Journal of
New Approaches in Management and Marketing

https://www.jnamm.ir

Volume 5, Issue 1, Sping 2026, Pages 23 to 44

eISSN: 2981-1554

Original Article (Qualitative)

Freelancing: A New Approach to Entrepreneurship and Business: A Thematic Analysis of Paths, Challenges, and Economic Empowerment Through Freelancing

Ali Siahkolah[1], **Mohammad Hossein Foroozanfar**[2]

1- Specialized Freelancing Training Center, Siah Kolah Academy, Tehran, Iran.
2- Department of Tourism and Hospitality, Faculty of Tourism, Higher Education Complex of Bam, Bam, Iran.

Receive:
04 November 2025
Revise:
06 January 2026
Accept:
26 February 2026

Keywords:
Freelancing, Entrepreneurship, Career Transition, Push Factors, Autonomy, Network Development, Economic Empowerment

Abstract

This study aims to examine the experiences and influential factors shaping young people's transitions from traditional employment to freelancing. The statistical population consists of 28 Iranian experts in the field of freelancing. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using purposive sampling and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The qualitative method applied in this study was thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's standard framework, and coding and analysis were conducted using Atlas.ti software.

The analysis of findings revealed four strategic dimensions that provide a comprehensive perspective for understanding freelancing:
(1) push factors and decision-making in career transition;
(2) significant economic and financial challenges during the transition process;
(3) skill development and professional networking; and
(4) economic empowerment outcomes for youth.

The results indicate that transitioning from traditional employment to freelancing is a complex and multilayered process requiring precise and purposeful planning, strong social and professional network development, and the establishment of supportive governmental and political environments. The comprehensive strategic framework presented in this study can serve as a practical and evidence-based guide for policymakers, entrepreneurs, and stakeholder organizations—including chambers of commerce and labor unions—to more effectively support young individuals during this career transition and to improve conditions for the development of freelancing.

Please cite this article as (APA): Siahkolah, A and Foroozanfar, M H. (2026). Freelancing: A New Approach to Entrepreneurship and Business: A Thematic Analysis of Paths, Challenges, and Economic Empowerment Through Freelancing. *Journal of New Approaches in Management and Marketing*, *5*(1), 23-44.

https://doi.org/10.22034/jnamm.2026.564097.1219

Authors retain the copyright and full publishing rights.
Published by Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business.
This article is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

Corresponding Author: Mohammad Hossein Foroozanfar | **Email:** mh.foroozanfar@gmail.com

Journal of
New Approaches in Management and Marketing
Volume 5, Issue 1, Sping 2026, Pages 23 to 44
https://www.jnamm.ir

Extended Abstract

Introduction

Over the past decade, a transformative shift—both morphological and structural—has emerged in the global labor market, placing independent entrepreneurship and freelancing at the forefront as key solutions. In Iran, as the knowledge-based economy, modern digital technologies, and internet-driven economic infrastructures rapidly expand and evolve (Khodaparast & Emadi, 2025), young people are increasingly and noticeably gravitating toward freelancing, autonomous work, and self-directed employment, considering these pathways as preferred career choices.

These new forms of employment and career transitions, despite offering advantages such as flexibility and autonomy, are accompanied by complex and profound challenges that pose difficulties both for young individuals and for the global economy (Yang et al., 2024). Income instability, lack of access to conventional employment benefits such as health insurance and unemployment insurance, high levels of economic vulnerability, and the absence of formal support structures are among the most significant challenges (Lu et al., 2024).

Accordingly, the central research question is formulated as follows: How does the transition of Iranian youth from traditional employment to freelancing lead to economic empowerment?

Theoretical Foundations

Independent Entrepreneurship

Independent entrepreneurship, or freelancing, refers to a modern approach to business and autonomous work in which an individual, as an independent entrepreneur, undertakes various projects for multiple clients. In this model, the individual operates as a self-directed professional, performing diverse tasks for different and numerous clients (Baitenizov et al., 2025; Öberg, 2018).

Career Path

Various perspectives exist regarding career paths, each emphasizing one or several dimensions of occupational development. Holland's Theory of Career Choice highlights the alignment between an individual's personality and their work environment, proposing that people are naturally drawn to occupations that match their personality types—such as realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, or conventional. This theory conceptualizes career choice primarily as a voluntary and individually driven process based on person-environment fit; however, it pays limited attention to external pressures and involuntary career transitions.

Economic Empowerment

Economic empowerment is a broad and multi-layered concept that refers to the process by which individuals acquire and activate the ability, authority, and capacity to plan, make independent decisions, and control their own economic resources (Golara et al., 2025; Saffari Darberazi et al., 2025).

Research Methodology

This qualitative study employed the thematic analysis method within the standard framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), utilizing the Atlas.ti software. A qualitative approach was selected for this research to gain an in-depth, internal understanding of the lived experiences, motivations, emotions, and meanings held by participants (Clarke & Braun, 2021). This established framework for thematic analysis has garnered over 20,000 academic citations to date and represents a scientific and systematic method for identifying semantic patterns and latent themes within qualitative data (Foroozanfar et al., 2025).

The study utilized purposive sampling. The statistical population comprised individuals holding at least a bachelor's degree and currently engaged in freelance work. In this research, the criterion for concluding the sampling process was the achievement of theoretical saturation, as defined within Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The sampling process unfolded

Journal of
New Approaches in Management and Marketing
https://www.jnamm.ir
Volume 5, Issue 1, Sping 2026, Pages 23 to 44

iteratively and in parallel with the coding phase. Following approximately 22 initial interviews, no significant new codes were added to the initial coding structure, and the primary themes began to repeat. Subsequently, conducting 6 additional interviews provided richer data and new contextual examples but did not yield any novel conceptual codes or themes, indicating theoretical saturation at the level of the main themes.

Research Findings

Through the analysis of 28 interviews conducted with the target population and audience, followed by a textual analysis of the interview transcripts, 11 initial themes were identified. In aggregate, these sub-themes represent four main dimensions, illustrating that the transition from traditional employment to freelancing among Iranian youth is not a simple linear process. Instead, it is a chain of transitions where push factors and liberating motivations, in conjunction with economic and institutional challenges, are navigated through skill and network development. This ultimately leads to outcomes of relative empowerment or [outcome not specified in text]. Consequently, freelancing in this study is understood not merely as an opportunity nor solely as a threat, but as a dynamic and conditional field whose quality of experience is contingent upon a specific combination of individual, network, and structural circumstances.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that the transition from traditional, conventional employment to freelancing for Iranian youth is a complex, multi-layered, and arduous process that demands considerable attention, meticulous and purposeful planning, and substantial support. The key findings are as follows: Firstly, diverse and varying push factors are significant—negative push factors (fear of instability, dissatisfaction) are as important as positive ones (freedom, income). Secondly, considerable economic challenges, such as income instability and the lack of benefits, represent fundamental dilemmas requiring innovative solutions. Thirdly, essential social capital, along with strong professional and social networks are crucial for success and economic empowerment. Fourthly, balanced economic empowerment and genuine self-sufficiency necessitate a combination of financial independence, a sense of control, and economic security.

In comparison to previous research, the findings of this study regarding the importance of networking underscore the vital and fundamental role of social capital in freelancing. These results corroborate Golara's (2025) research on the role of "weak ties" and professional networks in job seeking. Furthermore, our findings concerning the essential role of social and professional networks, the importance of continuous skill development and learning, and the fear and concern regarding income instability show significant similarities with studies conducted in other countries (Baitenizov et al., 2019; Morris et al., 2025). However, fundamental differences also exist. It can be argued that in Iran, negative push factors are stronger, whereas in developed countries, positive factors are more prevalent.

The findings of this research have important implications for policymakers and support organizations, presented below based on the study's outcomes:

Based on the findings and themes from the push factors and decision-making dimension, a significant portion of youth transitioning to freelancing stems from dissatisfaction with the rigid structures and bureaucracy of traditional employment. Therefore, it is recommended that governmental and private organizations revise their human resource policies. By developing flexible work models (remote work, flextime, project-based work) and reducing unnecessary procedures, they can mitigate some of the push pressures. This would help transform freelancing from an option often driven by compulsion or escape from structure into a conscious and strategic choice. Based on the themes from the economic challenges dimension, considering the fundamental role of income instability and the lack of benefits in undermining the economic empowerment of freelancers, it is proposed that policymaking institutions such as the Ministry of Labor, the Social Security Organization, and the Chamber of Commerce move towards designing

insurance and support mechanisms tailored for freelancers. This includes flexible health and retirement insurance and adaptable premiums based on actual income, thereby partially reducing the gap between occupational freedom and social security.

Furthermore, findings based on the skill development and networking dimension indicated that success in freelancing depends on a package of technical, soft, and business skills, as well as robust professional networks. Consequently, it is recommended that universities, skill training centers, and science and technology parks design and implement comprehensive freelancing preparation courses, including training in negotiation, project management, personal marketing, and professional networking skills. They should also foster the development of social capital for freelancers by creating networking spaces, such as internal events and platforms.

Also, based on the themes from the economic empowerment outcomes, given that economic empowerment is experienced as relative and conditional by participants, it is suggested that policymakers and freelancing platforms develop indicators to monitor the quality of freelance livelihoods, including relative income stability and access to social support. Based on these indicators, programs to enhance the welfare and job security of freelancers should be designed, ensuring that the transition to freelancing systematically leads to improved well-being rather than merely a change in the form of insecure work.

Based on the results of this research, suggestions for other researchers interested in the field of freelancing are presented as follows: conducting longitudinal studies to track the career paths of youth over longer periods; examining the potential of freelancing for women and conducting specific research on the unique barriers faced by female freelancers; analyzing the role of new technologies, artificial intelligence, and automation on the future of freelancing; investigating public sector support policies; conducting cross-country comparative studies to benchmark and assess efficient and diverse freelancing methods; and examining the social effects of freelancing on family and social relationships.

Acknowledgments

The authors gratefully acknowledge all individuals, institutions, and organizations that provided scientific, technical, administrative, or advisory support throughout this research and the preparation of this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or non-financial, personal, professional, or institutional conflicts of interest relevant to this work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

AI Use Statement

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used in the preparation, writing, or editing of this manuscript.

Funding

The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other financial support were received during the conduct of this research or the preparation of this manuscript.

Ethics Approval

All procedures performed in this study were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible institutional and national research committee.