Normalizing Remote Work in East Africa

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About the Author

Aurelio Mofuga is a seasoned Tanzanian entrepreneur, business consultant, and technology enthusiast with extensive experience in management consulting, technology and innovation. He is also the founder of Kipepeo Edutainment and AfyaChats, startups that are transforming access to Early Childhood Education and Health Information in Tanzania.

Aurelio has amassed expertise in advising organizations, corporations, and governments on integrating novel technology, data, and design thinking to address humanity's impediments. His advisory experience spans the Internet of Things (IoT), space and satellite, Artificial Intelligence (AI), blockchain, and Fintech, to name a few. He also has extensive industry knowledge in various emerging markets in the global south, a region with numerous opportunities that have yet to be realized through the use of technology.

Aurelio's core values are integrity, honesty, self-leadership, and continuous learning and improvement, which he embodies throughout his practice. He hopes to facilitate the adoption of novel technologies in Africa as a key to advancing the continent's progress and ensuring seamless planning and effective utilization of resources to create long-term impact, particularly for the vulnerable living in low-income households.

Notably, thanks to the generous support from the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) through its Young Leaders Program (YLP) funding has been instrumental in completing this research. Being part of the YLP fellowship cohort of 2022, has enabled Aurelio to unveil his passion for remote work, a once in a life-time opportunity to redefine this budding and lucrative industry in Africa. He hopes this report will bridge awareness to youth, open opportunities to corporations and companies to benefit from Africa's fast growing global talent and to inspire collective efforts led by the government and development actors to spur regulation and wide adoption of remote work across the continent.

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed where and how people work, putting many long-held norms and practices under scrutiny. Perhaps no trend has defined the pandemic era more than the shift to remote work. Remote work refers to flexible working arrangements that allow an employee to work from a different location other than a central location operated by an employer.[1] Notably, remote work opens up new employment opportunities for previously excluded groups. Professionals can now shape the future of industries worldwide without relocating, thus earning a steady income and acquiring the necessary skills for career advancement. For employers, remote work unlocks a nexus of innovation, productivity, and cost-efficiency thanks to a diverse talent pool easily accessible over the internet.

Africa is no exception to this global trend, and enterprises and professionals are already tapping into youth as a talent pool. The continent's youth are plagued by alarming unemployment rates that for years have rendered many unproductive and is expected to continue skyrocketing, fueled by the continent's exponential population growth coupled with unequal economic growth and, in turn, diminished employment opportunities. Yet over 85 percent of the continent's economy runs on informal sectors comprising of small- to medium-sized enterprises and lower-wage sectors such as agriculture, hotels and restaurants, retail and wholesale trade, and manufacturing. Lower wages, an unsafe work environment, and a lack of job security hinder many "hand-to-mouth" workers from attaining prosperity. Fortunately, low-skilled, entry-level remote jobs could give these groups a guaranteed income and opportunity for career advancement.

Burgeoning literacy rates, higher digital device and internet service penetration, and a youthful tech-savvy population established the foundation for the surge of remote work in Africa. Yet, for a few, this has materialized into their north star, while for many, it remains a mystery yet to be uncovered. This research features a thorough review of the remote work landscape in East African countries, uncovering the state of youth engagement, challenges impeding them, and how capitalizing on opportunities brought about by recent technological transformations is critical for empowering access to life-changing remote work opportunities available on the internet.

The findings incorporated in this report were gathered through over 255 survey responses and stakeholder consultations with key personnel, such as remote work advocates and fellow youth leaders in East Africa and beyond. It is anticipated that this report will inform young people about the benefits

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[1] 'Definition of Remote Work - Gartner Information Technology Glossary'. *Gartner*, https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/glossary/remote-work. Accessed 31 Oct. 2022.

of remote work and how to tap into them. For governments and organisations, we hope this report will enable them to discern the value of remote work and how developing friendly policies and enhancing digital infrastructure go a long way toward creating a ripple effect that supports youth economic development.

Methodology

This research study gathered insights from a small group of over 255 remote workers spread across five East African regional states and beyond, including Nigeria, Ghana, and Ireland. The insights were gathered through an online survey hosted on a Google form and consultation with remote work advocates from across the region.

Additional information was gathered through in-depth desk research that looked for insights from reliable sources like academic journals, institutional reports and data portals, and globally distributed news.

State of Remote Work in East Africa

Set ablaze by the ongoing technological revolution, remote work adoption in East Africa has increasingly become mainstream among youth, albeit, at a varying pace, with countries like Kenya trailblazing regional and global statistics and emerging as the 15th largest contributor to the global remote human workforce.[2] For the rest of the East African states, it remains a mystery unheard of. However, this is set to change soon as youth-led movements like Jukwaa Africa emerge across the region with the sole purpose of advocating for and uncovering green pastures on the internet for other fellow youth. Notably, it is imperative to recognize the significance of these movements in the digitization and enlightenment of young people among themselves and how each of these movements has yielded increased engagement with remote work platforms.

Snapshot: East African Youth Engagement in Remote Work

Youthful Demographic

250+
Responses Collected through survey.

50% of respondents were Female

24
Average age of respondents

With an average age of 24 years old, the East African remote work scene is dominated by young people, and a majority of them have accrued an average work experience of up to 2 years. Kenya by far is the largest contributor to regional and global remote workforce, having approximately over 58,000 remote workers.

Fig 1: Map showing distribution of remote workforce in East Africa.

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[2] Oxford University - Online Labour Observatory *Demand*. http://onlinelabourobservatory.org/oli-demand/. Accessed 31 Oct. 2022.

Female Underrepresentation in Remote Work

The remote workforce landscape remains a male-dominated playground, with women representing only 20 to 30 percent of the entire workforce.[3] Low female representation in remote work is exacerbated by incumbent digital divide and unequal accessibility to digital devices and opportunities, pertinent to existing socio-economic differences.

Remote Work Preference Factors
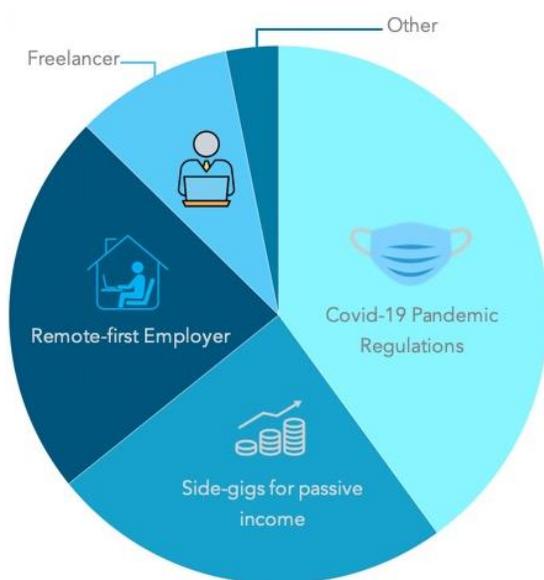
The Covid-19 pandemic, the need to build a passive income, remote-first employer and freelancing have been cited among the reasons for working remotely. Over 30 percent of respondents mentioned they were working in a different industry other than their field of study citing reasons such as difficulty in securing a job with their educations, hobbies, and self-taught skills.

"My side gigs are not related to my field of study because I am doing them as my hobbies."

"Because it's hard to be employed in my field of study"

"I have been freelancing in sales and marketing while in school but never studied it in a school. Learnt on the job!"
Anonymous Respondents

Top Occupations

Occupation	Percentage
Sales and Marketing	35%
Professional services	17%
Technology	13%
Arts and Entertainment	9%
Micro work (online gigs done on smartphone)	9%
Education	7%
Development Sector and NGO	7%
Event management	2%
Manufacturing	2%
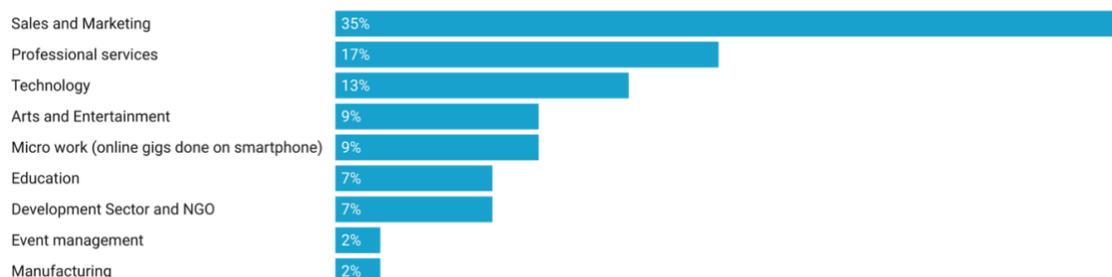
[3] Arem et Al 'Making the Future of African STEM Female'. *Brookings*, 10 Feb. 2022. Link

Remote Work Perks

Increased Employee Productivity

Employers were reluctant to adopt remote work because of pre-pandemic misconceptions that it might decrease employee productivity or motivation. A survey conducted by Michael Page in South Africa found that over 63 percent of professionals reported increased productivity while working from home during the pandemic, with 31 percent sharing that their productivity remained unaffected by the transition into remote work due to the pandemic.[4] Reduced commuting time to a physical office, exacerbated by traffic in major cities across the continent renders many employees unproductive due to spending most of their time on the way to the office, luckily, remote work removes this pain by allowing employees the option to work in the comfort of their homes. This is further supported by the preference of many remote workers to work from home rather than in an actual office—more than 72 percent of them prefer a hybrid model that combines home and office work.

Cost Reduction

Remote work enables both employees and companies to benefit from cost reductions. For employees, little to no commute to office space slashes the costs associated with transportation and food, which are critical when working from an office location. Similarly, companies can cut down on costs associated with operating in a physical office space, such as rent, utilities, and maintenance. These cost savings have been cited as enabling startup company success, allowing companies to allocate more resources to company growth by implementing a remote-first workplace, in which all employees work remotely.

Better Work-life Balance and Job Satisfaction

Long weekdays, shorter weekends and weary evenings - which result in limited time spent with family and on personal hobbies - are blamed for eroding urban workers' work-life balance. Globally, longer commutes to work and busy schedules tend to exacerbate this, which also accounts for job dissatisfaction among employees. Remote work offers flexibility for employees to work from home, availing sufficient time to look after other life factors. This is responsible for motivating workers in fast-paced industries such as finance and technology. A survey conducted by Andela highlighted that over 87 percent of remote software developers stated that they have more control over how, when and

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[4] Michael Page: Dramatic increase in remote working in South Africa

where they work, thus availing flexibility to enable them to pursue their hobbies, spend time with their family and friends as well as learn new skills to advance their skills or enable them to switch careers to more promising industries.[5]

Expanding Opportunities to Underrepresented Groups

Marginalised groups such as women and youth, internally displaced people (IDPs), refugees, and people with disabilities are some of the groups that are likely to be excluded from normal employment opportunities. This is exacerbated by dire socio-economic conditions, low literacy rates, and a lack of skills that might support employment in formal sectors. Households with marginalised members are likely to have lower incomes and are at a significantly higher risk of living below the poverty line. Luckily, remote work and particularly digital jobs could help these groups earn a steady income by completing simple, low-skill jobs such as translation and completing surveys that can be completed by using simple devices such as smartphones. Expanding access to marginalised groups has a ripple effect that will ultimately lift the entire community out of extreme poverty and provide the means, skills, and resources for earning an income.

Career Progression

Remote work promises an opportunity for workers to upskill by acquiring skills that can help them change careers, thus earning better salaries and making an impact in industries that interest them. In one survey by Andela, respondents highlighted that 75 percent of respondents taught themselves to code, gaining an opportunity to work in the fast-growing technology industry without a need to go back to university to study a new career. Previous barriers that prevented people from non-tech backgrounds from entering the workforce have vanished as a result of a growing demand for software development, opening the industry to anyone in need of such opportunities thanks to companies hiring remotely.

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[5] 'The Future Is Africa: How African Developers Are Leading the Remote Workplace Revolution'. *Andela*, 23 Mar. 2022, https://andela.com/insights/the-future-is-africa-how-african-developers-are-leading-the-remote-workplace-revolution/.

Baraka Mafole

Remote work advocate in Tanzania

Baraka is the founder of Jukwaa Africa limited a Tech startup company focused on shaping the future of the Creator economy in Africa. Baraka played a crucial role in enlightening youth about remote work opportunities through working as a Co-Founder of Sanuka Kidijitali an Initiative which focused on helping youth identify, learn and monetize their digital skills on various digital platforms. As a pioneer of Digital Transformation in Tanzania, Baraka has championed and organized various events, activities, and programs including Social media day Tanzania, and Dunda Kidijitali spaces also collaborated with multiple trusted organizations including Sahara ventures, DoT Tanzania, and Her Initiative all in the quest to popularize remote work in Tanzania.

His freelancing journey story has been featured by various national and International Media houses including Tech Cabal, Mwananchi newspaper, Mwangaza newspaper, Simulizi na Sauti, Beeyou media, and East Africa Tv. He has also spoken at various national and international events including TedX UDSM, Sahara spark 2021, Innovation Week Tanzania 2022, Tanzania Youth Digital Summit 2021.

Unblocking Remote Work Adoption

Context-specific challenges

Youth participation in remote work opportunities has increased as a result of African youth embracing the trend. However, this remains an opportunity that few tech-savvy youths have tapped into, and it remains inaccessible to many who lack access to essential devices, skills and infrastructure to connect them to such opportunities. Ticking off each of these problems, bridges access to essential digital devices and internet services thus connecting countless young people to the internet and, ultimately, enabling them to take advantage of the exciting economic opportunities it offers.

Improving digital access and use of mobile devices

Alarming poverty rates prevalent across the continent roadblock youth from accessing essential devices such as smartphones and computers due to their expensive nature. Additionally, because they lack access to high-end devices due to poverty, young people are unable to benefit from recent technological advancements and must instead rely on outdated, ineffective models. A significant step toward bringing on board a new generation of internet users would be for the government to ensure equal access to digital devices by lowering import taxes and levies, which would then result in lower end-user acquisition costs. Similarly, public-private partnerships, such as the Connect Rwanda initiative between the Rwandan government and MTN RwandaCell, which saw over 30,000 smartphones pledged for Rwandans, are essential for enabling accessibility to those at the base of the pyramid who cannot afford digital devices.[6]

Connectivity

Underdeveloped electricity and telecommunications infrastructure hinder youth from hopping onto the digital future. Closing the energy gap by electrifying over 70 percent[7] of East Africans disconnected from electrical grid is a crucial step to bridging the digital divide and would also power up a variety of industries that depend on electricity. Equally important, making internet access a basic need for every citizen would ensure undisrupted connection, linking youth to digital platforms and powering up their search for greener pastures online. This is critical in order to connect millions currently disconnected

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[6] Anita. 'Over 30,000 Smartphones Pledged under Connect Rwanda Challenge'. *The Commonwealth*, 20 Jan. 2020, https://www.thecommonwealth.io/digest/over-30000-smartphones-pledged-under-connect-rwanda-challenge/.

[7] 'Powering Up: The Urgent Need to Close Africa's Energy Gap'. *Millennium Challenge Corporation*, https://www.mcc.gov/resources/story/story-kin-apr-2015-powering-up-the-urgent-need-to-close-africas-energ. Accessed 31 Oct. 2022.

from the internet due to an unreliable, underdeveloped, and expensive broadband-based internet infrastructure.

Digital upskilling and Training

For decades, the African continent experienced higher levels of illiteracy, which have only recently been reversed; however, a different type of illiteracy resurfaced due to the inability to use digital communication tools such as computers and smartphones. Digital illiteracy is exacerbated by the inaccessibility of digital devices hampering low-income households due to its relatively higher cost. Deliberate efforts should be made to equip human capital with relevant, on-demand digital skills by modernising educational curriculum to meet current-world demands and season world-class talents capable of competing globally. Bridging digital skills lay the groundwork for youth to communicate easily, interact, and work online.

Designing remote work platforms for the next billion users.

Globally, over a billion people who were previously digitally excluded are now connecting for the first time. The majority of them use low-end smartphone devices to connect, are limited by their lack of experience with digital platforms, and have little to no money to spend on internet subscriptions in addition to a slow, unreliable broadband connection. In practice, the aforementioned factors contribute to digital-anxiety, or the fear of not being able to perform basic tasks due to novelty, which further excludes them from life-changing opportunities. It is imperative to design remote work platforms with the newcomers in mind and further incorporate accessibility features that would allow disabled people that are currently excluded from existing platforms to take advantage of the remote work opportunities available online. Simpler user flows, lighter apps that use less data bandwidth, and guided navigation for new users are some of Google's most recommended features to support this new group of internet users.

Capacity-specific considerations

Strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks

The legal and regulatory environment, not only in Africa, but globally, is incapable of regulating the remote work industry. This is due, in part, to its novelty and, as a result, the lack of fundamental regulations that would protect the interests of various stakeholders. Concerns have grown among gig workers who have reported to being underpaid, working in an unsafe environment, and being treated unfairly by companies operating gig work platforms. This is common among companies that provide software as a service, such as ride-hailing and food-delivery apps, which have grown in popularity since the pandemic. Strengthening the legal and regulatory environment by learning from what has worked

elsewhere, as well as holding consultative meetings with key stakeholders, would reveal insights into how this lucrative industry can be regulated.

Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Remote Work Environment

Women, minorities, and people with disabilities continue to be underrepresented not only in remote work but in tech-related aspects. Persistent systemic barriers resulting from discrimination have rendered these groups unproductive and limited their access to essentials such as education and employment opportunities, all in the fear that they will be unable to outperform and thus unproductive in comparison to members of dominant groups. Advocating for DEI in remote workplaces is critical to ensuring the representation of these marginalised groups and, ultimately, their economic empowerment.

Safeguarding employee rights

Gender pay disparities exist in remote work as well, putting marginalised groups at a disadvantage due to sex, race, and disability. Often, the same individuals are forced to work in an unsafe environment with no protection measures in place, such as insurance or emergency compensation funds, forcing workers to use the hard-earned funds to cover emergencies that may arise due to accidents or even injuries from violence and gender-based abuse. The prospect of decent remote work would become a reality if workers were guaranteed access to their basic rights and protection.

Recommendations

Multi-stakeholder strategic partnerships

The majority of the hindrances impeding youth from taking ownership of remote opportunities stem from various causes. As a result, this requires a multifaceted approach when tackling these problems as this would ensure effective solutions for these challenges altogether. Stakeholder consultations are essential for representing the youth perspective. This includes remote work advocates, government and remote work platform providers to ensure consensus is reached and in turn can accelerate the growth of the industry and ultimate technology adoption by young people:

Learning, advocacy and evidence building

The speed and adoption of remote work is constrained by the lack of contextual evidence that would facilitate stakeholder dialogue and even inspire other youth to engage in it. Luckily there has already been a movement of young people advocating for mainstream adoption of remote work among its peers and for the government to create enabling policies that facilitate its widespread adoption. Such movements championed by youth across East Africa, offer learning opportunities for various stakeholders through observing how remote work has transformed their lives and thus using such evidence for advocacy and transformation of some of the challenges impeding its widespread adoption.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion in Remote Work

Breaking down the barriers that impede vulnerable and marginalised groups from accessing remote opportunities would ensure equitable access to such opportunities and, thus, guarantee their economic empowerment. This further requires strengthening employee rights and protections while closing the gender pay gap prevalent due to race, sex and disabilities that has rendered women to be paid less than their male counterparts. Advocating DEI in remote work would ensure the inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups previously excluded in traditional workplaces like refugees, women, and disabled people who bear the burden of financial hardship due to their socio-economic status.

Strengthen regional cooperation to accelerate digitalization

Digitalization is the core pillar and enabler of remote work adoption. Scaling digitalization should be at the core of the East African Community (EAC) masterplan as this lays the groundwork for remote work adoption across the region and digitization across various sectors of society and economies. Mobilizing public and private resources would help pool funds for infrastructure development such as internet and electricity that would form a backbone for digitalisation efforts. Furthermore, existing social economic

similarities coupled with closeness beg for a single digital market that would facilitate seamless connectivity and roaming across the region. Furthermore, harmonizing regulations and facilitating interoperability of digital services will allow seamless exchange and use of electronic information, which is a crucial milestone toward unlocking seamless payment settlement across the bloc and enabling youth to remotely work and get paid easily by companies across the EAC region.

Invest in Human Resources to meet existing and future workforce demand

An unskilled workforce is among the key barriers to East African youth from accessing remote work. Facilitating school-to-work transition through equipping youth with necessary transferable employability and skills would bolster their competence in the global labour markets. This also calls for inclusive digital literacy programmes that include disadvantaged groups so that no one is left behind in this wave. Finally, monitoring technological development trends across East Africa and globally would help inform how the EAC community should tailor its strategies to meet such demands and facilitate its mainstream adoption among its citizens and stakeholders.

Conclusion

More than ever, remote work demands the active engagement of African nations in determining the future of this exciting industry that has recently veered off, in contrast to earlier digital revolutions where Africa had little influence. Equally important is the recognition of the importance of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic, when it remained critical for the continuation of 'business as usual,' albeit from the comfort of one's own home. Globally, it has enabled millions to steadily earn income, reshape the future of different industries and make impact miles away from home, just in the comfort of their homes. Youth in the least developed countries, where a lack of employment opportunities threatens their future, have found refuge in this burgeoning industry, securing their future and the future of their loved ones through guaranteed income and career advancement. Indeed, remote work has had a significant impact that has profoundly changed careers, industries, and ultimately the entire economy, and this is just the beginning as the future of the workplace world is rapidly evolving and widely embracing remote-first culture, as does a burgeoning demand for remote-first workforce.

Youthful population, fast-growing digital infrastructure penetration and the growing need for employers to access global talent more cheaply fuel the growth of the remote work industry globally, albeit, at a much slower pace in Africa than the rest of the world. Remote work adoption in Africa is hampered by a lack of developed electricity and communications infrastructure, a lack of digital devices, and an unskilled workforce. To solve these challenges and many other it would require multiple stakeholder consultations, a thorough review of strategies leveraged by other countries to materialize remote work, and further transformation across infrastructure, education and legal and regulatory frameworks to enable the protection of workers' rights, and equitable access to connectivity while equipping youth with essential skills to compete globally. Learning from progress thus far, it is evident that the benefits of remote work outweigh some of its challenges, and is therefore worth pursuing.

Glossary of Terms

Remote Work

Remote work is a term for flexible work schedules that enable an employee to conduct business from a location other than a company's main office. In general, the term "remote work" can be used to refer to a variety of working arrangements, including gig economy, freelancing, digital work, working from home, and microtasks. For employees who can complete work offsite, this arrangement can help ensure work-life balance, access to career opportunities, or reduce commuter costs. Benefits for the company include increased employee satisfaction and retention, increased productivity, and cost savings on physical resources. Remote work arrangements can be temporary or permanent, part-time or full-time, occasional or frequent.

GIG Economy

In the gig economy, instead of a regular wage, workers get paid for small tasks they do called "gigs" such as food delivery, taxi ride, or digital tasks. The gig economy is facilitated via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between service providers and customers on a short-term and payment-by-task basis.[8] Examples of gig economy platforms include Uber, Fiverr, Upwork, and many others.

Work From Home

Working from home is the term used to describe an employee or contractor who performs their role from home instead of in an office environment. This arrangement is possible in skills-intensive industries such as finance, IT, and other industries that do not involve physical work.

Digital Work/Virtual Work

Digital work or virtual work is defined as paid labour that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunication technologies and can broadly be divided into three categories: telework, crowd work, and emerging virtual occupations.

Micro-tasks/Microwork

A microtask is a small task that requires a low level of skill and takes minimal time to complete, and can be completed online using common devices such as a phone or computer. Microtasks include simple

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[8] World Economic Forum: What is the gig economy and what's the deal for gig workers?

activities such as filling out a survey, word translation, voiceover inputs for media work, and many others. The nature of microwork can be completed on the go and using minimal resources; therefore, financial remuneration for completing a microtask is also minimal but can be aggregated by completing as many tasks as possible.

Freelancing

Freelancing is when an individual uses their skills, education, and experience to work with multiple clients and take on various tasks on a per-job or per-task basis. Since a freelancer is not an employee of a business, they are free to work on several projects at once for various clients or companies, unless they have a written agreement stipulating that they will only work on one project until it is completed.[9]

[9] Investopedia

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