

# FREELANCE WORKING

## Mobile Technology and Social Media

### Executive Summary



Picture credit: Business Collective

Please contact the author in order to obtain the full report.

Dr Darja Reuschke, University of Southampton: [D.Reuschke@soton.ac.uk](mailto:D.Reuschke@soton.ac.uk)

Dr Annabelle Wilkins, University of Southampton:

[A.H.Wilkins@soton.ac.uk](mailto:A.H.Wilkins@soton.ac.uk)

## 1. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

Freelance workers are important contributors to the United Kingdom's (UK) economy and they are growing significantly not at least because technology enables them to work on their own account. Reports based on Labour Force Survey (LFS) data estimate that there were 1.9 million freelance workers in the UK in 2015, constituting 6% of all UK workers in employment (Kitching 2016). While much attention has been paid to the reasons why their numbers have increased, little is known about the work practices of freelancers and the role played by new technology in organising their work and running a business.

### WORK PLACE

Professional freelancers work on their own account for a number of clients and they work from various workplaces including their own homes (Reuschke and Houston 2016; Mason et al. 2015). Based on LFS data it is estimated that 38 per cent of freelancers work mainly in different places with their home as a base, while 28 per cent work mainly in their own home (Kitching, 2016). Freelancers may choose to work at home because it is more convenient, less expensive than commercial premises, or to combine paid work with caring and other activities. New technologies and mobile devices in particular facilitate flexible mobile work practices (Hislop et al. 2015) and are therefore likely to be vital for freelance working.

### IMPORTANCE OF MOBILE DEVICES FOR FREELANCE WORK

For some freelancers, including those who work in app development, new technology is integral to their work. For others, mobile devices and ubiquitous fast Internet may be a facilitator for conducting work more productively and efficiently. Others might not be able to work as freelancers if it was not for being able to work in a flexible manner from home or outside 'traditional' working hours. The first aim of this study is therefore to reveal how important mobile devices actually are for various types of professional freelance work.

### IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA FOR FREELANCE WORK

Although freelancers work on their own account, they do not work in isolation. Contact with other freelancers or people who provide ideas and support with how to run a business are essential for their work. Social media has dramatically changed our economies and societies, particularly how social networks are built and sustained and how information is distributed (Aral et al. 2013; Graham et al. 2013; van Dijck 2013; Papacharissi 2010).

Given the almost ubiquitous presence of social media in our societies, towns and cities, it is surprising how little we know about the role of social media in professional freelance work. Social media has been identified as a way of promoting a professional 'brand' or identity (Brems et al. 2016; Gandini 2016; Hedman and Djerf-Pierre 2013).

Social media also enables new forms of networking and community building (Wang et al. 2017; Fischer and Reuber 2011). However, little is known about the importance of social media for freelancers and how they use particular platforms. The second aim of this study is

therefore to reveal how important social media is for freelance work and which social media platforms and networks are used.

## 2. THE STUDY

In total, this study is based on responses from 549 active freelancers who are IPSE members based in the UK at the time of the survey. The first two questions in the questionnaire survey were about the use of mobile devices for business purposes, the subsequent three questions covered the use of social media for business and the last question captured the place where the participants spent most of their working time.

### LIMITATIONS

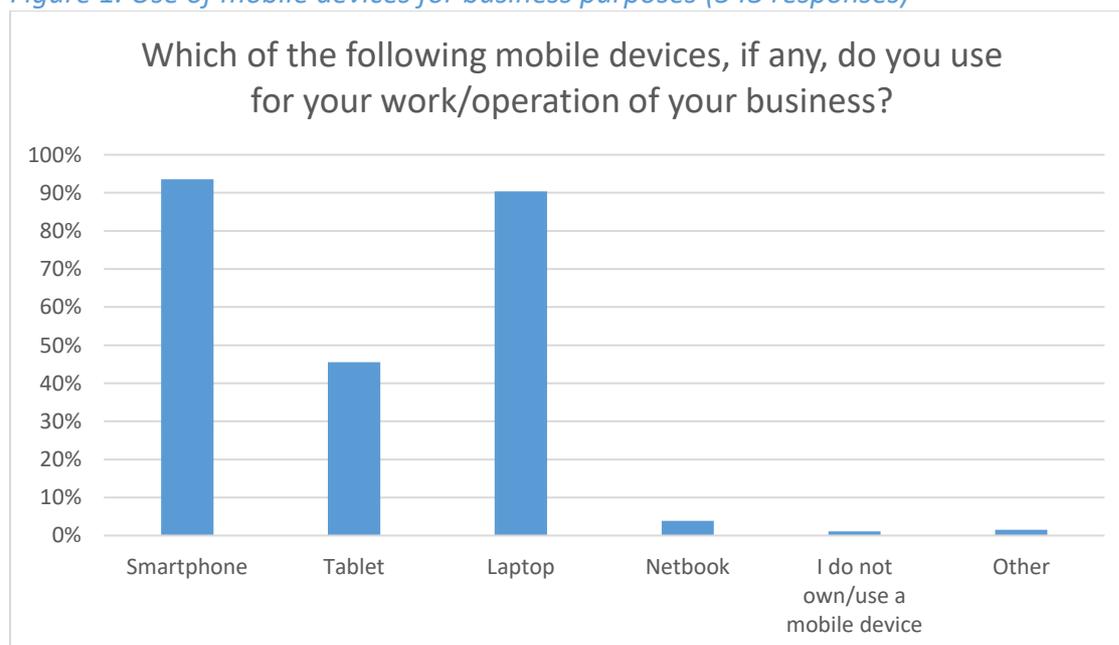
The IPSE membership is not representative of the UK freelance/self-employed population. IPSE members are overwhelmingly highly qualified workers who cluster in information technology and telecommunications professions and engineering professions.

Freelancers operating as sole proprietors and those who run a business part-time, female freelancers, lower skilled freelancers and freelancers in art, health, education and manufacturing are not well covered by this study.

## 3. USE OF MOBILE DEVICES FOR THE BUSINESS

On average 2.4 mobile devices are used by the freelancers in this study. A smartphone and a laptop are the mobile devices used by nine in ten respondents for work purposes; in almost all cases these are used in combination (85% of all respondents). Forty-one per cent make use of a smartphone, a laptop and a tablet.

Figure 1. Use of mobile devices for business purposes (543 responses)



Note: Respondents could tick as many mobile devices as apply. Source: ISPE Freelance Confidence Survey June 2016

## OCCUPATIONAL DIFFERENCES

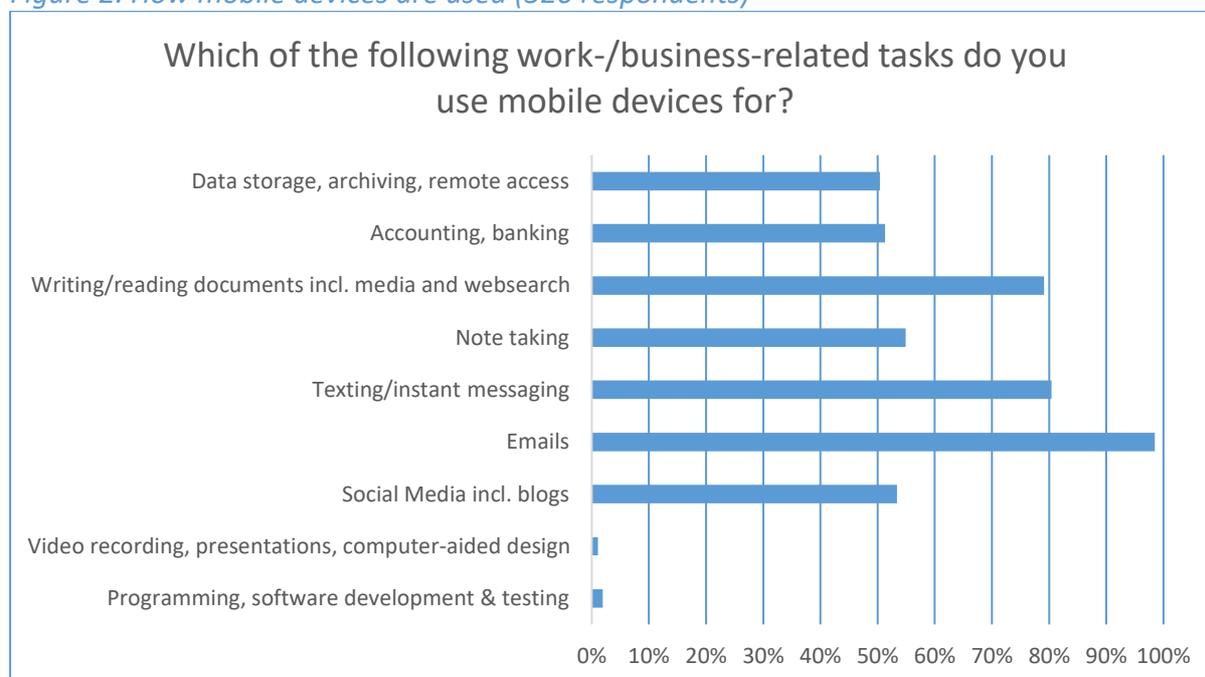
Freelancers who work in business research and finance professions<sup>1</sup> are particularly dependent on mobile devices for their work (78 respondents). All of them use a smartphone for their work. They also use a tablet more often than respondents in other professions (55% versus 44%). More than half of them use a smartphone, a laptop and a tablet (53% versus 41% in other professions).

## WORK PLACE

Freelancers without fixed premises all use mobile devices for their work. A high proportion of these freelancers are tablet users (59% versus 45% among all other respondents).

## 4. HOW MOBILE DEVICES ARE USED

Figure 2. How mobile devices are used (526 respondents)



Note: Respondents could tick as many activities as apply. Source: ISPE Freelance Confidence Survey June 2016

The surveyed freelancers mentioned on average 4.7 work-related activities for which they use mobile devices.

Almost all respondents who use mobile devices for business purposes, use their smartphones, tables, laptops etc. for emailing. Texting and instant messaging is also a relevant business-related task mentioned by 80% of respondents, particularly in business research and finance professions (92% versus 78% in other professions).

Various forms of information are gathered through mobile devices; data digitalised, processed remotely, archived and also presented, for example in meetings. Given the mobile

<sup>1</sup> Here the two professional groups 'Business & Research' and 'Business & Finance' were collapsed (see Table 1).

nature of much freelance work, mobile devices are also helpful for some to actually find meeting places, including in the use of mapping apps. Accessing and working with social media (e.g. blogging) is only one activity among many uses of mobile devices by freelancers.

#### OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

Numbers of respondents in design, media and artistic professions are small in the sample but here, well above three quarters use mobile devices for social media purposes compared to 50% in IT professions.

#### WORK PLACE

The use of social media on mobile devices is also high amongst freelancers without fixed premises, of whom four in five use their mobile devices for social media or blogging purposes (22 respondents).

### 5. IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN FREELANCE WORK

For 53% of the study sample, social media is 'somewhat important' to 'very important' for their business, while it is 'very important' only for just below one in five freelancers. Hence, that freelancing is highly dependent on social media is only partly true, at least in this sample with a distinct profession/industry composition.

#### OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

The breakdown by professional groups shows, somewhat surprisingly, that social media is rated as relatively unimportant for most freelancers working in 'media, art and design' and 'sales and marketing' professions. It has to be noted, however, that in these professional groups observations are very small which is why these findings have to be interpreted with care. Instead, social media is most important in engineering professions, followed by IT professions. In business research and finance professions the large majority regard social media as 'not very important' to 'not important at all'.

#### WORK PLACE

For those freelancers who mainly work in their own homes, just above half regard social media as 'somewhat important' to 'very important', which is not significantly different to freelancers who work at clients' premises most of their time (53% versus 56%).

### 6. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Freelance workers do not use a large number of social media platforms for their work. Respondents who use social media for their business use on average 1.6 platforms.

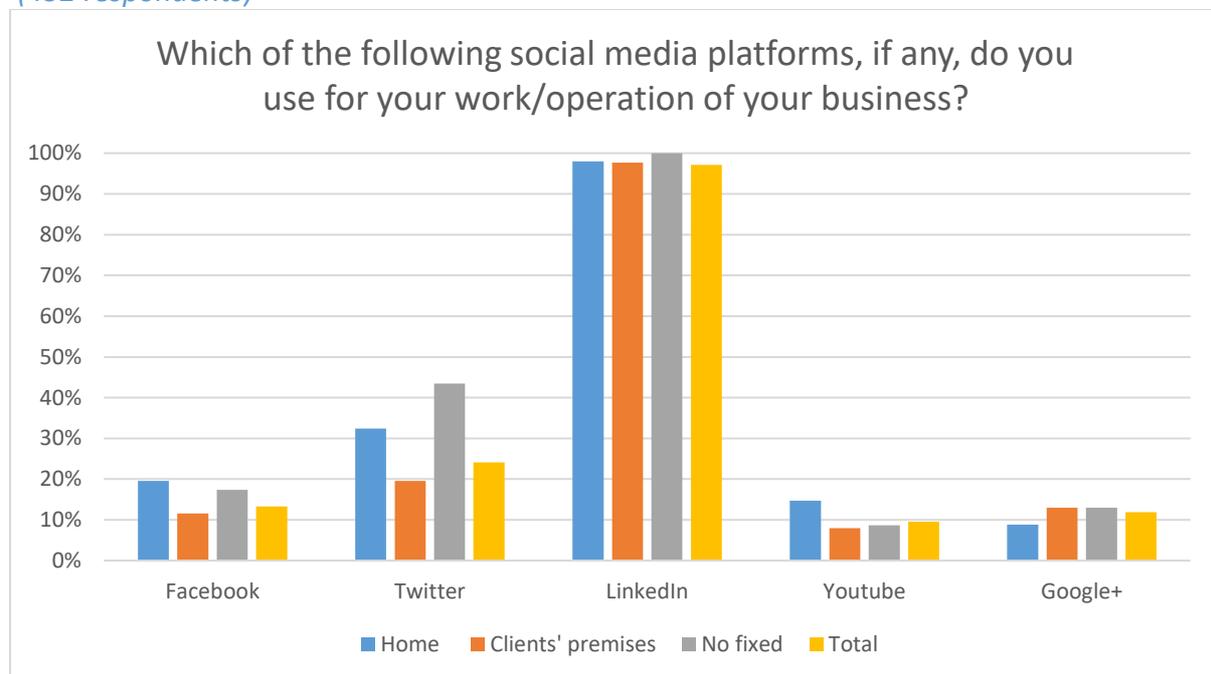
[LinkedIn](#) is the most relevant social media platform by a large margin, used by almost all of the respondents who provided information on the kind of social media they use (97.1% or 439 respondents out of 452). LinkedIn is not only quantitatively of greatest importance for

professional freelancers, but is also perceived as the most important social media platform by freelancers in this study.

The second most relevant social media platform for professional freelancers is [Twitter](#), but this social media network is in a large proportion of cases not perceived as very important, and for a notable number of respondents even not important at all.

Apart from LinkedIn and Twitter, only [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [Google+](#) are mentioned by a decent number of freelancers, ranging between 60 and 43 respondents. Facebook is less often used by freelancers for their work compared to Twitter, but those who use Facebook value this social media network more for their business than Twitter users do.

*Figure 3. Social media platforms/networks by where freelancers mainly work (452 respondents)*



Note: Respondents could tick as many applications as apply.

Source: ISPE Freelance Confidence Survey June 2016

## OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND

The choice of social media platform varies by profession. While LinkedIn has a huge take-up amongst freelance across the professions included in the study, it is particularly relevant to those in business research and business finance professions, of whom almost all use LinkedIn.

Media, arts and design professions – even though numbers in the sample are small and results have to be interpreted with care – are most likely to make use of Twitter and Facebook compared to all other professions covered in this study. In contrast, freelancers in engineering professions rarely make use of Twitter and Facebook for work purposes.

## WORK PLACE

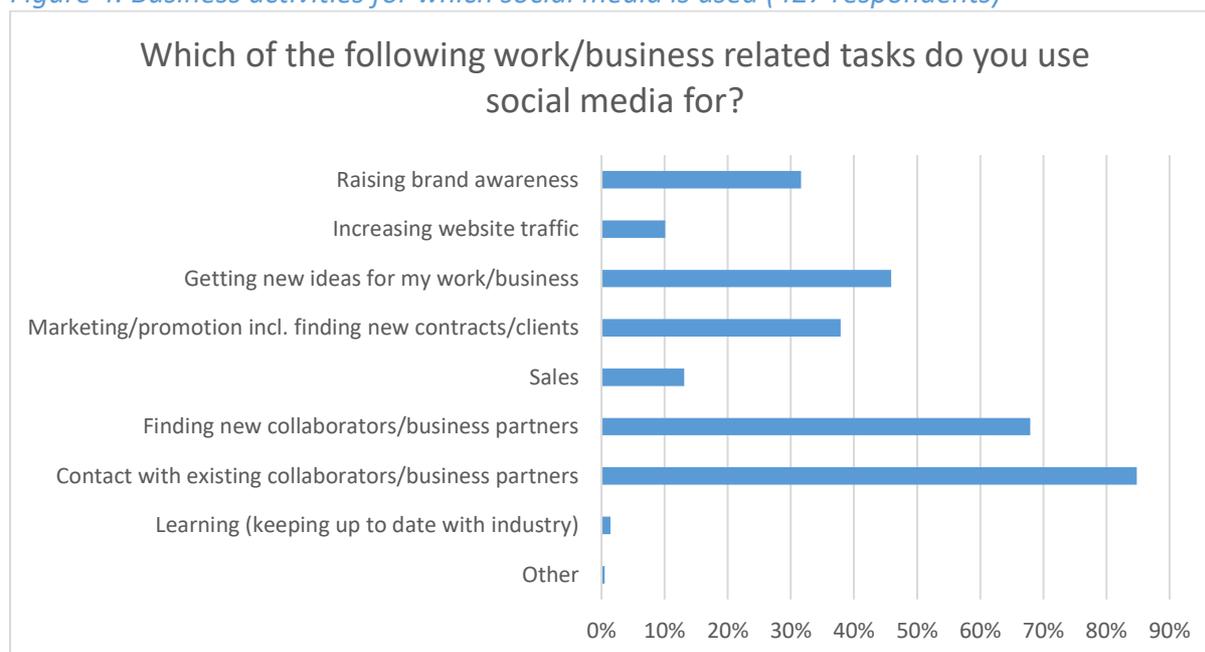
Those who work mainly from their own home or have no fixed workplace are more likely to use Facebook and Twitter, suggesting that these social media networks are more important to them. In addition, when home-based, freelancers use a greater variety of social media platforms/networks for their work; an average number of 1.85 compared to 1.6 on average.

## 7. BUSINESS ACTIVITIES FOR WHICH SOCIAL MEDIA IS USED

Participants were asked for their reasons for using social media. On average, freelancers mention 2.9 business-related activities for which they use social media. These are, first and foremost, networking-related activities, including contact with existing partners but also to find new collaborators and clients.

Another key reason for using social media in their work is to gather new ideas. This might also include checking out what competitors are doing in the market, as noted by one respondent in IT. More than one third of freelancers promote their services/products and look for new contracts and clients via social media.

Figure 4. Business activities for which social media is used (427 respondents)



Note: Respondents could tick as many tasks as apply. Per cent are based on respondent counts.

Source: ISPE Freelance Confidence Survey June 2016

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

This study has revealed the diverse ways in which mobile devices are used by freelancers and the significance of social media for networking, marketing and forming new contacts. For just above half of the interviewed freelancers, social media is somewhat important to very important for their work. The study also revealed the relative importance of particular social platforms and how they are used for specific purposes. LinkedIn is shown to be hugely

important for networking, for both retaining existing networks and making new contacts, in freelancing across a range of professions.

Differences by professions and industries have emerged in how mobile technology is used for freelance work and what social media networks are used and for what purposes. Social media is perceived most important for freelancing and running a business in engineering and IT professions. With this survey, we could not investigate further social media use in 'media art and design' and 'sales and marketing' professions. However, the findings indicate that Twitter and Facebook are particularly relevant in these professions.

The findings of this study open up new areas for research into how freelancers are using social media and mobile technologies. Related relevant questions are how freelancers' strategies of finding work may have changed with advances in mobile technologies and the emergence of new sharing platforms. LinkedIn, as documented in this study, is emerging as key to making and staying in touch with new contacts. This may have implications for recruitment as well as business growth.

Based on the study findings, we would therefore suggest that future surveys examine how social media is used for recruitment and growing their business and which social media networks are best suited for recruitment and growth and how this varies across professions and industries.

## 9. REFERENCES

- Aral, S., Dellarocos, C., Godes, D. (2013) 'Introduction to the Special Issue—Social Media and Business Transformation: A Framework for Research'. *Information Systems Research* 24 (1) 3-13.
- Brems, C., Temmerman, M., Graham, T. and Broersma, M. (2016) 'Personal Branding on Twitter: How employed and freelance journalists stage themselves on social media'. *Digital Journalism*, 1-17.
- Fischer, E. and Reuber, A.R. (2011) 'Social interaction via new social media: How can interactions on Twitter affect effectual thinking and behaviour?' *Journal of Business Venturing* 26, 1-8.
- Gandini, A. (2016) 'Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy'. *Marketing Theory* 16 (1) 123-141.
- Graham, M., Stephens, M. and Hale, S. (2013) 'Featured graphic. Mapping the geoweb: a geography of Twitter'. *Environment and Planning A* 45 (1) 100-102.
- Hedman, U. and Djerf-Pierre, M. (2013) 'The Social Journalist: Embracing the social media life or creating a new digital divide?' *Digital Journalism* 1 (3) 368-385.
- Hislop, D., Axtell, C., Collins, A., Daniels, K. Glover, J. and Niven, K. (2015) 'Variability in the use of mobile ICTs by homeworkers and its consequences for boundary management and social isolation'. *Information and Organization* 25, 222-232.
- Kitching, R. (2016) 'Exploring the UK Freelance Workforce in 2015'. Online at: <https://www.ipse.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/research/Exploring-uk-freelance-workforce-2015-report-v1.pdf>.
- Mason, C., Reuschke, D., Syrett, S. and van Haam, M. (2015) *Entrepreneurship in Cities: Neighbourhoods, Households and Homes*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2010) (Editor) *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*. London: Routledge.
- Reuschke, D. and Houston, D. (2016) 'The importance of housing and neighbourhood resources for urban microbusinesses'. *European Planning Studies* 24 (6) 1216-1235.
- Van Dijck, J (2013) 'You Have One Identity: Performing the Self on Facebook and LinkedIn'. *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (2) 199–215.
- Wang, F., Mack, E. and Maciejewski, R. (2017) Analyzing Entrepreneurial Social Networks with Big Data. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* 107 (1) 130-150.