

The next war for talent is for skilled freelancers and independent consultants

The number of workers resigning to go solo has accelerated enormously in the past two years, as the Covid pandemic shook up the workplace and forced people to rethink their futures.



Source: www.pexels.com

While some analysts have dubbed this trend the great resignation, it's more of a great liberation, says Jon Younger, a global authority on freelancing who is frequently published in *Forbes* and *Harvard Business Review*. "They are taking back their professional lives, expertise and time, and that's a powerful thing," he said during a webinar hosted by Outsized.

Younger recently conducted a global survey on freelancing in partnership with the University of Toronto, and found that 60% were finding enough fulfilling and profitable work to have made the move worthwhile. "Freelancers are busier, more engaged and optimistic than anybody expected," he said. "About 60% of freelancers in our survey had either enough work to do or too much work to do, 60% were happy with their financial outcomes, and 90% said that they were experiencing increasing opportunities."



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David Seinker 23 Feb 2022



Those figures included African and Asian countries, which have traditionally lagged behind western nations in seeing freelancing as a viable option. The survey covered 1,900 respondents in more than 30 countries, and confirmed that the move to independent consulting is sweeping across the world in numerous economic sectors.

Greater flexibility

While some organisations are learning to appreciate the greater flexibility that comes from hiring independent consultants, many large companies need to rethink their hiring habits, said Anurag Bhalla, the cofounder of Outsized. “We’ve seen organisations putting a higher value on agility in very uncertain times and looking at more flexible ways of getting things done, which has really driven up the demand for freelance talent,” he said.

Freelancers also believe that many companies see them as outsiders rather than part of the team, and Bhalla hopes that will change as companies choose to build more flexible workforces. That was already happening in South Africa with some companies treating their contractors as co-workers, particularly on longer-term projects, said Johann van Niekerk, the CEO and Head of Africa at Outsized.



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Viewing them as a key part of the workforce was a cohesive, winning strategy, he added. “The next war for talent is for independent consultants and skilled contractors, not permanent employees. Companies need to carefully think through their employer value proposition for independent workers,” van Niekerk said.

Yet companies often struggle to integrate freelancers successfully because the human resources department doesn’t know how to build a workforce of independent contractors, and managers don’t know how to manage them. That was compounded by the procurement department wanting to pay the cheapest price for everything. “That’s a problem when you’re talking about freelancers who may have left a real top-notch job,” Younger said in the webinar.

Hiring external contractors presented an excellent opportunity to refresh and strengthen a company’s thinking, he added, but some companies were too hung up on finding a person with the right cultural fit. “So many organisations have a closed talent culture and just talk to themselves and are missing what’s happening outside. Freelancers throw a window open so you see what’s happening in the bigger world because they are coming from different organisations, and that’s how organisations grow.” Hiring talent shouldn’t just be about cultural fit, but about technical competence, he stressed.

Modernise the hiring practices

The survey drew its respondents from 77 online platforms that match contractors with client companies, and Younger suggested that these platforms could do more to support both the supply and the demand sides. That could include helping companies modernise their hiring practices, and offering training opportunities for freelancers. That would be particularly helpful in professions that are continually evolving, since it is harder to keep up with the latest developments if you are no longer part of a company that offers refresher courses.

Bhalla said Outsized was working to create a sense of community and support for freelancers by having a specific focus on Africa and Asia, and by placing them with large enterprises that run big projects. That made it easier for people to turn freelance by giving them a safety net of guaranteed work.

The role of social media in recruitment





“It’s a lot easier if you know your first job is a full-time, six-month project,” he said. “It’s allowed us to really professionalise the market and demonstrate that it can be a career choice as opposed to a side hustle.” Outsized has also launched an online Community for independent workers to connect with others and to access upskilling resources, he added.

Another permanent change that Covid has had on the workplace is to make people more open to international opportunities. The shift towards working from home and the technology that supports it has proved that remote working is not only possible, but also very productive. That has made companies more willing and able to tap into the global talent pool, and allows freelancers to work for international firms without leaving home. That was boosting equality by no longer confining people’s opportunities to the area where they happened to live, said Younger. “It can connect opportunities with talent and reduce the inequalities that come from that,” he said.

The ability to gain experience and boost your portfolio by working for top-tier international companies is another attraction that will persuade more skilled South Africans to turn independent in the coming months, van Niekerk believes.

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