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FREELANCING AS AN OBJECT OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY:
A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Freelancing in modern society is one of the key forms of atypical employment caused by the digitalization of the economy and the spread of online platforms. This phenomenon refers to the performance of work on a project or temporary basis without entering into a traditional employment contract. Its development is associated with global changes in the organization of work, the growth of the "gig economy" and a change in the professional identity of workers.

A wide range of approaches to freelance analysis has emerged in the world literature. Economic and sociological studies consider it as a manifestation of flexible employment, focusing on income, status and motivation of freelancers. Legal publications address issues of social protection and taxation. The digitalization of the labor market has set new research objectives related to the functioning of platforms and the globalization of labor processes.

The Kazakh context remains insufficiently studied. In official statistics, freelancing is more often included in the category of self-employed, which makes it difficult to assess its scale. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of specialists working through digital platforms in the fields of IT, design and marketing.

The purpose of the article is to systematize existing research on freelancing, identify the main areas of analysis and identify gaps in the study of this phenomenon in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: freelancing, digital employment, atypical employment, labor market, intellectual labor, Internet.

ФРИЛАНС ҒЫЛЫМИ ЗЕРТТЕУ НЫСАНЫ РЕТИНДЕ: ӘДЕБИЕТКЕ ШОЛУ

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Аннотация

Қазіргі қоғамдағы Фриланс экономиканы цифрландыруға және онлайн-платформаларды таратуға байланысты типтік емес жұмыспен қамтудың негізгі нысандарының бірі болып табылады. Бұл құбылыс деп дәстүрлі еңбек шартын жасаспай, жобалық немесе уақытша негізде еңбек қызметін орындау түсініледі. Онын дамуы енбекті үйімдастырудың жаһандық өзгерістермен, «гиг-экономиканың» өсүімен және жұмысшылардың көсіби сәйкестігінің өзгеруімен байланысты.

Әлемдік әдебиетте фрилансты талдауға кең көзқарастар қалыптасты. Экономикалық және әлеуметтанулық зерттеулер оны фрилансерлердің табысына, мәртебесіне және мотивациясына назар аудара отырып, икемді Жұмыспен қамтудың көрінісі ретінде қарастырады. Құқықтық Жарияланымдар әлеуметтік қорғау және салық салу мәселелерін қозғайды. Еңбек нарығын цифрландыру платформалардың жұмыс істеуіне және еңбек процестерінің жаһандануына байланысты жаңа зерттеу міндеттерін қойды.

Қазақстандық контекст әзірге жеткілікті зерттелмеген қүйінде қалып отыр. Ресми статистикада фриланс көбінесе өзін-өзі жұмыспен қамтығандар санатына енеді, бұл оның ауқымын бағалауды киындалады. Сонымен қатар, ат, дизайн және маркетинг салаларында цифрлық платформалар арқылы жұмыс істейтін мамандар санының өсуі байқалады.

Мақаланың мақсаты-фриланс туралы колданыстағы зерттеулерді жүйелеу, талдаудың негізгі бағыттарын анықтау және Қазақстандағы осы құбылысты зерттеудегі олқылықтарды анықтау.

Кілт сөздер: фриланс, цифрлық жұмыспен қамту, типтік емес жұмыспен қамту, еңбек нарығы, зияткерлік еңбек, Интернет.

ФРИЛАНС КАК ОБЪЕКТ НАУЧНОГО ИЗУЧЕНИЯ: ОБЗОР ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ

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Аннотация

Фриланс в современном обществе выступает одной из ключевых форм нетипичной занятости, обусловленной цифровизацией экономики и распространением онлайн-платформ. Под этим феноменом понимается выполнение трудовой деятельности на проектной или временной основе без заключения традиционного трудового договора. Его развитие связано с глобальными изменениями в организации труда, ростом «гиг-экономики» и изменением профессиональной идентичности работников.

В мировой литературе сформировался широкий спектр подходов к анализу фриланса. Экономические и социологические исследования рассматривают его как проявление гибкой занятости, акцентируя внимание на доходах, статусе и мотивации фрилансеров. Правовые публикации затрагивают вопросы социальной защиты и налогообложения. Цифровизация рынка труда поставила новые исследовательские задачи, связанные с функционированием платформ и глобализацией трудовых процессов.

Казахстанский контекст пока остаётся недостаточно изученным. В официальной статистике фриланс чаще включается в категорию самозанятых, что затрудняет оценку его масштабов. Вместе с тем наблюдается рост числа специалистов, работающих через цифровые платформы в сферах ИТ, дизайна и маркетинга.

Цель статьи систематизировать существующие исследования о фрилансе, выявить основные направления анализа и определить пробелы в изучении данного феномена в Казахстане.

Ключевые слова: фриланс, цифровая занятость, нетипичная занятость, рынок труда, интеллектуальный труд, Интернет.

Introduction

The modern labor market is in a state of profound transformation under the influence of digitalization, globalization and changes in organizational models of employment. The emergence of new forms of work that go beyond the traditional institution of hiring stimulates scientific discussions about the boundaries and prospects of "atypical employment." Freelancing occupies a special place in this series, which is an activity based on the fulfillment of temporary or project tasks without concluding a long-term employment contract and without an institutional link to a specific employer.

The term freelance ("free spear") It has historical roots going back to the European medieval tradition, where it meant an independent mercenary warrior. The concept entered the socio-economic discourse in the 20th century and was fixed for employees who provide their services on a temporary basis [1]. Already at the end of the XX – beginning of the XXI century, freelancing began to be understood as a special form of professional activity combining elements of self-employment, entrepreneurship and wage labor.

Scientific interest in freelancing increased significantly in the 2010s against the background of the development of the platform economy. The emergence of global platforms such as Upwork, Freelancer, Fiverr has created conditions for the large-scale spread of remote project work. The International Labour Organization [2] emphasizes that platforms create new employment opportunities on a global scale, but at the same time they actualize the problem of lack of social guarantees and labor protection. According to OECD reports [3], freelancers are more likely to face income fluctuations and job instability than traditional employees, as well as lack access to pension and health insurance systems.

Sociological discourse considers freelancing as one of the forms of atypical employment associated with a change in labor identity, professional trajectories and employment strategies [4]. The works of Barley, Bechky, and Milliken [5] emphasize that freelancing forms new social practices and professional communities that go beyond classical labor collectives. Economic research focuses on the role of freelancing in the formation of a flexible labor market and its impact on the employment structure [6]. Legal works [7] record the uncertainty of the legal status of freelancers, who often find themselves "between" the categories of an employee and an individual entrepreneur, which creates difficulties in matters of taxation, social protection and legal regulation.

An important topic of foreign research is the role of digital technologies in the development of freelancing. Wood and co-authors [8] note that platforms create new opportunities for the involvement of specialists from developing countries in the international labor market, but at the same time increase the dependence of workers on algorithmic monitoring and evaluation systems. De Stefano [9] characterizes this process as the formation of "online workspaces", where traditional forms of employment contracts are replaced by flexible digital contracts.

For Kazakhstan, the topic of freelancing remains poorly understood. There is no separate category of "freelancer" in official statistics, and it is more often considered within the framework of self-employment or informal employment [10]. According to the agency's reports, there are about 2 million self-employed people in the country, but this category unites a wide range of workers - from small farmers and individual entrepreneurs to independent specialists working in the digital field. Such an association does not allow us to correctly assess the scale and features of freelancing.

Nevertheless, there is a steady trend towards an increase in interest in freelancing in Kazakhstan. According to the Freelancehunt and platforms hh.kz The number of registered IT, design, copywriting, and marketing professionals is increasing annually. The research works of Kazakhstani authors [11, 12] record the emergence of new professional communities and the growing role of online platforms as intermediaries between the customer and the contractor. However, these studies are mostly descriptive in nature and do not provide a holistic analysis of the position of freelancers in the social structure of society and the national economy.

Thus, the relevance of this review is determined by a number of factors: the growing scale of freelancing at the global and national levels; the lack of comprehensive research in the Kazakh context; the need for interdisciplinary analysis – economic, sociological and legal; the tasks of shaping public policy in the field of regulation of flexible forms of employment.

The purpose of the article is to summarize and systematize existing research on freelancing, identify key areas of analysis, identify gaps and prospects for further study of this phenomenon in Kazakhstan.

Methods

This article uses the method of systematic literary review, which allows us to identify key areas of scientific research on the problems of freelancing and summarize the accumulated

empirical and theoretical material. This approach provides a structured analysis of publications and reduces the risk of fragmented perception of the phenomenon under study.

The methodology of the systematic review was borrowed from the works of Kitchenham [13] and Snyder [14], which define the main stages of such research: formulation of research questions, development of a literature search strategy, establishment of criteria for inclusion and exclusion of sources, as well as synthesis of the results obtained.

Stages of research:

1. Formulation of goals and objectives.

The purpose of this work was to identify and systematize existing approaches to the study of freelancing in the world and Russian literature. The following research tasks were considered: definition of the basic concepts and definitions of freelancing; identification of key areas of analysis (economics, sociology, law, digital economy); identification of features of the Kazakh context and gaps in research.

2. Search strategy.

The sources were searched in international and national scientific databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, eLibrary, National Electronic Library of Kazakhstan. Additionally, reports from international organizations (ILO, OECD, World Bank) and analytical materials from Kazakhstani research centers were used.

The search keywords included: freelance, gig economy, independent work, atypical employment, digital labor, Kazakhstan, freelancing, atypical employment, self-employment.

3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

The review included: peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025; monographs and books on atypical employment and digital labor; official reports from international organizations and national statistical authorities.

Excluded were: publications without scientific review (for example, articles from the media, blogs); works where freelance was mentioned only indirectly, without meaningful analysis.

4. Selection and analysis of sources.

At the first stage, about 350 publications were identified, of which 120 sources remained after initial filtering according to quality and relevance criteria. There are 90 foreign and 30 domestic publications among them. The analysis was carried out using qualitative content analysis methods, which made it possible to identify thematic clusters and key research areas.

Methodological limitations

A number of limitations of the study should be noted. Firstly, despite the use of a wide range of sources, a number of publications may remain inaccessible due to language barriers or limited access to some databases. Secondly, in the Kazakh context, the number of freelance studies is limited, which reduces opportunities for cross-country comparisons.

Nevertheless, the chosen method made it possible to provide a comprehensive and systematic analysis of scientific literature, which is a prerequisite for the formation of a holistic view of freelancing as an object of scientific study.

Results and Discussion

The concept of "freelance" has historically evolved from a broad conceptual designation of independent performers to a specialized term that includes various forms of temporary and project employment in the digital space. In classical sociological and economic discourse, freelancing was considered as a kind of self-employment and flexible employment, but with the development of digital platforms, the term began to encompass a new form of mediation - the platform transfer of orders between an employer and a remote contractor. This development

is analyzed in detail in works on "just-in-time workforce" and platform employment: De Stefano showed how "on-demand" platforms transform traditional labor relations, introducing fragmentation of tasks and uncertainty of employee status; similarly, ILO research interprets platform labor as a continuation of long-known atypical forms of employment, but with new ones. digital mediation mechanisms [9].

The key stages of the concept's evolution can be reduced to three conditional waves:

1. The pre-platform stage is freelancing as a local, often offline-oriented self-employment (before the widespread use of the Internet and platforms) [15].

2. The stage of platform expansion (2010s) – the entry of freelancing into the global online space through platforms such as Upwork/Freelancer/Fiverr; the attention of researchers is shifting to algorithmic control, digital contracts and transnational service supply chains [8].

3. Analytical Wave of Regulation and Social Protection – research focuses on legal status, social security, taxation mechanisms, and policy regarding platform employment. Examples are the work of Prassl and the OECD/ILO analytical reviews [7].

Thus, the modern definition of freelancing combines several dimensions: the nature of the contract (temporary/project-based), the degree of dependence on platforms, and the economic and social context (global/local work). This multidisciplinary reinterpretation makes freelancing the subject of research by economists, sociologists, legal scholars, and labor relations specialists [7].

There are several axes of freelance typology in the literature:

According to the degree of integration into platforms:

Platform-mediated freelancers work mainly through online exchanges and platforms (Upwork, Fiverr, etc.). Research shows the specifics of algorithmic management and labor quality assessment [8].

Non-platform freelancers are looking for customers through personal connections, social networks or local markets; they often have stable business contacts and a high value of personal reputation.

By type of services provided: IT (development, web design), creative professions (design, copywriting), professional services (law, consulting), micro- and macro-tasks (microtasks, transcription). JRC/EC and other studies provide a detailed breakdown by industry and type of tasks [15].

By motivation and status: entrepreneurial-oriented (choose freelancing voluntarily for the sake of flexibility and independence) and forced freelancers (transition due to unemployment or lack of jobs). Theoretical works by Kalleberg and others emphasize that motivation correlates with economic stability and professional identity [16].

In terms of economic stability: stable (have regular customers and regular income) and unstable (unstable income, seasonality). The OECD/ILO notes that income instability is an important marker for a significant proportion of freelancers [17].

Typological conclusion: freelancing is a heterogeneous phenomenon; for a correct analysis, it is important to take into account both platform affiliation, type of activity, motivation and economic sustainability.

Research over the past decade has focused on how platforms are changing the working environment: they simplify access to global orders, but create new forms of control — ratings, automatic assignment of tasks, smart contracts. The work of Wood et al. and JRC (Pesole et al.) contain empirical data on the impact of algorithmic management on the autonomy and quality of performers' work; they show mixed effects: on the one hand, market expansion and opportunities; on the other, increased dependence and income instability [8, 15].

In addition, platforms affect the geography of work: specialists from developing countries gain access to orders from developed markets, but competition with the global workforce often puts pressure on rates and leads to a "race down" in wages (see the empirical findings of the ILO and research on platform markets) [18].

Key issues highlighted in the literature:

- Legal status: Freelancers often do not fall under the existing categories of labor law, which makes it difficult to apply labor guarantees (Prassl, etc.).
- Social protection: lack of access to retirement savings, health insurance, and unemployment benefits. ILO and OECD point to the need to adapt social protection systems to new forms of work [7, 19]
- Taxation and formalization: it is important to choose between self-employment, sole proprietorship and informal employment; different jurisdictions offer different solutions (microenterprise, simplified taxation). The literature contains recommendations on the creation of hybrid legal regimes that take into account the specifics of platforms [7].

In Kazakhstan, several empirical and review papers have appeared in recent years on freelancing and the development of remote/platform employment. The main conclusions of these studies and reports can be summarized as follows.

The official statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan do not distinguish freelancing as a separate category; freelancing is more often found in the category of "self-employed" or "informal employment", therefore, it is difficult to assess the scale. This is noted in national reviews and analytical documents [20].

A number of academic articles and reports have tried to assess the freelance market in Kazakhstan through indirect indicators (platform data, thematic surveys, vacancies on hh.kz). These studies record an increase in the number of remote specialists in IT, design, and marketing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic [21].

Kazakhstani freelancing is mainly focused on digital professions: software development, web design, SMM, copywriting and translation services. Regional and university publications emphasize the potential of exporting IT services through freelance channels [22].

The main barriers to development are the lack of clear regulations, low awareness of the rights and opportunities of formalization, lack of financial and legal tools for working with international customers (payment systems, contracts, taxation). These limitations are described in detail in regional studies and reports (ETF/ETF for Central Asia, local articles) [23].

Domestic authors propose measures to stimulate the freelance services market: the integration of digital skills training, the creation of local-level platforms, the adaptation of tax regimes for freelancers and the formation of statistical accounting. These proposals are consistent with the international Recommendations on Platform Employee Support (OECD/ILO) [24].

Conclusion for Kazakhstan: national literature and reports confirm the growth of freelancing, but indicate a significant gap in system statistics and regulation; additional empirical research and the creation of specialized support tools are needed to form an effective policy [20, 23].

In Russia, the topic of freelancing has been researched since the late 2000s and has an extensive empirical base (site surveys, analytical reports, articles in specialized journals). Key observations from the Russian-language literature: empirical censuses and surveys: platforms (Freelancehunt, FL.ru and others) and research centers conduct censuses and surveys of freelancers, revealing income structure, distribution by profession and motivation. For example, the 2019 census provides an idea of the scale and dynamics of the Russian market [25, 26];

Academic papers: publications by Russian sociologists and economists (Strebkov, Shevchuk, etc.) analyze the social status of freelancers, their connection with informal employment and the role of Internet brokers. The analysis indicates the heterogeneity of the freelance community: from young novice freelancers to professionals with a steady income [27]; tax and organizational issues: Russian research focuses on formalization, simplified tax regimes and models of interaction with customers [28].

Russia – Kazakhstan comparison: The Russian empirical data base is broader (there are more platforms and studies), which provides a more detailed understanding of the market; in Kazakhstan, research is emerging faster in universities and analytical centers, but they lack large-scale national surveys and platform data [20, 27].

The analysis of the sources shows several persistent gaps that are relevant for both the global and regional (Kazakhstan/Russia) context:

1. Statistical scale assessment: In most countries, there is no standardized way to include freelancers in employment statistics – this is especially acute in Kazakhstan. There is a need for methods for identifying freelance workers in national employment surveys [23].

2. Long-term panel income studies: most of the work is cross-sectional; few studies track income dynamics and the sustainability of freelancers' work trajectories over time. The OECD and the ILO note the importance of such data for policy.

3. Qualitative research on professional identity in the region: more research is needed to show how Kazakhstani and Russian freelancers construct professional identities and perceive risks and benefits. (there is still a lot of descriptive material in the literature, less in – depth qualitative research) [29].

4. The effects of platforms on local labor markets: research is needed on the impact of global platform competition on rates and employment in local economies, including migration of working skills and changes in employment structure [8, 15].

5. Legal experiment and pilot models of social protection: it is useful for Kazakhstan to explore pilot modes of formalization and social protection measures adapted to freelance workers (micro-pensions, risk insurance, benefits) [3, 7].

Thus, the concept of "freelancing" has undergone a transformation from local self-employment to a multidimensional phenomenon of the platform economy; modern research emphasizes the multidisciplinary approach [9, 15].

The typology of freelancers is multidimensional: platform/non-platform, type of service, motivation, and economic sustainability – each axis has significant policy and protection implications [16, 30].

Platforms open up markets, but at the same time create risks – algorithmic management, income instability and limited social protection [4, 31].

There is an increase in freelancing in Kazakhstan and Russia, but in Kazakhstan there is a pronounced shortage of systematic statistics and large-scale empirical research; the Russian literature is more empirically developed, which creates an opportunity for comparative research [32].

Conclusion

A review of the scientific literature has shown that the phenomenon of freelancing is multi-layered and is actively being transformed under the influence of digitalization, globalization and changes in social and labor relations. Its evolution has gone from local self-employment to platform employment, becoming one of the key elements of the modern "gig economy".

International research focuses on several areas: the typology and structure of freelancers (platform and off-platform, professional and creative, voluntary and forced); economic

sustainability and income – with an emphasis on their instability and risks; socio-legal status – uncertainty of employment status, weak social protection, the need to adapt tax and legal regimes; the impact of digital platforms – access to the global market and at the same time increased competition, algorithmic control and dependence on rating systems.

The Russian academic literature is characterized by a significant amount of empirical data: censuses of freelancers, surveys, and analysis of platform databases are conducted. These studies provide a deeper understanding of the socio-demographic profile and motivation of freelancers, as well as the problems of formalization and taxation.

Kazakh literature is still in its infancy. Domestic publications and reports record an increase in the number of professionals working in freelancing, mainly in digital professions (IT, design, marketing). However, the key problem remains the lack of official statistics and systematic research, which makes it difficult to develop government support and regulatory measures.

Thus, freelancing is part of the global trend of atypical employment and requires interdisciplinary analysis at the intersection of economics, sociology, law and digital technologies. The presence of persistent risks (income instability, social insecurity, competition) is combined with new opportunities (flexibility, global market, professional autonomy). The regional context is fundamentally important: if in developed countries the emphasis is shifted to legal regulation and social protection, then for Kazakhstan and the post-Soviet space, the priority is the formation of statistical accounting and basic conditions for the development of the freelance market. The gaps in research relate to the lack of panel income data, the lack of high-quality professional identity research, and limited analysis of the impact of platforms on local labor markets.

In conclusion, freelancing is not just a "new" form of employment, but a multidimensional socio-economic phenomenon. For Kazakhstan, the integration of international research experience and the development of its own analysis methods is becoming an urgent task, which will make it possible to build a sound policy in the field of supporting freelancers and regulating digital labor.

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