RESEARCH QUESTION

HOW MIGHT WE FACILITATE THE SHIFTING DYNAMICS BETWEEN PRODUCT DESIGNERS AND COLLABORATORS?

ABSTRACT

Advancing technology has allowed for businesses and individuals to operate and work with unprecedented flexibility. These developments have facilitated the rise of the freelance economy, which is increasing in both supply and demand.

In the realm of Product design this means that both roles and client interactions are becoming increasingly diversified and non-linear. Today businesses are built within a network of inter-dependant relationships, i.e supply chains and outsourcing. This means that the number of different interactions and contexts also increases, leading to serious need for understanding of direction, in a context that is in the midst of redefining itself.

The aim of this research is to study the current and potential shifts work interactions between product designers and other continually diversifying stakeholders. Synthesising insights from a narrative literature review, statistical analysis and a case study, to better understand how to achieve productivity.

This thorough comprehension of the freelance economy will allow for all relevant stakeholders to leverage its benefits, and be aware of potential drawbacks.

INTRODUCTION
& BACKGROUND RESEARCH

In my research, the value of interactions via Information communication technologies is specifically identified as a 'core catalyst' and 'key strategic resource' (Pade-Khene et al., 2011; Rashid and Hassan, 2012).

These technologies formed fundamental relationships of modern work allowing for rapid growth. A good example is the "delay time for an email today is a few seconds) in comparison to what mail...which takes days" (Meza 2018). Such an interconnected landscape has created a shift that is beginning to redefine the work sphere.

Designers, product and otherwise, have experienced both permanent and contract work however with the rise of peer to peer platforms like Uber and Airbnb, many entrepreneurial suppliers and consumers have not only begun to seriously explore the landscape of the Freelance Economy, but also depend on it.

The Gig economy, characterised by low-skilled short term work allows near on-demand sourcing, utilising highly responsive digital services to request, mediate and connect users within a labour market.

This responsiveness however is not without a cost, and requires a focused study of the gig economy specifically as it serves as an indication of a mass market example of freelancing.

As projections in the US have determined that by 2027, the percentage of freelancers will exceed 50% (FIA 2017). There is an inherent need for a comprehensive understanding of what this means for the work sphere.

Ultimately for designers this means that the relationship with clients and their dynamic roster of co - workers presents the landscape of design work as unprecedentedly fluid.

METHODOLOGY

1. Statistical Analysis: The decision to use this quantitative method was to understand the current status and recent trends in the workforce, thus informing qualitative detailed study.

2. The narrative literary review synthesises two sources on regulation of the mass gig economy, followed a critical study that provides more detailed insights. As well as an online article for contemporary insight on the role of the Product Designers.

3. The aim for using a case study is to examine and understand a potentially indicative example of a design based freelance landscape. 99 Design was chosen due to it's commercial success and accessibility for both research and ordinary consumers.

CASE STUDY
A MASS-MARKET APPROACH TO DESIGN WORK

99 designs is an online platform that provides a 2-sided marketplace for graphic designers and potential clients. Through the insights of online reviews and A/B testing of the platform, (A) being a potential client and (B) being a freelance graphic designer, this case study aims to explore reality of a mass application of high skill work.

As a customer, 99 designs is clean, and structured well from an navigational standpoint. From the first 'categories' screen to selecting a designer and their services. Throughout the site, there is a strong communication of price allowing for a client to stick to initial budget. When proceeding to requesting a design, one of two things can happen. If a particular designer really strikes the client, an 'invite to work' is sent, however there is also alternate method of sourcing designs which is the contest, a open invite and participation to the brief.

For the client this means proactive designers may submit designs, and then from all entries you one is selected and that designer is payed. This presents an especially high value method as without the need for motivation a potential unlimited amount of designs can be submitted.

As a designer, 99 designs advertises a large promise, one thing to note is that there are a large number of designers competing for the same jobs. Starting out as a designer is especially hard due to the two features, firstly there is a strong and understandable bias toward reputation within the 99 designs marketplace, which at this point is non-existent for the designer. This is then followed ones only point of difference, the folio. This creates a huge problem for designers as their only point of difference will be viewed in a scrolling list of thousands of others.

When attempting to acquire work, as a designer you can either wait for requests or participate in contests. This, judging by online reviews, is largely the case. The contest feature does however create an unforeseen mechanic, which is that designers are both not invested but highly motivated. This creates a disconnection between hours or effort given and payment received, as a common insight provided by designers on the platform.

"just because you are the best designer, does not mean you will get picked" (review from trustpilot)

This is disconnection not only stems from the unbalanced contest feature but from real miscommunication. Throughout both tests, there is a clear contrast in the communication of the platform. For clients, price and choice is continuously touted to increase perceived value, however for designers the platform appears quite different. Not only promoting the contest feature front and centre, but shields users from the explicit realisation that they are one in thousands, contradictorily celebrating the self throughout the website.

★ " " " " OR ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

An exploration in to off-site customer reviews reveals a serious disparity in responses. TrustPilot reveal a majority of reviews being either 5 or 1 star, with a majority being 5. The 1 star ratings however presented an insight to the client experience, which was the dissatisfaction of quality. This coupled with many designers being fed up with the contest driven structure also experienced a considerable amount of suspensions for seemingly no reason. This is a especially dissatisfactory due a large emphasis on tier or reputation.

In summary, this exploration of a live product using ICT to mass connect users presents an interesting lesson. Simultaneously aiming to cater both graphic design freelancers and an array of clients, puts price, and volume on one end with design, quality and investment on the other. This scenario of a high skill mass freelance, further places a stronger need for management in expectations and real communication, as many reviewers baffled at the idea that a real solution can be provided without a single face to face conversation.

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THE FUTURE OF PRODUCT DESIGNERS IN A FREELANCE ECONOMY

BY CLEMENT TAN

THE FREELANCE FUTURE
STASTICAL ANALYSIS (FIA 2017)

In order to holistically understand just how we can facilitate interactions one needs to first consider shifts in the work environment. The movement toward the freelance economy instigates three main queries; what is really happening, who is involved and why?

WHY PEOPLE ARE CHOOSING TO FREELANCE?

- 1) To be their own boss, 2) Control when they work 3) Choice in projects, 4) Where they work and 5) to earn extra money.
- 71 percent of Freelancers are finding more work online
- 63% stated it was by choice to go freelancing, up from 53% from last year, reflecting its increase in feasibility and thus desirability.

These drivers have also been documented to be driven by the idea of an increased variety of work as well as the autonomy to be able to spend more time with family.
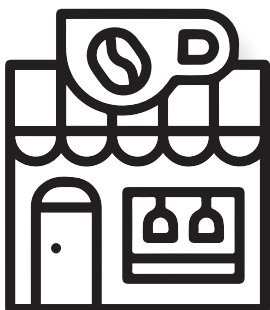
WHO ARE THE FREELANCERS?

With the US freelance workforce growing 3x faster compared to its overall growth, working millennials are almost already half freelance at 47%, "a participation rate higher than any other generation".

This in conjunction is a slow descent of moonlighters from 19% to 16%, and an increase in full time time freelancers from 17% to 29% both of these shifts occuring in just three years between 2014-2017.

LITERATURE REVIEW

THE REALITY OF THE GIG ECONOMY

By exploring the possible notion that Product Designers will be part of the shift toward freelancing, the gig economy stands to help us understand the potential work conditions of freelancing on a large scale.

Rebecca Burns an associate editor at In These Times, authors 'Bargaining with Silicon Valley' with the purpose of disillusionment. As marketplace's like Uber and Airtasker have begun revealing the surprisingly unfavourable return for workers in the gig economy.

"the defining feature... isn't really that workers accept jobs through an app on their phone: it's that they work with no benefits, no job security, and no unions."

Throughout the article Burns highlights the hidden technological determinism that is prevalent within silicon valley and public opinion. Identifying the belief of "Modernising (read: gutting) key labor laws" under the "guise of inevitability" as biased ploys for lack of regulation.

The ITI Foundation, a D.C. based institution suggested a even simpler approach. In hopes of letting marketplaces "experiment" with offering benefits to their workers, and suspend all labor law for internet-based platforms for the time being.

This comes in conjunction with reports that "Uber has been caught delivering anti-union messages to its drivers' presents a very chaotic and nefarious landscape of policy, with not much promise Relocating to Australia, the research director of Unions NSW Kate Minster, unravels the negotiation between Airtasker and Unions NSW, in which a degree of regulation is achieved. The debate in worker classification directly addressed and introduced "some basic protections" regarding four issues: minimum rates of pay, insurance, safety and dispute resolution.

This however does not excuse the need for 'full, formal protection" as these agreements are still not compulsory and are not be enforced. This in conjunction with Airtasker's job-bidding system will encourage workers to undercut legal minimums in exchange for more work, this type of outcome in particular presents itself repeatedly in the case study and later sources.

Ultimately these two sources have provided a strong need for a focus on the policies that might define the future scenario of a freelance dominated workforce. Both Burns and Minster call for serious intervention of policy.

Therefore regardless of the low skill, short-term contracts reality of said platforms, developments in classification of employment will most likely effect regular freelancing. Nonetheless this leads to a the a further questioning of the reality of product designers moving further in to a freelance role.

FREELANCE PRODUCT DESIGN TODAY

Having internalised insights from FIA 2017 report, it stands to note that the gig economy, due to its high worker and client count, accounts for a larger part of the 'freelance' population. Furthermore it also generates experiences specific to the high skill, longer term experiences of regular freelancing.

A study done by Pinar Kaygan, from the Department of Industrial Design at Middle East Technical University, provides real primary insights into the "The Cost of 'Free' in Freelance Industrial Design Work".

This journal article focused on responses from 24 industrial designers in Turkey. This study also constrained its interviewee's to having at-least 5 years career experience and worked as a freelancer. and ensured that none of them had any outstanding recognition in pursuit insightful ordinary experiences.

These constraint are important as it more closely informs the comprehension of a freelancer in a future mass market context. From this applicability, many core insights such as why the interviewee's choose to go freelance and who, align with the insights from the statistical analysis.

The first of the three drivers presented was the strong desire to engage in nothing but industrial design. This insight, being the most adamantly expressed, deviated in detail from the analysis of FIA 2017, in which freelancers actively engage with skill diversity. Participants elaborating that their experiences in manufacturing companies or design agencies, entailed unwanted and the over-assignment of responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of work in both current and potential future states, an understanding is formed of not just what, but why and how these shifts will effect the rest of the world. The statistical analysis of freelancing in America served as a depiction for the desire for autonomy, that is both considerable in size and rapidly growing.

Furthermore people that freelance have an advantage in being stereotypically more adaptable and agile in terms of skills. This effect is a conditional of their self-managed environment and lack of income predictability. For product designers this means that they could be both part of this shift or potentially hiring and interacting extensively with the people driving it. Bring up broader questions of stability of the individual, organisation and policy.

To explore this notion, the analysis of the gig economy presents a similar example to speculate on a predominantly freelance work economy. Despite distinct skill and contract term differences, studies of platforms like Uber and Airtasker shed insight in to the current regulations and policies regarding this type of work. This was done due to the recent exponential expansion of the gig economy and likely accounted for a large part of the 1.4 trillion contributed to the U.S. economy in 2017.

WHAT IS IMPACT?

- Freelancers contributed an estimated $1.4 trillion to the U.S. economy (2017)
- Freelancers and non-freelancers share many of the same concerns, from access to affordable healthcare, debt management and their ability to save.
- One major unique factor present is the income predictably is completely self driven.

This has resulted in 63% of full-time freelancers dipping into savings atleast once a month in comparison to the 20% non-freelancers.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PRODUCT DESIGNERS?

Firstly it may be that the freelancers of today, will be major actors in the future as they have been identified as the most adaptable.

"54 percent of the U.S. workforce said they're not very confident that work they do will exist in 20 years. Reskilling is therefore critical." (upwork 2017)

As of 2017 55% of freelancers have engaged in skill related education, as recent the last 6 months versus 30% of non-freelancers. This may beneficial as Product Designers are often exposed and required to learn new skills, meaning a similarity in lifestyle practises.

Proportional with the demand for adaptability, product design is increasingly being seen as a fundamental part of success, this is explored in greater detail in the articles literature review. Aided by the rise of crowdfunding and increased government investment, new markets increase opportunity and interactions. An example of this is the surge and demand of co-working spaces and incubators, both prime environments for freelancers, Product Designers and other potential collaborators.

A critical issue to note is income instability, in most cases this is unique however product design work shares similar concerns being primarily project based. It is also important understand that lack of structure will be translate to to the individual, organisational, and macro level, as models of work and sources of funding change.

Lastly these findings also mean that many product designers may not disrupted too aggressively by such a shift. Among the many similarities, a larger freelance population can also create demand for more tools and services to operate more effectively and efficiently. An example of this is Slack, an ICT that has in many organisations, completely replaced emails.

"and, if you push them hard enough, they can do marketing, as well. You can make them do everything. For this reason, working in a company [as in-house worker] is very risky for the designer;"

This quote from a participant is an example of a both mis-management and forced design roles, highlighting the familiar negative reaction caused by a lack of choice. Furthermore the second common driver was control, as participants wanted to avoid hierarchal and vertical organisational structures in.

"the designer does not have direct access to the upper levels of management and cannot present their ideas and designs themselves".

Here the desire to be the boss stems from the actual communication of work, as the in-house designers felt unsure about the delivery of their idea. The interviewee's felt insecure and powerless and was made worse by interactions with consultants. With In-house designers lacking strategic input, the injustice was compounded. as consultants they were 'taken more seriously, respected and listened'.

The third and last desire was quite simple, to escape the monotony of working on a singular type of product.

In summary Kaygan provides his perspective on the study by calling attention to the fact that almost all participants actually accepted any partially-related design job. Their hope of doing 'nothing but industrial design' had contented with the need to just to survive as a freelancer.

"freedom itself supports self-exploitation."

The reflection of this study has highlighted a serious lack of support and management of the industrial designers in both freelance and non-freelance contexts, this is especially true for the graduate designer. Kaygan goes on to conclude that the freelance landscape is "difficult navigate for inexperienced designers" leading to 'young designers to be open to insecurity and exploitation in their relations with their clients"

In response to this journal article, one major insight is to the potentially contradictory nature of pursuing a freelance lifestyle in todays landscape. When considering that all of the participants ended up taking more menial and often undesired design jobs, this can also be seen as a misconnection between worker and client. This exploration reveals a potential opportunity in the re-definition or evaluation of industrial designers and in my opinion does not objectively discount the sacrifice of things like income predictability.

THE DEFINITION OF PRODUCT DESIGNERS

As certain aspects of today's in-house and freelancing product designers have revealed themselves as not ideal, this leads to the notion of re-evaluation. Originally interchangeable, the term industrial designer has more or less kept its historical approach of problem solving via mainly the physical medium. Where as the term 'Product Designers' has evolved outside of design and inside the realm of business often applying to both services and physical product.

VP of Product Design at Invision, Billy Kiely, both defines and is defined by the evolved Product Designer. His article "Why your next hire should be a product designer"(2017) is one of many, that position product designers in an in-house role but re-contextualise the product designer's responsibility.

'For the companies disrupting the market today, design is no longer just a "stage" in the business process—it is the language of business.'

A strong driver of this change has been the brought about by a 'fundamental shift" in and toward user experience. Facilitated by society's switch in focus from owning physical artefacts to experiences, Kiely highlights that many of today's product designers are often UI or Ux focused. This comes with the aim to apply their specialised skills across all aspects of the process.

Product esigners can be seen as people who apply design approaches and goals to business touch points. Kiely himself refers to skills such as "business strategy, technical prowess and marketing insights" providing roles that encapsulate 'a broader, holistic view of design" . This allows for a wider scope of solutions and therefore the end experience

This is naturally made possible by involving the Product designer at as many steps in the process as possible, from research to marketing and everything in between.

"When the promise doesn't match the product, customers feel deceived."

Among its unique characteristics the study of "The Cost of 'Free' in Freelance Industrial Design Work" aligned with the statistical analysis; while supplied greater qualitative information. This study in particular presented clear drivers for individuals gravitating toward freelancing, while also illuminating the somewhat contradictory nature of the current high skill landscape.

This, less than ideal, reality for design freelancing is then further confirmed in the case study of 99 designs, a platform specifically for graphic design. Aiming to provide user driven and created visual design solutions, the experience of both client and design is lop sided. The inherent bias in user experience toward the client's own directives skew design solutions, exploiting designers in the process, which in turn is often results in poor outputs.

In final response, the impact of this poster brings about new questions, such the future of non-freelancers in such an economy, the classification of a third type of worker and the necessity for things such as company culture.

This research had also led to question the role of Product designers outside of the design context. This meant a distinction between the terms industrial and product with Product designers in a new, more holistic position.