain access to benefits such as minimum wage, unemployment insurance, and health protections. However, the law has sparked significant debate regarding its impact on the flexibility of gig work. While AB5 has been celebrated as a step forward in labor protections, it faced pushback from both businesses and some gig workers who valued their independent status. The eventual passage of Proposition 22 further complicated the landscape by exempting app-based drivers from AB5, showcasing the dynamic and contentious nature of gig economy regulation (Dubal, 2022).

Comparatively, while developed economies focus on formalizing labor protections, the UAE emphasizes accessibility and economic diversification, leveraging its strategic location and innovation-driven agenda. The nation's framework supports freelancers in navigating the challenges of gig work, such as income instability and the lack of social protections, while enabling them to contribute meaningfully to the economy. This approach underscores the UAE's commitment to fostering a resilient and sustainable gig economy, setting an example for other nations striving to balance flexibility with protection.

The rise of freelancing globally and within the UAE signifies a significant transformation in labor markets, driven by technological advancements, regulatory reforms, and evolving workforce dynamics. While developed economies have prioritized strengthening worker protections within the gig economy, the UAE has adopted a strategic approach emphasizing accessibility, economic diversification, and fostering innovation, particularly within the creative and media industries. This study critically analyzes the UAE's policy framework for freelancers in the media sector. By examining the UAE's regulatory strategies, this paper contributes to the discourse on fostering sustainable and resilient freelance economies in the post-pandemic context.

2. The Evolving Landscape of Work

The contemporary labor market has undergone profound changes driven by globalization, technological advancements, and shifting workforce dynamics. These factors have reshaped traditional employment arrangements, leading to a gradual transition from full-time regular work to alternative models such as independent contracting and non-standard work arrangements (Florin & Pichault, 2020). Independent Professionals (IPros), particularly in service-oriented sectors, embody this shift, as they prioritize autonomy and flexibility while fulfilling specialized roles. This emerging work structure reflects the growing appeal of gig and project-based work for both workers and employers.

This shift is further highlighted in the distinction between independent and dependent contracting, where workers may choose roles based on autonomy and adaptability while organizations leverage such arrangements to address

specific skill gaps and market demands. Connelly and Gallagher (2006) emphasize that these flexible models allow for mutual benefits: workers gain freedom and variety in their careers, while organizations enhance operational efficiency by outsourcing specialized tasks. These arrangements, however, require careful structuring to align with organizational needs and worker preferences, highlighting the growing complexity of modern labor markets.

Both managerial and worker priorities often influence the decision to opt for contracting over traditional employment. Peel and Boxall (2005) argue that contracting offers opportunities for managers to manage costs and access niche expertise while providing workers with the chance to escape rigid structures and pursue career independence. However, this dynamic presents challenges, including balancing worker satisfaction and organizational objectives, underscoring the need for robust frameworks that support these evolving work practices.

These perspectives collectively illustrate the transformation of the workforce, where non-standard work models are increasingly recognized as viable, strategic solutions in a competitive and dynamic global economy. This evolving landscape underscores the critical need for adaptive policies and practices to support both organizations and workers in navigating this transition.

Until recently, freelancing or participating in the gig economy was something people did in between jobs or as a supplemental source of income on the side. But it was unusual for a person to be a career freelancer. Large companies are beginning to see the advantages of temporarily hiring specialists to complete specific tasks—and workers are embracing the benefits of being a gig worker.

Drawing on insights from Halliday (2021), freelancers are often distinguished by their employment classifications, which can create a blurred divide between independent contractors and employees. In the gig economy, workers are typically labelled as independent contractors, granting them flexibility but excluding them from employment benefits such as minimum wage and social protections. Gig workers, particularly those engaged through digital platforms, represent a subset of freelancers whose roles challenge traditional legal frameworks due to their dependence on platform-determined tasks. Halliday critiques the exploitative potential of ambiguous classifications, arguing for a more structured approach to differentiating between freelancing and employment.

2.1 Advantages of Freelancing

Freelancing provides numerous advantages that appeal to persons pursuing a more adaptable work lifestyle. A primary advantage is that freelancers can select their assignments, enabling them to align their work with their specific interests and skills.

This freedom contributes to a more favorable work-life balance (MoldStud, n.d.). Freelancers are not confined by the limitations of conventional work environments; they can "decline jobs they don't want" and set their own pace, often working from home (Jarrahi et al., 2021). Moreover, freelancers can select their assignments, establish their working hours, and choose their work locations, offering a significant degree of independence compared to traditional employment models (Ahmad, 2024).

Financial Benefits

Financially, freelancing presents substantial advantages. Freelancers possess the authority to determine their own rates with clients, often leading to higher profits than conventional employees.

Companies are frequently "willing to compensate freelancers at a higher rate than their staff" due to the absence of overhead costs such as benefits and sick leave (Mena Alliances, n.d.). As they gain experience, freelancers can "request higher rates," making this profession an appealing choice for skilled individuals who want to increase their income potential.

Professionals in high-demand sectors like technology and consulting often command competitive rates that outpace conventional salaries (Ahmad, 2024).

Furthermore, technological advancements have played a crucial role in the expansion of the online gig economy, enabling freelancers to engage with clients and companies around the globe.

Technological Advancements

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This trend has increased the popularity of freelancing, particularly in the IT industry, as it facilitates a "bridge between individuals across the globe" and enables "reduced development costs" for businesses (Gheorghe, 2015). Networking platforms like Outsized provide opportunities for freelancers to develop their skills, establish global client relationships, and foster a supportive community (Zainulbhai, 2024).

Freelancers often include more highly skilled and in-demand workers compared to other flexible employment groups, such as temporary and on-call workers (Mai, 2021). According to Sutherland et al. (2019), freelancers operate largely independently of any single organization's control, which offers them increased locational and scheduling flexibility. This appeal for greater autonomy and adaptability is a key motivator for many individuals pursuing freelance careers (Wood et al., 2018).

Skill Development and Entrepreneurial Spirit

In addition to flexibility, freelancing allows individuals to broaden their skill sets and expertise, as they often take on various responsibilities beyond their primary focus. This diversity in tasks enhances their value to potential clients and boosts their overall employability. Freelancing cultivates an entrepreneurial mindset, enabling individuals to create their own brand, set competitive rates, and take control of their career paths.

As Jarrahi et al. (2021) note, "flexible, contingent, or 'agile' working arrangements provide workers with greater autonomy over when, where, or how to fulfill their responsibilities." Organizations increasingly favor flexible work arrangements to improve productivity and reduce absenteeism. Thus, freelancers possess significant independence compared to their traditionally employed counterparts (Ahmad, 2024).

Lastly, Katz and Krueger (2019) observed that "independent contractors are compensated more per hour than traditional employees" (p. 402, as cited in Mai, 2021, p. 3). Unlike temporary workers, freelancers are not reliant on employment intermediaries, allowing them substantial control over their work schedules and methodologies (Felfe, 2008; Osnowitz, 2010, as cited in Mai, 2021, p. 3).

2.2 Disadvantages of Freelancing

While the flexibility and autonomy of freelancing can be deeply rewarding, the profession also presents a unique set of challenges that must be carefully navigated. One of the primary disadvantages is the inherent job insecurity and unpredictable income streams that come with constantly seeking new projects and clients (Mai, 2021; Mai, 2020). Traditional work benefits like health insurance, retirement plans, and paid time off are frequently unavailable to freelancers, which can lead to serious financial and personal difficulties (Sterrantino & Salerno, 2021; Mai, 2020). The precarity of freelancing is especially pronounced among low- and moderate-income households, where self-employment is linked to greater income volatility and economic insecurity compared to traditional employment. This disparity underscores the need for policy interventions to enhance economic stability for freelancers, such as access to affordable health insurance and emergency financial resources (Auguste et al., 2023).

Trade-offs of Flexibility and Autonomy

The flexibility and autonomy of freelancing come with certain trade-offs (MoldStud, n.d.). While freelancers may enjoy a better work-life balance, the nature of their work can be "irregular," with unpredictable schedules and the need to be "on-call" during evenings, nights, and weekends (Mas & Pallais, 2017). The project-based nature of freelance work means that freelancers cannot rely on a constant flow of income, unlike their full-time employee counterparts who can anticipate regular paychecks with certainty (Mai, 2020).

Absence of Employee Benefits

A significant drawback is the absence of typical employee benefits because “freelancers do not receive unemployment benefits, such as pensions, sick leave, paid leave, bonuses or health insurance, which can be a serious problem in the future” (Akhmetshin et al., 2018, p. 5). Additionally, freelancers face difficulties in remote work environments, with some workers complaining of a lack of communication and support that is typically available in traditional office settings (Akhmetshin et al., 2018, p. 5).

Income Instability and Financial Management

Freelancers encounter income instability, facing various issues related to job security that can impact their financial well-being (Singh, 2023). They also bear the responsibility of managing their own insurance and retirement planning, adding an extra layer of complexity and financial burden (Mai, 2020). The ambiguity around freelancers' skills can hinder their advancement, as employers may find it difficult to verify capabilities, impacting career growth (Mai, 2021).

Psychological and Professional Challenges

Freelancing imposes psychological and professional challenges. Studies highlight that freelance journalists often face loneliness and professional alienation due to the lack of a cohesive work community, which can significantly affect their well-being and productivity (Mukhina & Сереевна, 2023). These challenges are exacerbated by the absence of structured boundaries between personal and professional life, particularly as digital platforms demand constant availability (Ranasinghe et al., 2022).

Overcoming Challenges in Freelancing

To mitigate these challenges, freelancers must develop strategies to build sustainable and resilient careers. Cultivating a diverse client base, diversifying income streams, and proactively managing finances can help mitigate the risks of job insecurity and unpredictable income (Sutherland et al., 2019; Kong, 2011). Building long-term client relationships and sustaining consistent work streams remain significant hurdles (Caza et al., 2022). To address these challenges, freelancers can leverage digital platforms for enhanced visibility, invest in skill development, and navigate competition from a worldwide talent pool, which may lower rates, particularly in saturated industries (Kim et al., 2023; Zainulbhai, 2024).

By adopting these approaches, freelancers can navigate the complexities of the profession and unlock the full potential of their independence and flexibility (Sutherland et al., 2019; Mai, 2020; Sterrantino & Salerno, 2021; Gruber, 2018).

3. Freelancing in the UAE: A Growing Opportunity

In recent years, the freelance economy in the UAE has expanded significantly, supported by both demand and supply-side factors in a post-pandemic economy. In 2018, Dubai's TECOM Group, in collaboration with the Dubai Creative Clusters Authority, introduced the GoFreelance initiative, enabling UAE residents to obtain a freelance permit for AED 7,500. This initiative aimed to attract talent by simplifying the setup process and reducing costs, addressing the "growth of the free business economy" and empowering independent professionals and entrepreneurs to leverage their skills (Estate Agent, 2018).

3.1 Regulatory Milestones in Enhancing the Freelance Ecosystem

In April 2022, the UAE Cabinet, under the leadership of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President, Prime Minister, and Ruler of Dubai, approved the executive regulations for the Federal Decree-Law on Entry and Residence of Foreigners. This pivotal initiative was introduced to solidify the UAE's reputation as a premier destination for living, working, and investing (WAM, 2022).

The updated entry and residence system is strategically designed to attract and retain global talent and skilled professionals, thereby enhancing the nation's job market competitiveness and flexibility (Dubai media city, n.d.). Furthermore, these regulations aim to foster greater stability for UAE residents and their families, aligning with the UAE's broader vision of supporting an adaptable, inclusive, and globally competitive workforce.

Complementing these national efforts, various free zones across the UAE have introduced freelance visas to attract skilled professionals, particularly in the media sector (Abbas, 2022). Notable free zones offering such opportunities include:

- **twofour54 Abu Dhabi:** A media-free zone providing infrastructure and services to media companies and freelancers. It offers customizable office spaces, production facilities, and freelance visas, fostering a thriving media community (twofour54, n.d.)
- **Dubai Media City (DMC):** Established as a hub for media organizations, DMC offers freelance permits and commercial licenses, supporting a diverse range of media activities. It provides a conducive environment for freelancers, startups, and large enterprises to collaborate and grow (DMC, n.d.)
- **Sharjah Media City (Shams)** offers a Freelance Permit designed for individuals seeking to operate as independent professionals across various sectors, including media, technology, and consultancy. This permit allows freelancers to legally provide their services within the UAE without the need for a local sponsor. Key benefits include 100% foreign ownership, full repatriation of

profits, and access to a vibrant community of creative professionals. The application process is streamlined, enabling quick setup and commencement of freelance activities (Shams, n.d.).

- Established in 2007, **Fujairah Creative City Free Zone (CCFZ)** offers a professional environment for individuals and companies across various sectors, including media, events, consulting, education, communications, marketing, music, entertainment, design, and technology. It provides cost-effective business solutions, supporting both freelancers and companies of all sizes (Creativecity, n.d.).

As of 2024, the freelance landscape in Dubai has evolved significantly. The GoFreelance program now offers permits across various sectors, including media, education, technology, and design, with the permit cost remaining at AED 7,500, renewable annually. Additionally, freelancers gain access to the "Marketplace," an online platform facilitating project bids and networking opportunities (Bayut, 2020).

Furthermore, the UAE has introduced the Green Residence Visa, a five-year residency permit for freelancers and self-employed individuals. Eligibility criteria include holding a bachelor's degree or specialized diploma and demonstrating an annual income of at least AED 360,000 from self-employment over the past two years or proving financial solvency during their stay (Wego Travel, 2023).

These developments reflect the UAE's commitment to fostering a flexible and competitive job market, enhancing its appeal as a destination for global talent (Wego Travel, 2023).

Recent findings indicate that the freelance and short-term contract market has grown in prominence, driven by an increasing number of professionals, particularly within the tech and business consultancy sectors, seeking non-traditional work arrangements (Dhanusha Gokulan, 2023). This shift towards freelancing reflects broader trends where professionals and employers prioritize flexibility and autonomy over traditional employment structures.

Key Motivations for Freelancing:

- **Earning Potential:** Freelancing in the UAE offers significant financial opportunities, especially for skilled professionals. Graphic designers, for example, report hourly earnings between Dh40 and Dh150, while business consultants on short-term contracts can achieve monthly earnings between Dh30,000 and Dh40,000. This earning potential underscores freelancing as a viable and lucrative career option for many in the UAE (Dhanusha Gokulan, 2023).

- **Flexibility and Autonomy:** Flexibility and autonomy remain key drivers for UAE professionals entering the freelance market. In alignment with 2022 survey results, where 40% of respondents pursued freelancing for supplemental income and 23% sought expanded career opportunities, professionals continue to value the ability to manage their schedules and select projects. This demand for flexibility and autonomy aligns with broader global trends in freelance work (Gulf News Report, 2022).

This analysis of the UAE's freelance sector draws on two key reports: the Gulf News Report (2022) and *Dhanusha Gokulan's findings (2023)*. These reports collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of evolving trends, employer strategies, and the challenges shaping the freelance economy in the UAE. The following sections synthesize insights derived from these reports, highlighting comparative developments between 2022 and 2023.

- **Employer Adoption of Freelance Workforce:** The adoption of freelancers by UAE businesses has become increasingly strategic, as evidenced in the reports. In 2022, 70% of companies expressed intentions to hire freelance talent, emphasizing the advantages of flexible staffing. This trend has persisted into 2023, with many businesses adopting a 'try-before-you-buy' approach. This strategy enables companies to evaluate freelancers' compatibility and performance before committing to long-term engagements. The consistent use of this approach highlights the recognition of freelancers as valuable assets in achieving organizational agility.
- **Sectoral Demand:** The demand for freelancers has broadened significantly since 2022. Initially concentrated in digital marketing and information technology, freelance roles have expanded to encompass diverse sectors, including customer service, accounting, banking, finance, human resources, and graphic design. This diversification reflects an increasing acceptance of freelance talent across industries traditionally reliant on full-time employees. The 2023 data underscores the growing trust businesses place in freelancers for specialized and project-based tasks, further driving the evolution of the freelance workforce.
- **Challenges Facing Freelancers:** Despite the evident growth and diversification of the freelance sector, both reports highlight some key challenges, like the lack of job security and delays in payment, which threaten the sustainability of freelancing as a viable career option. The absence of traditional employment benefits exacerbates these difficulties, making it essential for industry stakeholders and policymakers to address these concerns. Ensuring fair compensation practices and providing supportive frameworks are critical for maintaining the momentum of the freelance economy.

By drawing on these foundational reports, the analysis emphasizes the interconnected dynamics of employer strategies, sectoral trends, and persistent challenges. Such insights serve as a basis for understanding how the freelance sector can continue its upward trajectory while addressing the systemic issues limiting its potential.

4. UAE Freelance Laws/Regulations

The UAE has undergone significant transformations in its labor laws, which have redefined the nation's work culture and employment practices. Traditionally, the UAE operated under the Kafala (sponsorship) system, a framework originally intended to regulate labor migration in the Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 Regarding the Regulation of Employment Relationships, 2021 (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2021).

This system effectively tethered workers to their employers, granting employers considerable control over their employees. Under Kafala, employers were legally responsible for their workers' visas and residency statuses, which restricted employees' ability to change jobs or leave the country without their employer's consent. Consequently, this system created employment constraints that undermined workers' autonomy, fostering a dependency on sponsoring employers for continued residency in the UAE. While the Kafala system facilitated the labor process and addressed market demands, its limitations increasingly became a concern, particularly as the UAE sought to expand and diversify its workforce to attract talent from around the globe.

Acknowledging these limitations, the UAE has implemented reforms to relax restrictions and promote worker rights, flexibility, and employment mobility. Recent federal decree-laws, including the amendment to Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021, represent a substantial shift from the previous Kafala system. This decree not only grants employees greater freedom to switch employers without needing prior permission but also strengthens labor protections to align with international standards. These reforms aim to enhance the UAE labor market's competitiveness and attractiveness to a diverse talent pool, including freelancers and those in flexible work arrangements (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2022b)

4.1 Key Developments in UAE Labor Laws

Reform of the Kafala System

The traditional Kafala system previously bound employees to a single employer, severely restricting their job mobility and autonomy. Recent reforms have introduced greater flexibility, allowing employees to change jobs without needing prior approval from their former employers. This change addresses many of the constraints that historically left workers in vulnerable positions. By diminishing employer control and enhancing labor rights, the UAE's revised

regulations represent a more equitable approach to employment. These updates provide workers with new opportunities and a structured legal framework for resolving disputes.

4.2 Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021: Employment Relationships

The UAE's Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021, effective from February 2, 2022, introduced significant reforms to the labor market, including the recognition of various work models such as part-time, temporary, and flexible work arrangements (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2021). This legislation allows freelancers and contract-based workers to engage in adaptable agreements, fostering a versatile employment structure that aligns with the needs of both workers and employers.

Key provisions include:

- **Adaptable Agreements:** This law enables freelancers and other contract-based workers to engage in part-time or flexible agreements, facilitating a versatile employment structure that aligns with the needs of both workers and employers.
- **Work Permits:** Specific work permits allow freelancers to operate independently within the UAE, granting them legal status and aligning their work under recognized labor frameworks as per the Cabinet Resolution No. 1 of 2022 (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2022a).
- **Labor Protections:** Regulations in this decree safeguard against discrimination and harassment, holding employers accountable to standards that resonate with international labor practices. These protections address critical concerns, including contract disputes and worker rights, ensuring a structured environment for freelancing and other flexible employment arrangements.

4.3 Federal Decree-Law No. 13 of 2022: Unemployment Insurance Program

Although primarily targeting full-time employees, Federal Decree-Law No. 13 of 2022 introduces an Unemployment Insurance Program that could potentially extend its benefits to freelancers under specific conditions (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2022c). This program provides financial support to eligible unemployed individuals, serving as a buffer during times of economic instability. Extending this program to formally include freelancers would foster an inclusive labor environment, supporting freelancers who experience fluctuating workloads or economic uncertainty. Such an initiative would also enhance the UAE's appeal to a broader range of skilled professionals.

4.4 Cabinet Resolution No. (1)

In the UAE, the year 2022 witnessed a significant shift in labor regulations with the implementation of Cabinet Resolution No. 1 of 2022. This resolution, a detailed blueprint built upon Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021, aimed to modernize and clarify employment practices across the nation (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2022a).

The document delves into numerous aspects of the employment landscape, meticulously outlining classifications for establishments and workers, setting precise rules for juvenile employment, and creating a framework for various types of work permits. It also tackled nuanced issues such as handling non-competition clauses, procedures for resolving employment disputes, and the definition and regulation of wages. Safety and health regulations for workers were given detailed attention, including rules around work injuries and employer responsibilities.

A significant and novel inclusion in this sweeping legislation was the formal recognition and regulation of freelance work.

4.5 Article (8): Freelance Work

The resolution specifically addresses freelance work in Article 8, recognizing it as "an independent and flexible work arrangement." This marked an essential moment, officially acknowledging and defining freelance work within the UAE's legal framework for the first time (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE), 2022a)

The resolution mandates that the Cabinet will issue further resolutions establishing the procedures, rules, and mechanisms for registering freelancers and obtaining, renewing, and cancelling work permits - all designed to enhance the flexibility of the labor market. Article 8 emphasizes:

- 1.** Free Lance is an independent and flexible work arrangement, whereby the natural person generates income by providing his services for a specified period of time or performing a task or providing a specific service, whether for individuals or establishments, whereas this natural person is in no way a worker for those individuals or establishments.
- 2.** The Cabinet shall, based on the Minister's proposal, issue the necessary resolutions for determining the procedures, rules and mechanisms for registering freelancers in the Ministry's systems and for obtaining, renewing and cancelling the work permit, in a manner that ensures the enhancement of labour market flexibility and its requirements. (Cabinet Resolution No. 1 of 2022, On the Implementation of Federal Decree-Law No. (33) of 2021 Regarding the Regulation of Labour Relations)

This forward-thinking approach showcases the UAE's commitment to adapting to modern work dynamics and creating a supportive environment for independent workers. The details of these supplementary resolutions, however, were left for future publication. The initial resolution provides the foundational legal recognition for freelance work within the broader context of UAE labor law.

5. United Arab Emirates Freelancing Market Overview (2024-2028)

Given the UAE's expanding freelancing industry, specialists anticipate considerable growth driven by a worldwide skills deficit expected to result in 85.2 million vacant positions by 2030, especially in finance and business services. Platforms like Outsized are closing this gap by linking companies with talented freelance professionals for project-oriented tasks. This corresponds with UAE Industry 4.0's efforts to promote innovation and economic flexibility.

Significantly, the digital economy of the MENA region is expected to exceed \$140 billion by 2031, driving the need for freelancers with technology expertise in fields like fintech, cybersecurity, and data analytics. This expansion demonstrates the transformation of freelancing into a valuable, skill-driven profession, particularly after the pandemic when companies utilized freelancers for their knowledge in strategic and temporary leadership positions. Nevertheless, specialists emphasize the importance of supportive infrastructure and transparent practices to guarantee a sustainable freelance environment (Ahmad, 2024).

5.1 Current Trends and Growth Drivers in the UAE Freelancing Market

The following text presents an overview of the UAE Freelancing Market Overview 2024-2028 report (ReportLinker, 2024), published in October 2024.

The UAE's "focus on fostering innovation, promoting entrepreneurship, and enhancing digital capabilities" has made the country a thriving hub for independent contractors (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 4). The UAE government has introduced initiatives such as the Golden Visa, enabling freelancers to obtain long-term residency and benefit from the country's "advanced infrastructure and business environment" (ReportLinker, 2024. p. 4).

In this "dynamic milieu" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 4), the demand for skilled professionals in fields such as IT, marketing, design, and consulting has surged, leading to increasingly attractive flexible employment opportunities for the UAE's diverse workforce—including both nationals and expatriates—while freelancing platforms have experienced "exponential growth" by connecting employers with talented freelancers and providing a seamless digital experience for both parties.

The UAE's strategic location and connectivity to the world's major markets have further contributed to the "rapid expansion of the freelancing market" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 4). As global businesses establish their presence in the region, the need for specialized services and diverse skill sets has intensified, leading to an "uptick in project-based engagements" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 4).

The COVID-19 pandemic's acceleration of remote work arrangements has fuelled the "demand for freelancers" as companies reevaluate workforce strategies to prioritize "operational efficiency and cost-effectiveness," ultimately benefiting the UAE's freelancing market (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 5).

To maintain momentum, the UAE government is streamlining regulations to foster a "favorable environment for freelancers" and introducing specialized licenses and freelance permits that simplify business operations for self-employed professionals, thereby solidifying the country's position as a "leading destination for freelancing opportunities" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 5).

5.2 Individual Freelancers: A Thriving Segment in the UAE Freelancing Market

Individual freelancers, a key segment in the UAE's freelancing market, are self-employed professionals offering their expertise "on a project or contract basis" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 6). These independent workers possess a diverse skillset, including web development, graphic design, content creation, and consulting, making them a valuable resource for businesses seeking to outsource specialized tasks (ReportLinker, 2024).

The rise of digital platforms has significantly impacted the individual freelancer segment in the UAE (ReportLinker, 2024). Online marketplaces like Upwork, Freelancer, and Fiverr have facilitated showcasing their skills and connecting "with potential clients from various industries" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 6) for freelancers. Additionally, these platforms have streamlined communication, collaboration, and secure payment methods, further encouraging the growth of the freelancer community (ReportLinker, 2024).

The UAE's initiatives to improve digital infrastructure and enhance the ease of doing business contribute to attracting international individual freelancers (ReportLinker, 2024). The availability of "high-speed internet, coworking spaces, and a robust digital ecosystem" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 6) allows freelancers to work efficiently and deliver high-quality services to their clients.

Furthermore, the UAE's diverse and multicultural workforce presents a unique opportunity for individual freelancers to network and collaborate "with professionals from various backgrounds" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 7). This fosters an exchange of ideas and knowledge, enhancing the freelancers' skills and enabling them to offer innovative and tailored solutions to their clients (ReportLinker, 2024).

The individual freelancer segment in the UAE is primarily driven by the rise of digital platforms, government support for freelancers, a robust digital infrastructure, and a diverse workforce (ReportLinker, 2024). This segment is expected to see substantial growth in the coming years as the UAE strengthens its position as a knowledge-based economy and a leading freelancing hub (ReportLinker, 2024).

5.3 Freelance Platforms: A Cornerstone of the UAE's Freelancing Market

Freelance platforms have become a cornerstone of the UAE's thriving freelance market, connecting businesses with a diverse range of skilled professionals for project-based work. Here's a closer look at some key players:

Upwork: A Global Leader

Upwork, a leading global platform, connects businesses with "independent professionals and agencies for various project-based work" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 7). Freelancers offer services in IT, design, writing, marketing, and administrative support (ReportLinker, 2024).

Upwork has significantly empowered professionals and businesses in the UAE by "fostering connections and facilitating project collaborations," and in 2020, it generated "\$226.7 million in revenue from freelancers in the UAE," highlighting its substantial presence (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 8). Upwork's success aligns with the UAE's focus on "innovation, entrepreneurship, and digitalization," as its advanced technology and user-friendly interface enable "seamless communication and secure transactions" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 8).

Additionally, a comprehensive vetting process and robust feedback system ensure clients access "top-tier talent," while freelancers showcase their skills and build portfolios (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 8). Upwork remains a popular choice for both businesses and professionals in the UAE's dynamic freelance ecosystem (ReportLinker, 2024).

Fiverr: A Marketplace for Gigs

Fiverr offers a prominent marketplace for individuals to buy and sell services in various categories like graphic design, digital marketing, writing, and programming (ReportLinker, 2024). Freelancers list their services as "gigs" and set their prices while buyers browse profiles and select the best fit, making Fiverr attractive for both freelancers and businesses in the UAE due to its "user-friendly interface and extensive range of services" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 9).

Considering Freelancer.com's UAE revenue of "\$58 million in 2021," the potential for freelance platforms in the region is evident (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 9). Fiverr, with its competitive positioning and growing user base, is poised to "capitalize on this opportunity" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 10).

The government's support for "entrepreneurship and digital innovation" further fuels Fiverr's success (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 10). Fiverr's "global reach and

diverse talent pool" allow UAE businesses to access a wide range of expertise, making it attractive for local and international clients, and as the UAE invests in digital infrastructure and innovation, platforms like Fiverr are expected to play an "increasingly significant role" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 10).

Freelancer.com: A Diverse Talent Pool

Freelancer.com is a prominent player, serving as a marketplace connecting businesses and individuals with skilled professionals for various tasks and projects (ReportLinker, 2024). The platform has witnessed notable growth resulting from the growing need for remote work and a globally connected workforce (ReportLinker, 2024). In the UAE, both local and international businesses leverage Freelancer.com's vast talent pool (ReportLinker, 2024).

The global freelance platforms market, expected to reach "\$18.3 billion by 2031," is highly competitive (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 11). Freelancer.com differentiates itself by offering a diverse range of services in technology, design, writing, and marketing, catering to various sectors in the UAE (ReportLinker, 2024). Several factors contribute to its growth:

(...) government's commitment to nurturing a digital economy, the increasing number of freelancers in the workforce, and the ease with which businesses can access specialized skills on-demand. Additionally, Freelancer.com's user-friendly interface and robust customer support have further contributed to its popularity among UAE-based clients and freelancers alike. (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 11).

With the UAE investing in digital infrastructure and initiatives fostering innovation and entrepreneurship, the "demand for skilled freelancers is expected to surge," positioning Freelancer.com to "secure a strong foothold" in the country's burgeoning freelance market (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 12).

5. 4 The UAE's Freelancing Ecosystem: A Value Chain Analysis

The UAE's burgeoning freelance market is underpinned by a robust value chain that facilitates seamless interactions between clients and freelancers. Key players in this ecosystem include input suppliers, freelance platforms, and end-users.

Input Suppliers: The Foundation

Input suppliers provide the essential resources and services that enable the smooth functioning of the UAE's freelance market. These include:

- **Online Platforms:** Platforms like "Nabbesh, PeoplePerHour, Freelancer.com, Fiverr, and Upwork" (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 32) serve as intermediaries, connecting clients with freelancers and streamlining processes such as project posting, bidding, and payment.
- **Payment Service Providers:** Companies like PayPal and Payoneer offer secure and efficient payment solutions, including invoicing, processing, and currency conversion (ReportLinker, 2024).

- Skill Development Institutions: “Universities, professional certification organizations, and online learning platforms provide education and training opportunities, enabling freelancers to upskill and meet the evolving demands of the market” (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 33).
- Coworking Spaces: These spaces offer freelancers “a conducive work environment and fostering collaboration and networking opportunities” (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 33). They provide access to essential infrastructure like high-speed internet, meeting rooms, and office amenities (ReportLinker, 2024).

Freelance Platforms: The Marketplace

Freelance platforms serve a crucial function in linking clients and freelancers, ensuring seamless project execution and secure transactions. Nabbeesh is a localized platform that addresses the "unique needs of the UAE market" by effectively connecting businesses with skilled professionals across various industries (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 34).

International PeoplePerHour, Freelancer.com, Fiverr, and Upwork have made a significant impact in the UAE market. PeoplePerHour is recognized for its quality and thorough vetting process, while Freelancer.com is favored for its extensive services and user-friendly interface; Fiverr offers a wide range of services at accessible prices, and Upwork provides flexible options, including project-based work and hourly engagements, allowing clients to select the best fit for their needs (ReportLinker, 2024).

These platforms have successfully tailored their offerings to the UAE market, enabling users to navigate the competitive landscape and access a vast pool of skilled professionals (ReportLinker, 2024).

End-Users: The Driving Force

End-users, including businesses and individual clients, drive the demand for freelance services due to the flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and access to specialized skills that freelancers provide (ReportLinker, 2024). Startups and SMEs particularly benefit from the "scalability and adaptability" offered by freelancers (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 35). “The growing digitalization and the increasingly remote nature of work further facilitate the engagement of freelancers by individual clients” (ReportLinker, 2024, p. 36).

To cater to the diverse needs of end-users, freelance platforms are continuously expanding their service offerings and enhancing user experience. This includes streamlining the process of finding and working with freelancers, implementing secure payment systems, and providing support services. By addressing user needs and preferences, these platforms are well-positioned to capitalize on the UAE's evolving freelance market and drive sustainable growth (ReportLinker, 2024).

6. Discussion

The evolving landscape of work, globally and within the UAE, underscores a fundamental transformation in employment practices. Freelancing, once perceived as supplemental or transitional, is now recognized as a legitimate and strategic career choice. This shift aligns with the broader dynamics of globalization, technological advancements, and changing workforce preferences, positioning freelancing at the intersection of flexibility, autonomy, and economic innovation.

The redefinition of freelancing as a viable career path reflects the growing emphasis on autonomy and adaptability in labor markets. This is particularly evident in creative industries, where freelancers are integral to delivering specialized, innovative outputs. However, this independence comes with challenges, including income instability and a lack of social protection (Neff, 2012).

The concept of "venture labor" aptly captures the entrepreneurial risks freelancers undertake, as they navigate environments marked by declining material conditions and exploitative practices.

In creative sectors, freelancers embody the "entrepreneurial self," balancing autonomy with economic adaptability. Their roles in sustaining industries such as media, design, and technology are undeniable, yet the absence of comprehensive policies recognizing their contributions hampers their full integration into economic frameworks (Mould et al., 2014). Within the UAE, this dynamic is changing.

The UAE's unique positioning as a global hub for talent is underpinned by its multicultural workforce, progressive regulatory frameworks, and robust digital infrastructure. This combination fosters a fertile environment for freelancing, particularly in industries that thrive on cross-cultural collaboration, such as media and technology. Expatriates from over 200 nationalities contribute to a vibrant, dynamic workforce, where diverse perspectives enhance creativity and innovation (Mould et al., 2014).

Freelancers benefit from this diversity, gaining a competitive edge in tailoring services to a broad spectrum of local and international clients. Regulatory initiatives, including freelance permits and coworking opportunities in free zones like Dubai Media City (DMC) and Sharjah Media City (Shams), have further streamlined the entry and operation of freelancers. These measures reduce administrative burdens, allowing professionals to focus on their creative and entrepreneurial pursuits.

The UAE's advanced digital infrastructure is a cornerstone of its freelance ecosystem. High-speed internet, innovative payment systems, and e-governance services facilitate seamless operations for freelancers, enabling them to collaborate with global clients. The country's strategic geographic location reinforces this connectivity, positioning freelancers to cater to diverse

markets across Europe, Asia, and Africa. This global reach not only enhances the UAE's reputation as a freelancing hub but also provides freelancers with opportunities for lucrative, cross-border engagements.

Freelancers contribute significantly to the UAE's economic adaptability, particularly in sectors requiring specialized or temporary skills. Industries such as technology, finance, and education increasingly rely on freelance talent to bridge skill gaps without long-term financial commitments. This flexibility aligns with the UAE's vision of fostering a knowledge-driven economy, where innovation and adaptability are key drivers of growth.

The analysis of the UAE freelancing market reveals a dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape characterized by significant opportunities for growth. Driven by a global skills deficit and the anticipated rise in demand for freelance professionals, the UAE is transforming its economy into a hub for skilled freelancers.

The government's initiatives, such as the Green Visa and free zone permits, provide freelancers with legal recognition and operational flexibility. These developments are reshaping the perception of freelancing, transitioning it from precarious work to a strategic career option aligned with the needs of a knowledge-driven economy (Nair, 2021). A supportive government framework is evidenced by initiatives like the Golden Visa, which facilitates long-term residency for freelancers, thereby nurturing an environment ripe for innovation and entrepreneurship.

Key trends indicate that the pandemic has permanently altered workforce dynamics, leading businesses to embrace remote work and freelancers for strategic roles. This shift has underscored the importance of freelancers in providing businesses with operational flexibility and cost-effectiveness.

7. Conclusion

The transformation of labor markets globally underscores a promising shift toward flexible and innovative work arrangements. This evolution, characterized by the rise of gig and project-based work, has provided opportunities for specialized talent to thrive in dynamic, adaptive economies. In alignment with these global trends, the UAE has demonstrated a forward-thinking approach to workforce development, integrating strategic initiatives and regulatory reforms to position itself as a leader in the freelancing and gig economy.

Through targeted programs such as the GoFreelance initiative, the Green Residence Visa, and specialized free zone permits, the UAE has actively cultivated a vibrant and inclusive labor market. These measures have not only opened new avenues for global talent but also aligned with the nation's broader agenda of economic diversification and innovation-driven growth. By reducing barriers for freelancers and fostering an enabling environment, the UAE has

established itself as a hub for creativity, flexibility, and innovation, catering to a global workforce seeking autonomy and specialized opportunities.

Furthermore, the UAE's significant labor reforms, particularly the overhaul of the Kafala system and the enactment of Federal Decree-Laws Nos. 33 of 2021 and 13 of 2022, highlight a commitment to redefining traditional employment relationships. These reforms enhance worker mobility, protect rights, and provide a structured framework for diverse work models, including freelancing. Initiatives such as Article 8 of Cabinet Resolution No. 1 of 2022 underscore the UAE's vision of formalizing and supporting freelance work within its legal and economic structures. This not only empowers independent professionals but also solidifies the nation's reputation as a competitive and future-ready economy.

The UAE's efforts reflect a delicate balance between flexibility and regulation, ensuring that worker protections are maintained while fostering an innovation-friendly environment. While challenges such as income instability and the lack of traditional employment benefits persist for freelancers globally, the UAE's comprehensive and adaptive approach serves as a benchmark for other nations navigating the complexities of the gig economy.

The UAE's freelancing market is poised for substantial expansion from 2024 to 2028, bolstered by a combination of favorable governmental policies, a burgeoning digital economy, and the rising necessity for specialized skills. While not empirical, the paper highlights the nation's forward-looking policies, positioning it as a leader in labor innovation. As the demand for freelancers continues to escalate, driven by technological advancements and evolving business needs, stakeholders - including freelancers, businesses, and freelance platforms - must adapt to the changing landscape.

Future studies may further explore the longitudinal impacts of these reforms on freelancers' experiences and economic outcomes, providing deeper insights into how nations can create sustainable, equitable, and dynamic gig economies. Continuous research and analysis will be crucial in understanding the evolving needs of freelancers and identifying opportunities for innovation. By proactively addressing these areas, the UAE can solidify its position as a global leader in the freelance economy, unlocking significant economic and social benefits.

The UAE's experience stands as an exemplar of how governments can navigate the intersection of flexibility, inclusivity, and economic progress in an increasingly interconnected world. The future of freelancing in the UAE appears promising, with the potential to emerge as a leading destination for global talent, thereby contributing significantly to the region's economy and innovation landscape.

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