

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WILEY

Understanding the careers of freelancers on digital labor platforms: The case of IT work

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Abstract

Online freelancing, an alternative form of work where independent workers offer services on digital labor platforms, gains increasing importance in IS research. While the general understanding of this form of work is growing, research lacks understanding careers on digital labor platforms. However, these differ from careers in offline labor markets due to volatility, global matching and platform mediation, the digital and temporary nature of work, and algorithmic management as particular platform working conditions. Therefore, to understand how working conditions on digital labor platforms influence the dynamic career paths of freelancers, we conduct an exploratory analysis using 35 interviews with freelancers and clients on digital labor platforms. We thus contribute to the body of knowledge on alternative forms of work on digital labor platforms by developing a long-term freelancing career model and outlining the dynamics of advancement, decline, and exit within platform careers. We also illustrate mechanisms between career phases in terms of platform lock-in effects, which arise from the career advancement dynamics and career exit dynamics.

KEYWORDS

career dynamics, digital labor platforms, gig economy, IT work, online freelancing

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Globalization, rapid technological change in the form of digital platforms, algorithms and artificial intelligence are increasingly accelerating the labor markets. In addition, economic uncertainties, not least due to the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to a restructuring of work and employment relationships. Especially post-COVID, the normality of remote work has reinforced the benefits of the freelancing economy (Mottola, 2023). As a result, people's career expectations have also changed (Alpar & Osterbrink, 2020; Guan et al., 2020; Sweet & Meiksins, 2013). The concept of career has been studied primarily in offline labor markets, in which people work as offline freelancers or in fixed organizations. However, the importance of working in online labor markets, where a global matching between freelancers (supply of work) and clients (demand for work) takes place via digital labor platforms (DLP) (Bunjak et al., 2021; Gu & Zhu, 2021), is increasing (Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). Previous studies only examine the conditions and challenges of this form of work, but not the entire career (Deng, Joshi, et al., 2016; Durward et al., 2020; Kittur et al., 2013). But a growing number of workers are pursuing careers outside of offline labor markets and embrace working on DLPs as a full-time job (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). This is reflected in the rising amount of projects and tasks on DLPs such as Upwork or Fiverr (Jabagi et al., 2019; Kässi & Lehdonvirta, 2018). In 2020, about 36% of the U.S. labor force (59 million people) worked as freelancers (Upwork, 2020). The platform Upwork in particular has seen an increase in qualified freelancers, e.g. in the fields of computer programming and IT (Upwork, 2021).

Some working conditions make the career dynamics on DLPs particular. First, we focus on the research context of online freelancers from the IT field who are self-employed and work through DLPs outside of an organizational environment, which makes the work highly volatile and uncertain compared to work in a permanent position (Deng, Joshi, et al., 2016; Durward et al., 2020; Kittur et al., 2013). Second, DLP careers are special compared to offline freelancing careers. Due to global matching on DLPs, there is high competition and broad heterogeneity of clients and jobs (Bellesia et al., 2019; Bunjak et al., 2021; Deng & Joshi, 2016; Seifried et al., 2020). Third, freelancing work is temporary and purely digital (Ashford et al., 2018; Bucher et al., 2019; Deng, Joshi, et al., 2016; Durward et al., 2020). Fourth, work on DLPs is not managed by a supervisor, but by algorithms that thereby significantly influence freelancers' careers (Duggan et al., 2020; Tóth et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2019).

Given these working conditions of DLPs, it is unclear how the particular careers of freelancers unfold over time. The literature reveals an initial understanding of the different career aspects on DLPs at a holistic level and examines single aspects (Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Sison & Lavilles, 2018). But despite recent calls to examine whether we need to update career theories in a changing work environment (Ashford et al., 2018; Barley et al., 2017; Rahman et al., 2016; Seifried et al., 2020), the dynamic development of careers on DLPs is not yet fully understood. However, to understand this new type of work, it is important for several reasons to consider the dynamic perspective of career paths on DLPs and to examine how freelance work evolves over the long term.

First, the static and linear view of careers on DLPs may not be accurate because it only considers the status of freelancers at a particular point in time and does not take into account the trajectory of their work and development (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). But since the labor market on DLPs is not stable, there is ambiguity and impermanence of career paths (Ashford et al., 2018). We therefore need to explore more closely the career path, which can move dynamically forward or backward, because freelancers' needs and contextual requirements are also dynamic and can change over the course of their careers (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Due to deep changes in employment relationships and organizational structures, more and more workers are experiencing a shift from stable and linear careers to dynamic careers. Thereby, these dynamic careers become even more challenging as freelancers have to plan their career development themselves due to the absence of organizations and fixed communities and they have to execute their careers by themselves under great uncertainty in a purely digital environment (Ashford et al., 2007, 2018; Lo Presti et al., 2018). In this context, theoretical assumptions about static careers in offline labor markets need to be reconsidered because, unlike permanent positions or freelancing in the offline environment, self-organized advancement and unprotected career decline may be a part of career development on DLPs.

Second, theory to date has largely assumed that people design their freelancing work primarily for the short term. Therefore, we are only beginning to understand how an entire career can be designed in this new way (Kalleberg, 2000, 2009). Previous theoretical assumptions need to be reconsidered, because freelancing work on DLPs may not only have a short-term character. In this regard, it is important for freelancers and for DLPs to understand possible dynamics and career paths, as this knowledge can help them make informed decisions regarding skill development, client acquisition, marketing strategies, and long-term planning (Ashford et al., 2018). In the new complex work environment of DLPs, workers are being asked to do more than what was previously required to succeed in the offline labor market because there are less familiar career paths or patterns for lifelong careers on DLPs. Therefore, it is important to highlight whether the benefits of a successful platform career, such as an individualized, multi-faceted, and exciting career, are worth the effort required in the long run (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2018). Based on this line of reasoning, this research seeks to answer the research question: *How can long-term, dynamic career paths of freelancers be designed on digital labor platforms?*

In this paper, we conduct an exploratory analysis of freelancer careers to answer the research question. Based on 35 semi-structured interviews with freelancer from the IT field, we develop a freelancer career model and systematize the career advancement, career decline and exit dynamics. The detailed information provided by freelancers yields interesting new insights into the long-term career dynamics of IT professionals as freelancers on DLPs.

2 | BACKGROUND

Based on the current state of research, we describe below what has not yet been adequately researched. It will be explained in detail which specific differences exist in contrast to previous related literature. To this end, we first describe the working conditions of work on DLPs in four clusters and thus provide a delimitation between freelancing careers on DLPs and (i) offline careers in organizations as well as (ii) offline freelancing careers. We then use the previous understanding of career phases on DLPs to structure a preliminary theoretical model from the challenges on DLPs.

In general, crowdwork is defined as work that is paid and whose execution is mediated through digital platforms (Howcroft & Bergvall-Kåreborn, 2019; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Crowdwork consists of micro and macro tasks (Kalleberg & Dunn, 2016). Microtasks (e.g., Amazon Mechanical Turk) are small, trivial, and largely repetitive tasks that can be completed in a short period of time (Heer & Bostock, 2010; Holthaus & Stock, 2017). In contrast, macro tasks involve considerable creative and knowledge work that typically requires a longer time to complete (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Majchrzak & Malhotra, 2013; Wagner et al., 2021).

In addition, crowdwork can be competition-based, where workers can participate in competitions or 'contests' on competition-based platforms (e.g., Topcoder) (Jian et al., 2019). Alternatively, DLPs (e.g., Upwork or Fiverr) enable online transactions and matching between freelancers offering their services and clients purchasing those services through DLPs (Rai et al., 2019).

In this paper, we investigate macro crowdwork on DLPs and more specifically the case of IT work on DLPs, which includes technology and software development (app development, website design, and software testing) (Gussek & Wiesche, 2023; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Thus, we study highly skilled freelance work (knowledge work). In this context, DLPs offer project categories such as app and website development, graphic design, digital marketing, and data analytics (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Kittur et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2021).

The career dynamics of highly skilled freelancers on DLPs (hereafter referred to simply as freelancing) are of particular interest here because they are more complex than those of micro-tasking or contest-based crowdwork. To examine freelancing careers, DLPs also offer high project heterogeneity and low career entry barriers (Ashford et al., 2018).

2.1 | Working conditions in DLP careers

Specific working conditions on DLPs have been studied in the literature. We provide an overview of this research below and organize it into four clusters to illustrate why careers on DLPs are special and need further research. Table 1 provides an overview of the clusters, associated working conditions, and corresponding illustrative references from previous research. The clusters illustrate the special conditions of careers on DLPs compared to (i) offline careers in organizations and (ii) offline freelancing careers who are self-employed but do not organize and perform their work via digital platforms.

TABLE 1 Overview of the working conditions in DLP careers.

Delimitation	Cluster	Working conditions	Illustrative references
Differences to offline careers in organizations	False self-employment and volatility	Work independently	Caza et al. (2022), Kost et al. (2020), and Mayer et al. (2020)
		Work outside of an organizational environment	Ihl et al. (2020), Kittur et al. (2013), and Petriglieri et al. (2019)
		Autonomy	Deng, Joshi, et al. (2016) Deng and Joshi (2016), and Durward et al. (2020)
		Flexibility	Bellesia et al. (2019), Huang et al. (2020), and Wood et al. (2019)
		High cost and time expenditure	Wood et al. (2019) and Zheng et al. (2015)
		Precarity and financial instability	Ashford et al. (2018), Durward et al. (2020), and Durward et al. (2016a)
Differences to offline freelancing careers	Global matching and platform mediation	Matching of clients and workers through digital platforms	Bellesia et al. (2019), Bunjak et al. (2021), and Gu and Zhu (2021)
		Global competition	Bucher et al. (2019), Kanat et al. (2018), and Strunk et al. (2022)
		Wide range and heterogeneity of clients and jobs	Deng & Joshi, 2016, Mayer et al., 2020, Seifried et al., 2020
		Market transparency	Claussen et al. (2018) and Seifried et al. (2020)
	Digital and temporary work	Digitally mediated work	Deng, Joshi, et al. (2016), Gol et al. (2019), and Irani and Silberman (2013)
		Temporary contract work	Brawley and Pury (2016), Friedman (2014), and Gol et al. (2019)
		Transience of work	Ashford et al. (2018), Bucher et al. (2019), and Strunk et al. (2022)
		Social isolation and emotional tensions	Petriglieri et al. (2019), Silberman et al. (2010), and Wood et al. (2019)
		Different motivations and rewards	Chandler and Kapelner (2013), Paolacci & Chandler, 2014, and Rogstadius et al. (2011)
	Algorithmic management	Algorithmic control	Duggan et al. (2020), Rahman (2021), and Wood et al. (2019)
		Reputation system	Idowu and Elbanna (2022), Tóth et al. (2022), and Yoganarasimhan (2013)

Generally, the literature suggests that careers on DLPs are different from careers within an organization (Blaising et al., 2021; Caza et al., 2022). DLPs lack clear, available, and relevant career pathways (Ashford et al., 2018). Workers often inhabit 'in-between spaces', between work roles, organizations, and career paths (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016). Research also refers to fragmented careers (Blaising et al., 2021) and high career path uncertainty (Caza et al., 2022). In addition, DLP careers are unpredictable, risky, and built slowly across multiple projects, relationships, and environments (Caza et al., 2022). Moreover, workers on DLPs are responsible for their own career development (Kost et al., 2020). Overall, it is unclear how careers on DLPs might unfold (Seifried et al., 2020).

First, freelancers are exposed to *false self-employment and volatility*, which are special conditions of work on DLPs compared to careers in organizations. Workers on DLPs work independently outside organizational structures through digital platforms (Burke & Cowling, 2020; Caza et al., 2022; Kost et al., 2020). Therefore, they do not receive organizational (social) support for their careers (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Ihl et al., 2020; Kost et al., 2020), are not supported by a holding environment (Petriglieri et al., 2019), and do not benefit from managerial supervision and direct rewards or punishments for their work performance (Kittur et al., 2013) as in organizations. Moreover, organizations fundamentally play an important role in shaping careers in the offline workplace, as they are responsible for promotion, training, and setting criteria for career development (Rande et al., 2015).

Moreover, on the one hand, working on DLPs is characterized by higher autonomy (Deng, Galliers, et al., 2016; Deng, Joshi, et al., 2016; Durward et al., 2016b, 2020) and flexibility (Bellesia et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2020) than working in organizations. This also impacts workers' careers, as they thus have greater personal responsibility and freedom to shape their careers (Alvarez et al., 2023). On the other hand, working on DLPs often comes at a high cost and time expenditure (Zheng et al., 2015) and individuals often work unsocial and irregular hours, which can lead to sleep deviation and exhaustion (Wood et al., 2019). In addition, DLP careers are characterized by precarity and financial instability (Ashford et al., 2018; Durward et al., 2016b, 2020; Petriglieri et al., 2019). There exists no job security and often low wages (Kittur et al., 2013; Wood et al., 2019).

Second, DLP careers are special compared to offline freelancing careers because digital platforms enable the *global matching of clients and freelancers by mediating the work online* (Bunjak et al., 2021; Gu & Zhu, 2021). Digital platforms act as providers of technological functions and online environments (Bellesia et al., 2019). In addition, there is huge competition among workers for jobs due to global connections on digital platforms (Kanat et al., 2018; Kittur et al., 2013; Strunk et al., 2022). DLPs bring together a large number of diverse individuals worldwide (Acar, 2019; Bucher et al., 2019). Moreover, there is a great breadth or choice and heterogeneity of clients and jobs (Deng & Joshi, 2016; Kokkodis & Ipeirotis, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Workers face an almost infinite pool of employment opportunities, offering many different ways to shape their careers (Seifried et al., 2020). Finally, there is enormous market transparency on DLPs. Since freelancers' profiles are freely available on the platform, freelancers can obtain detailed information about the career paths of other freelancers. Likewise, all job descriptions and prices can be viewed so that workers can easily assess qualification requirements which is not possible for offline freelancing (Seifried et al., 2020).

Third, the work on DLPs itself is special compared to offline freelancing work because it is purely *digital and temporary*. The work on digital platforms is digitally mediated (Gol et al., 2018; Irani & Silberman, 2013) and significant parts of the value creation take place via IT-facilitated platforms that enable exchange between workers and clients (Deng & Joshi, 2016; Durward et al., 2016b, 2020). Moreover, work is not only digital, but can be defined as temporary contract work (Brawley & Pury, 2016; Gol et al., 2019). Thus, there are no long-time connections but jobs over a defined period of time as flexible agreements (Friedman, 2014). Because of this granularity and decontextualization of tasks, workers are removed from the end product of their work (Bucher et al., 2019; Strunk et al., 2022). The transient nature of work on DLPs is therefore challenging for career development (Ashford et al., 2018). The digital nature of work also makes workers feel socially isolated (Wood et al., 2019) and they face emotional tensions (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019). Moreover, there is a certain anonymity in the working relationship on DLPs (Silberman et al., 2010). Last, workers are motivated to participate on DLPs and develop their careers for divergent reasons, and the reward structure is often not only monetary (Seifried et al., 2020). For example, factors that

increase the intrinsic motivation of a task, such as framing the task in a way that helps others (Rogstadius et al., 2011) or increasing the meaningfulness of the task (Chandler & Kapelner, 2013), can improve the quality of the outcome. Extrinsic motivators, on the other hand, such as higher pay, may not do so directly (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014) or only if part of the pay is designed as an unexpected gift by offering an unconditional pay increase (Gilchrist et al., 2016).

Fourth, the work on DLPs is *governed and controlled by algorithmic management*, which is not the case in offline freelancing (Duggan et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019). In this regard, algorithms create power asymmetries and thus constrain freelancers' actions (Kinder et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019). Previous research also shows that algorithms affect how and why freelancers find work on DLPs (Jarrahi et al., 2020, 2021). Freelancers experience algorithmic rating systems as a form of control where the criteria for success and changes of those criteria are not always easy for freelancers to predict or to influence (Jarrahi & Sutherland, 2019; Rahman, 2021). In addition, unlike in offline freelancer careers, the successful careers of workers on DLPs are highly dependent on their reputation and the reviews of clients on the platform (Cram et al., 2020; Hong & Pavlou, 2017; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Lin et al., 2018; Möhlmann et al., 2021; Tóth et al., 2022; Yoganarasimhan, 2013). Freelancers cannot directly influence these reviews, but the quality of these evaluations is very important as it serves as a status indicator and influences future job acquisition (Bellesia et al., 2023; Gussek & Wiesche, 2023; Rahman, 2021).

In summary, online freelancing careers on DLPs and offline freelancing careers both differ from offline careers in organizations in that they are characterized by a high degree of independence, uncertainty and freedom (see cluster 'false self-employment and volatility'). However, the concept of DLP careers can be distinguished mainly from offline freelancing careers, because DLP careers are shaped by freelancers in a purely digital environment and in interaction with the digital platform (see cluster 'global matching and platform mediation', 'digital and temporary work', 'algorithmic management').

2.2 | Careers on digital labor platforms

Based on the research presented so far on the working conditions on DLPs that make careers in such markets special compared to (i) offline careers in organizations or (ii) offline freelancing careers, the following section develops a preliminary theoretical model based on the literature that structures the career challenges on DLPs.

The literature reveals an initial understanding of the different career phases on DLPs at a holistic level and examines single aspects (Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022; Gussek & Wiesche, 2022; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Sison & Lavilles, 2018). Table 2 shows that the core literature on career challenges on DLPs can be roughly clustered into four different phases.

The first phase describes the difficult entry into the DLP (Blaising & Dabbish, 2022; Claussen et al., 2018; Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022). We refer to this phase as '**beginner**'. Competition with other freelancers is very high (Bellesia et al., 2019; Strunk et al., 2022). Most workers also have little knowledge of DLPs at the beginning, and especially of the dynamics of performance management, evaluation, and reputation systems (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Workers depend on reputation systems in the form of ratings and reviews, which they do not have at the beginning of their careers (Tóth et al., 2022). When they enter DLPs, they have no feedback or other verified performance data (Rahman, 2021; Stanton & Thomas, 2016). Therefore, it also takes many applications before the freelancer gets the first job (Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022; Tóth et al., 2022).

We term the second phase '**slave**', as workers must do everything they can to build their reputation (Tóth et al., 2022). Due to the still high competition in this phase, the number of ratings must be increased quickly (Blaising et al., 2021; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Overinvestment in reputation is made to advance the career (Claussen et al., 2018). Moreover, at this phase, work is not yet done primarily for monetary reasons, but for the rating (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022). Due to the high competition and number of freelancers, only very low prices can be charged for the work (Graham et al., 2017; Hu & Fu, 2021; Tóth et al., 2022). Finally, worker profiles need to obtain a lot of

TABLE 2 Clusters of career challenges on digital labor platforms across phases.

Phase	Our label	Phase characteristic	Illustrative references
1	Beginner	Difficult platform start with a lot of competition	Blaising and Dabbish (2022), Claussen et al. (2018), Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022), Gussek et al. (2023), and Strunk et al. (2022)
		No reputation on the platform yet	Rahman (2021), Stanton and Thomas (2016), and Tóth et al. (2022)
		Many unsuccessful applications for jobs	Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022) and Tóth et al. (2022)
2	Slave	Reputation must be built	Ashford et al. (2018), Blaising et al. (2021), and Claussen et al. (2018)
		Only a small price can be charged for the work	Graham et al. (2017), Hu and Fu (2021), Idowu and Elbanna (2022), and Tóth et al. (2022)
		The profile on the platform must contain a lot of information	Holthaus and Stock (2018), Ludwig et al. (2022), and Sison and Lavilles (2018)
3	Establisher	A good rating must be developed and maintained	Alqazlan et al. (2022), Durward et al. (2016b), and Rahman (2021)
		The profile is now used and the client relationships must be established	Blaising et al. (2021), Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022), and Kost et al. (2020)
		The price for the work can be raised	Bellesia et al. (2019), Bihary et al. (2021), Idowu and Elbanna (2022), Ke and Zhu (2021)
4	Celebrity	Trust between clients and workers is given and a network can be built up	Bellesia et al. (2019), Gu and Zhu (2021), Gussek and Wiesche (2023), and Lo Presti et al. (2018)
		Competition is no longer as strong as it was in the beginning	Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022), Idowu and Elbanna (2022), and Rahman (2021)

information to compensate for the still low reputation (Holthaus & Stock, 2018; Sison & Lavilles, 2018). In this context, more personal information can increase the chances of success (Ludwig et al., 2022).

The third phase is characterized by the fact that the workers as ‘**establishers**’ must develop a good rating and, above all, maintain it in this phase. The rating score, which acts as a flagship for the workers, only increases after a certain period of time on the platform (Rahman, 2021). Finally, when the first projects in phase two are completed and the workers have received several positive ratings, it is easier to acquire more projects in the third phase as long as a high average rating has been maintained (Tóth et al., 2022). The profile enriched with information in phase two can now be used in the third phase to build relationships with clients (Kost et al., 2020). Workers on DLPs rely solely on virtual tools to present themselves and build relationships with customers (Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022). Last, in the third career phase, the price of labor can be slowly increased (Ke & Zhu, 2021). Workers are recommended to customers by the algorithm of the digital platform and thus have the opportunity to increase their fees (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022).

At the fourth and highest phase, workers take on the role of a ‘**celebrity**’. This phase is characterized by a high level of trust between clients and workers (Gu & Zhu, 2021). A long history of reviews and good ratings enables the building of collaborations (Tóth et al., 2022). Thus, long-term client relationships and the development of networks become possible (Bellesia et al., 2019; Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022; Lo Presti et al., 2018). In addition, competition in this phase is much less than in previous phases, or even completely absent, as few workers reach this career phase (Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Rahman, 2021). Consequently, this phase is also characterized by the fact that a large number of job applications is no longer needed and workers can even secure a stable income with which they can plan (Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022).

There are also initial research findings on the power dynamics between freelancers and DLPs. However, these cannot be assigned to specific phases based on existing literature. Due to the platforms' monopoly power, they can limit workers' choices, mobility, and career development, making them more vulnerable to exploitation (Dube et al., 2020). As described earlier, algorithms and evaluation systems create power asymmetries, limiting freelancers' actions (Curchod et al., 2020; Kinder et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019). However, a developed reputation on the platform can also increase freelancers' bargaining power and shift the distribution of power in their favor (Durward et al., 2016b). In addition, the described use of power by platforms can promote the formation of alliances between freelancers who build their own network on the platform (Kinder et al., 2019).

Previous literature can be roughly clustered in these four career phases. So far, however, it is unclear how the described working conditions and challenges of careers on DLPs interact and lead to career advancement, career decline and platform exits. Since, to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined this before, in this paper we will examine career dynamics to highlight how workers' careers on DLPs develop over time along the phases and how workers can influence these developments. Furthermore, we also illustrate mechanisms between career phases in terms of platform lock-in effects, which arise from the career advancement dynamics and career exit dynamics.

3 | RESEARCH METHOD

Given the shortage of knowledge and studies that capture the specific career dynamics of freelancers on DLPs, we use an exploratory research design that allows us to develop theoretical depth and detailed understanding of under-researched phenomena. Thus, in this work, we use an abductive approach that follows the grounded theory approach described by Strauss and Corbin (1990).

This approach is particularly suited to explore poorly understood phenomena based on previous theory and explore new data. We can thus broaden our understanding of phenomena and deepen knowledge, as well as extend and complement existing theories. Grounded theory does not mean that researchers work completely independently of existing theories (Wiesche et al., 2017). The method is based on an iterative process in which data and theory building are constantly interrelated. We therefore also draw on insights from existing theories and the literature and relate our exploratory data to them. With the help of the grounded theory method, we therefore not only extend existing theories, but also contribute to filling the described shortcomings in existing theory building and to developing new theoretical perspectives. By applying grounded theory, we can thereby identify unexpected phenomena or relationships not contained in existing theories (Levina, 2021; Walsh et al., 2015). Compared to relatively stable phenomena studied in some fields, a crucial aspect of information systems phenomena is that they are inherently emergent, that is, they dynamically evolve and change. Technologies are changing at a fast pace and in unpredictable ways, and so are their impacts. Technologies, such as DLPs and their particular working conditions, affect many aspects simultaneously. Consequently, today's new technologies have the potential to fundamentally change many previously known contexts, such as the career development of individuals. This ever-increasing role of technology must therefore be incorporated into theories of important organizational processes and phenomena (Bailey et al., 2022). To keep up with such evolving phenomena, qualitative methods help by allowing us to identify insightful cases, develop grounded theories, and shape new concepts to describe emerging phenomena such as, in our case, dynamic careers on DLPs (Monteiro et al., 2022).

The working conditions of individuals working on DLPs presented in the theoretical background that make careers in such markets unique, as well as the classification of previous literature into the four career phases, make it clear that it is so far unexplored how the described conditions and challenges of careers on DLPs interact and lead to career advancement, career decline, and platform exit. These career dynamics are therefore unexplored in the context of DLPs and differ from careers in offline labor markets due to the particular working conditions, false self-employment and volatility, global matching and platform mediation, digital and temporary work, and algorithmic management, thus requiring an extension of existing theory in this research field.

To this end, we collected semi-structured interview data across 35 cases and used grounded theory techniques to structure and analyze our data (Sarker et al., 2013; Urquhart, 2013; Wiesche et al., 2017).

3.1 | Sample and data collection

Regarding the research context, we chose IT professionals (e.g., software development) on DLPs (IT freelancers) as the sample for our research for two reasons. First, IT work is increasingly being performed by freelancers via digital platforms (Upwork, 2021; Younger, 2020). The effects of this change are not yet precisely known and may have significant individual as well as general economic consequences. Second, IT freelancers differ from other online freelancers in two main ways, which additionally makes their careers special: IT work, which is constantly evolving, requires a high level of skill (Ang et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2012), and IT projects often require a certain level of collaboration to complete them successfully (Kudaravalli et al., 2017; Levina, 2005). This is not the case for other freelance activities such as simple design tasks, translations, or image editing. In IT, this is exacerbated by increasing competition among workers, which is why technology companies are offering fewer and fewer lifetime employment opportunities for IT professionals (Ang & Slaughter, 2000). As a result, the IT profession is becoming more diverse and careers involve multiple moves between organizations and occupations (Slaughter, 2001).

We studied a heterogeneous sample of freelancers on different DLPs. On these platforms, there are a wide variety of jobs from the IT context in terms of diversity of tasks, duration of employment, and skill level. Therefore, there is a wide range of workers on the platforms with varying levels of success, and these freelancers are also in different career phases. We rely on 33 semi-structured interviews with IT freelancers, two semi-structured interviews with clients, the personal online profiles of our informants and archival documents downloaded from the platform to support our theory building process. For triangulation purposes and to strengthen the generalizability of our results, we conducted two additional interviews with clients in order to be able to include a second perspective in the results. In total, we collected 1397 min of interview material. The interviews lasted an average of 40 min, all of which we transcribed, resulting in 422 pages of qualitative data.

We conducted, recorded and transcribed 35 semi-structures interviews. The participants differ according to several characteristics. Table 3 provides an overview of the sample.

We used theoretical sampling to ensure that the freelancers were at different phases of their careers and that they differed in terms of experience, success, and background. Background means gender, cultural background and professional area or task field. Thus, different perspectives on career development are possible and different experiences can be studied. We randomly contacted a set of freelancers in the IT specific platform categories and then conducted the interviews via online communication media outside the platform. After the initial interviews, we more consciously selected the freelancers based on their career advancement. A similar approach has been used in other studies that conducted online surveys on DLPs (e.g., Deng, Joshi, & Galliers, 2016).

The interviews were also structured using a basic interview guide. In the interviews, we first asked the informants general questions about their careers and motivations for joining the platform. We then moved on to more detailed questions about the organization of the work and the start of the platform career. Examples of questions include: Could you tell me about your entry into the platform? What problems did you encounter in the starting process? We then asked questions about career development on the platform such as: Please describe what helped you climb the ladder on the platform? Do you follow certain strategies to be successful on the platform? We also focused on the relevant skills as well as teams of freelancers. We sought to understand the dynamics of individual situations to develop detailed descriptions of the career dynamics on the platform. After the first twelve interviews, we found that informants frequently talked about the changes in their job choice within career development and the role of the platform owner within the career. Given the centrality of these topics to career dynamics, we modified our interview guide to examine such issues in all subsequent interviews. Our interviews continued until we found that new data no longer provided new information and did not help us further refine or develop our model, i.e. theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

TABLE 3 Overview of the sample.

Sample overview	
Platform affiliation (35 in total)	
Main platform is Upwork	24
Main platform is Fiverr	3
Use more than one platform	8
Gender (35 in total)	
Male	29
Female	6
Location (35 in total)	
Europe	15
Asia	10
North America	4
South America	1
Australia	1
Africa	4
Assignment of the 33 freelancers to career phase	
Beginner (phase 1)	2
Slave (phase 2)	7
Establisher (phase 3)	11
Celebrity (phase 4)	13

We also analyzed the freelancers' public online profiles to obtain additional information about their work experience and development on the platform (based on their work history) and what status symbols they have on the platform (e.g., platform badges or job success scores). We started this investigation before the interviews so that we could ask specific questions about the information in their profiles.

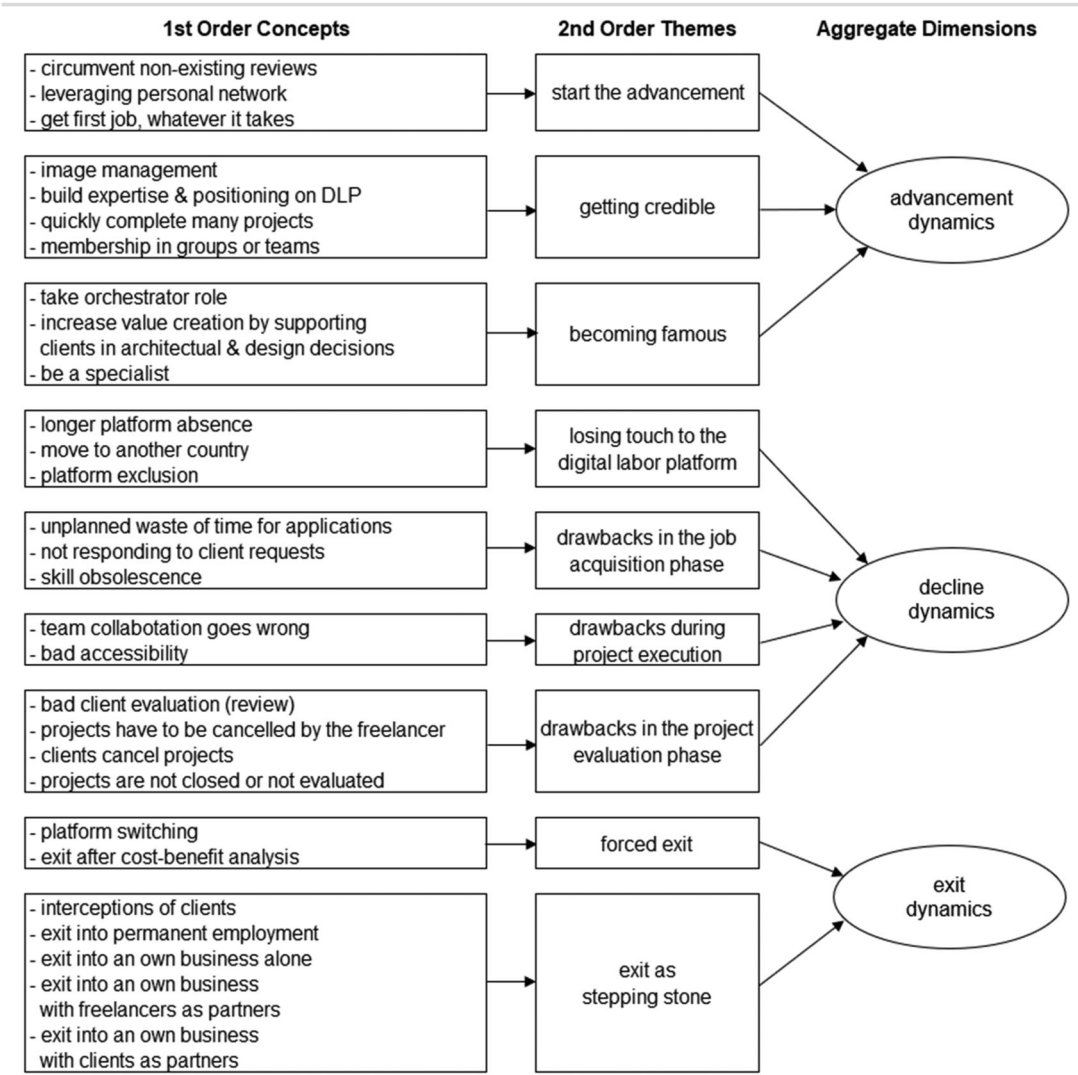
Finally, we reviewed some articles and reports published on the platform's blog to develop a better understanding of the context. These documents mainly contained information about the platform itself and offered tips for freelancers.

3.2 | Data analysis

We built an integrated database of interviews, profiles, and documents. The data analysis followed the framework proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for the development of grounded theory development and the three-step coding process described by Gioia et al. (2013). Following these frameworks, data analysis went hand-in-hand with the data collection phase (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We adopted an iterative approach of constant comparison between the literature and data. We first open-coded to search for recurrent first-order concepts. In open coding, interview passages were marked with open codes (we identified about 100 codes), that is, short descriptive statements that summarize the key idea of the text passage (Wiesche et al., 2017). Then we grouped them into nine code groups to form categories (second-order themes), and finally we aggregated three theoretical dimensions. In the last step of this procedure, we identified the relationships between the categories to build a career model. Thus, data were mapped to theorize the relationships between contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes. To ensure reliability of our analysis, 20% of the interviews were coded by a research assistant who was not involve in the project. This resulted in an average inter-coder reliability of 81%.

In a first step, we looked for regularities and patterns in the data and found that freelancers could be classified into the proposed career phases. Further, freelancers reported on their current career status and on earlier phases of their careers. Then, as we went back and forth between theory and data, we were able to link the phases together and recognized specific attributes that lead to career advancement as well as different strategies to achieve these attributes. We also interpreted different aspects that led to a decline within the career. By having the freelancers report how the career unfolded up to the point of the interview and what they would like to achieve in the future, it became clear to us how the dynamics of the career are represented. Finally, we further examined our data to determine what exit dynamics occurred within the freelancer careers or which ones the freelancers planned. The end result of the process was the data structure in Table 4. A more detailed presentation along the data can be found in the appendix. We then synthesized the described data structure into a freelancing career model (Figure 1) by mapping the relationships between advancement, decline, and exit dynamics. Applying abductive reasoning also identified mechanisms between career phases, which are integrated into the career model (Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Gioia et al., 2013). An example of the abductive reasoning can be found in the appendix (Gioia et al., 2013).

TABLE 4 Data structure.



4 | RESULTS

In the following section, the results are presented. We developed a long-term freelancing career model, divided into four career phases that freelancers dynamically move through, represented by the staircase in Figure 1. The advancement and decline dynamics can be identified by the up and down arrows in the career model. Finally, the exit dynamics are visible in the upper part of the Figure 1. We found many dynamic career mechanisms (first-order concepts) in the advancement, decline and exit dynamics, which are influenced by the working conditions of the platform as a context. We also illustrate mechanisms between career phases in terms of platform lock-in effects, which arise from the career advancement dynamics and career exit dynamics. Throughout explaining these results, we highlight the IT specifics along the career dynamics as we examine the case of IT work on platforms.

4.1 | Career advancement dynamics

Our analysis identified three different career advancement situations for freelancers on DLPs, influenced by the platform working conditions. Within each advancement situation, certain attributes must be achieved through strategies to advance to the next career phase. We present the three advancement dynamics below.

4.1.1 | Start the advancement

To advance from ‘Beginner’ to ‘Slave’ phase, the **first job** on the platform must be won as an entry barrier to start the advancement. To get this first job, freelancers use three different strategies: they circumvent non-existing reviews, leverage their personal network and get the first job, whatever it takes.

Due to the algorithmic management and reputation systems on platforms, starting a career is particularly difficult because freelancers do not have reviews of completed projects on the platform at the beginning. Freelancers

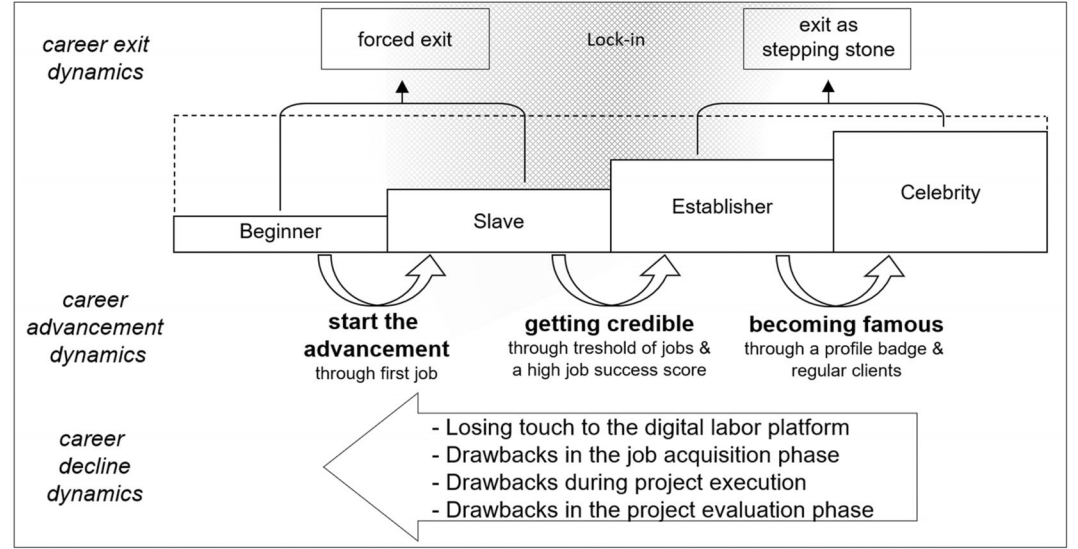


FIGURE 1 Freelancing career model.

circumvent these non-existent reviews by completing certificates or tests as a substitute for client reviews. This clearly demonstrates the quality of the freelancer to potential clients. In addition, external profiles of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook or Linked-In) or other freelancing platforms are often linked if for example reviews are already available there. Finally, fake reviews are sometimes used by completing fake jobs to replace the non-existing real reviews.

It is difficult nowadays for a new freelancer to join this world, to build this profile. [...] People are actually posting fake jobs in order for them to get reviews and to get noticed. [...] So: 'You are my friend, you are posting this job for five dollars, you hire me for the job and then you give me a review', then close the job. (#20)

The working conditions on platforms are characterized by the fact that freelancers usually work independently outside an organizational environment. By **leveraging the personal network**, freelancers nevertheless receive help in getting a job. Likewise, they receive information through the experiences of other freelancers from their private environment or on the platform.

I actually started on [the platform] and then I was having people who are my friends, so they are on the same team as well. I taught them how to get the projects and etcetera and help them to be successful with first two projects. (#7)

In addition, it is necessary that the freelancers **get the first job, whatever it takes**, to start in the reputation system of the platform. In this first phase as a 'beginner' it is not important how much money the freelancer earns. Many freelancers even report to do the first job for free, just to get the first rating. Additionally, any job at this phase will be accepted, regardless of whether it is in the desired field of activity for further career advancement. Lastly, freelancers present half of the solution for projects already in the proposal within the job application and may spend wasted time on it just to get the job. Some freelancers even reported that they complete the entire job before the client accepts the proposal (based only on the job description which is free available on the platform), so that clients who are in a hurry can accept the solution directly and the freelancer get a quick review.

For desperate people who needed something fast, I did a Python program and I said 'Hey, I already have it done, do you want to hire me?'. And because [the client was] so good about putting the requirements in the job description I said, 'Oh yeah, that's done... okay we'll code it up'. And then I told him later [...] that I already have it for him and he was thrilled so, that's what it was like in the beginning. (#19)

4.1.2 | Getting credible

To advance from 'Slave' to 'Establisher' phase, a **threshold of jobs and a high job success score** (percentage of successfully closed jobs) is necessary to get credible. To get this threshold and high success score, freelancers use four different strategies: they manage their image, build expertise and position themselves on the DLP, quickly complete many projects and become a member in groups or teams.

To stand out against the global competition and successfully complete more and more jobs, active **image management** help freelancers to deal with global matching and platform mediation. They do everything the client asks for and often give more than 100% and therefore more than is paid. Additionally, they actively seek feedback and ask clients for a review after completing projects. Finally, portfolios of work samples provided to the client help for image building. But this presentation of work samples is particularly difficult for IT freelancers. The project content

and data are often confidential or licensed in IT projects and sometimes IT freelancers have to sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). Likewise, IT is often intangible and difficult to map and, therefore difficult to show to clients. Finally, code data in the samples can be copied and used by competing freelancers. However, it is especially important for IT freelancers to market themselves in order to stand out against the competition and to acquire jobs. The clients have to be convinced of the qualities and skills of the IT freelancer in other ways.

This one [project] is like their website that I work on... is like a little [platform] for teachers [...]. And I have access to all the information of these people, and I think a lot of freelancers could use these for bad purpose [...]. And this one is real data... real people. [...] Just for software it's like a freelancer has to I mean... he must have this quality of like secretive. For example, if one client told me 'Have you ever developed a website with over 1000 users?', I cannot show him the screen [...] (#16)

The second strategy for advancing to the establisher career phase is to **build expertise and positioning on the DLP**, which is influenced by the wide range and heterogeneity of clients and jobs. Skills are constantly being developed and improved by freelancers. Especially in the IT field, technologies change quickly, which is why the phenomenon of obsolescence of skills helps IT freelancers for positioning on the DLP. They react to the changing market demand on the platform. Depending on which skills are currently in demand in their fields of activity, appropriate skills should be learned in order to stand out from the competition and to advance in the career. In this case, the DLP helps freelancers by making job offers visible to freelancers. In addition, it can be helpful for freelancers to have a fixed amount of time each week reserved for learning new skills. Material on the internet, textbooks, videos on other platforms like YouTube, classes at universities, paid courses, training on the traditional job or blogs and news can help to update, train and learn new skills.

I spent one to two hours daily, just searching about what new tasks are needed on the platform, [...] even if I have a job. Currently I am working as a full time, at [the platform]. So, I can have a good idea what skills I need to enhance, what new skills I should acquire, what are the trends on the future, on the tasks that will be on the platforms. So, I can be prepared [...]. (#15)

In order to **quickly complete many projects** and therefore maintain the threshold of jobs to advance a career phase, mainly short and simple jobs are accepted. Especially in the IT field, the type of work can help. Work results can be used multiple times for different clients. For example, IT freelancers use a developed code snippet several times for different projects to earn money twice without investing time in a new solution a second time. This is possible especially in the IT field, when developed software solutions fit several similar projects. In addition, freelancers usually apply specifically for projects where there is little competition or where there are few competitors. Finally, freelancers always apply at a specific time on the day when most jobs are posted online. For example, to be the first freelancer on a job, they apply at the time it is morning in the US, as that is where many new projects come from.

A lot of people even reuse the code from part to part. Or even resells the software, you know. There are a lot of implications in software development because, for example, [...] a project of these one I have it ready on my computer. (#16)

Due to the working condition that freelancers work independently and often in social isolation, the final strategy for advancement to the establisher phase is a **membership in groups or teams**. The freelancers form online (with other freelancers) or offline (with people from the personal environment) teams for joint project management. Tasks are distributed in the team and thus it is possible to accept more projects and larger contracts. In addition, online or offline teams distribute expertise in these teams. The freelancers complement each other's skills in the team and take on a wider range of jobs.

We need colleagues or friends, when we are upgrading our sales in terms of time and getting more and more projects. I am also doing that. I also started taking some of my friends... not in [a professional way] but I just having a conversation like that 'I may need you for a project'. So that if I get any chance, if I get more projects, I can count on them. [...] I'm trying to build my team. Slowly, slowly. (#12)

4.1.3 | Becoming famous

To advance from 'Establisher' to 'Celebrity' phase, a **profile badge and regular clients** are necessary to **becoming famous** on the platform. The profile badge helps the freelancers with their career advancement further, as it is also noticed by clients who are new to the platform or do not have a background in the field of activity, as it is directly visible on the profile and is assigned by the DLP. In addition, it is valid across job categories. To get a badge and regular clients, freelancers use three different strategies: they take on an orchestrator role, increase value creation by supporting clients in architectural and design decisions and they become a specialist.

Unlike as in the slave career phase, the freelancers **take the role of an orchestrator** instead of a team member to advance to the celebrity career phase. If the freelancers are already credible and have completed a threshold of jobs, they can become team leaders and hire other freelancers on the DLP or from their offline environment as job orchestrators to distribute work and become even more famous.

I did hire a small team for some projects. [...] So there was this website I need to complete, but I did not have time on my hands. Then I outsourced it, send it to (the team) to complete it and I got it done in time. [...] They are not on the platform, I am the only one on the platform and I give them some money I earn on the project. (#21)

Furthermore, freelancers **increase value creation by supporting clients in architectural and design decisions**. Many clients, especially in the IT field, often do not know what exactly they expect for a project success due to a lack of technical understanding. Therefore, freelancers need to support and advise the client before the project starts in defining requirements and goals in order to satisfy them and thus convince them for further projects. This requires close collaboration and regular feedback loops with clients. After the project, freelancers keep in touch with the clients to stay present for future jobs.

I usually keep in touch with the old clients, not actually with up for contract, but just for fun or just to being around. So, [the client] contacted me for some tasks, and I just gave him some solution architecture for just keep relations with old clients as well so I gave my contact details usually. (#26)

In order to become famous on the platform, freelancers **specialize on the platform**. Whereas in earlier career phases, it was somewhat helpful for advancement not to focus on the skill type, since only the number of jobs and the review quality counted, freelancers specialize in an area of work in order to advance to the highest career phase. This is mainly influenced by the high market transparency and wide range and heterogeneity of clients and jobs on platforms.

I chose this job with this technology and another job with another technology. It was not very optimized because when you are working with different technologies in development you waste time reading documentation. [...] Now my strategy is [to take] only jobs with this technology, it's just a specialization. (#16)

4.2 | Career decline dynamics

In addition to career advancement, there is also the possibility that freelancers decline in the phases for various reasons, caused by the working conditions on platforms. Different situations or dangers lead to the fact that either the career advancement is slowed down or prevented or that the freelancer declines one or more phases in the career. The decline dynamics can be clustered into four dimensions, which are presented in the following.

4.2.1 | Losing touch to the digital labor platform

A **longer platform absence** causes the freelancer to lose profile badges and thus decline by one career phase, because of the algorithmic management in form of the reputation system. During the period of absence, projects cannot be completed, freelancers lose clients and do not generate income. Reasons for an absence are parental leave, vacation, illness, or focusing on a permanent position at a company. After returning to the platform, it is more difficult to win jobs. In any case, the absence should be communicated to clients and the profile should be set to private for the time to minimize the career decline.

I had a few time-related problems in my private life and was no longer able to work, I became a father. [...] I then just started again at 0, not directly at 0, maybe at 20%. You always see how many people have looked at your profile and the scale has really gone down to 0, maybe 1 or 2. Has not been so nice, you had to build it all up again and invest a bit of time. (#18)

In addition, if the freelancer **moves to another country**, there may be a career decline by one phase. After a move, the country of origin changes in the freelancer's profile. Client preferences vary depending on the freelancer's country of origin, and clients also pay attention to the average hourly wage from a country, so the amount of hourly pay may need to be adjusted as a result of a move. In addition, communication and time issues may arise if the client's time zone differs from the freelancer's time zone after a move.

Lastly, over the course of their career, freelancers become more dependent on the platform compared to other platforms. The cost of switching to other platforms increases as freelancers mostly build their profile and career on only one platform over time. Thus, **platform exclusion** becomes a threat as the career progresses since the career would have to be completely restarted in case of platform exclusion. Thus, a platform exclusion leads to a career decline down to the first career phase as a beginner. Ratings and job history are not transferable due to the platform-specific reputation system and cannot be transferred to a new platform. In addition, freelancers no longer have access to their reputation in the case of exclusion. Reasons for exclusion include disregarding platform rules, for example, when communicating with clients outside the platform or making payments outside the platform system. This threat can be mitigated by team mergers on the platform, as the other team members remain on the platform even if a freelancer is excluded.

Freelancing has many risks. [...] Your account may be shut. You can work all night for 4 years and one problem with one client, your account may be suspended. (#30)

4.2.2 | Drawbacks in the job acquisition phase

During job acquisition, there is an **unplanned waste of time and connects for job applications**. Connects are needed for job applications and there are only a limited number available on the platform for freelancers for free. Many of the freelancers have reported 'dummy projects' or 'bot generated projects' which do not really exist and are only

created to increase the platform's attractiveness and pull more freelancers to the platform. When applying for such projects, the connects are wasted, which can lead to a career decline, as the connects are missing accordingly for applying for real jobs.

I think some of the projects are dummy projects [...]. I would say probably 40% of the projects maybe 30% are dummy projects, like they don't really exist. They're just posted there to attract people to come in and look at the projects. No, they don't already exist, if you make a bid, nothing will happen. (#7)

Furthermore, freelancers may **not respond to client requests**. This leads to a career decline especially in the last two career phases where the freelancers receive such requests from the clients, if the invitations from clients are not answered and thus the performance measures of the freelancer deteriorate. The main reason for these developments is the platform reputation system and the algorithmic management.

I have already worked with a client and I was getting three or four invitations a day and if I don't respond to those invitations my profile level goes down, so I made [the profile] to private that I stop receiving invites and I don't have to respond to those things. (#26)

Finally, especially in the IT sector, constant technological change is a key driver of **skill obsolescence**, which can lead to a career decline. If certain skills become obsolete, the freelancer can receive fewer jobs and accordingly has fewer opportunities to gain new experience and skills in projects. Therefore, freelancers need to update and develop old skills in their field of expertise. This is especially challenging because freelancers usually work independently without organizational support that could assist with training and learning. Since obsolescence affects IT professionals in particular, it is essential for IT freelancers to stay up-to-date with their skills. An IT freelancer draws a comparison to other fields:

Being a developer is like being a samurai: 'It's a path, not a finish line'. So because of that, it [be up to date] has nothing to do with freelancing. A freelancer can be a designer, for example, and then you don't need anything, just your fantasy. [...] As a developer [...] one has to check every day what new library versions have come out, what security vulnerabilities have been figured out. As a developer, you have to evolve every day and read the news and look at those feeds all the time, because something happens every hour. (#4)

4.2.3 | Drawbacks during project execution

During the project, problems can occur that ultimately affect the freelancer's reputation and lead to a career decline. This is influenced by the working conditions on platforms that the job allocation and coordination is done by algorithms and a reputation system and that the work is done completely digital. First of all, **team collaboration can go wrong**. If the freelancer acts as an orchestrator, especially in the establisher or celebrity phase, they are responsible for the success and depend on the hired freelancers. Furthermore, communication problems can occur due to the purely digital job completion.

Team means that everyone expects trust and with trust comes disappointment, always. For example, you just give your best client [to the team] and say, 'Please help me with this. But I need it today or tomorrow'. 'Yes I'll do it'. And then the guy says 'I couldn't, I was busy'. And then you have the responsibility for it and you kind of have to explain yourself to your client. (#4)

Moreover, **bad accessibility** during the project can lead to a career decline. The client expects a response from the freelancers at any time, which is often difficult to realize, especially due to time changes or private problems. Especially when problems arise, demanding clients require quick solutions. If these cannot be delivered fast by the freelancers, bad reviews are threatening.

Freelancers need to be active 24/7. So if they are not active, their profile goes down. For example, if I am not working on weekend it will definitely affect my rankings and score. (#10)

4.2.4 | Drawbacks in the project evaluation phase

After the project, clients have an immense position of power, as they significantly influence the reputation of freelancers through their evaluation of projects. Therefore, **bad client evaluations** (negative reviews of projects) can lead to a career decline, as often, even one negative feedback is enough to damage the reputation of freelancers. This means that they will consequently get fewer jobs on the platform in the future, because of the reputation system. Many freelancers have given reasons for negative reviews such as poor internet connection during the project, language barriers, clients expected different results due to misunderstandings or the freelancer was not honest and could not do what he promised in skills to get the job.

If there was bad blood between you and your client and he might leave a negative review... that bombs your success rate or your rating and when that happens, you lose visibility. (#29)

What also leads to a career decline are **projects that have to be cancelled** at an early time, as this has a negative impact on the job success score, which is important in slave and establisher phase. On the one hand, this cancellation can be caused by the freelancers, for example, when clients book the wrong freelancer, when clients are 'scope creeps' and demand more and more from the freelancers without remuneration, which was not previously agreed. On the other hand, clients close projects early when the client can no longer afford the freelancer, for example due to the drop in sales during the Covid pandemic.

We've had the case where clients have booked the wrong gig. Then we had to cancel that and then, of course, our cancellation rate dropped. (#35)

Finally, it often happens that successfully completed **projects are not closed by the client or remain without evaluation**. Both have a negative impact on the image of the freelancer and can lead to a phase decline if the freelancer loses their profile badge due to missing ratings.

Sometimes [the client] forgot to put up the feedback and to close the project. If you have this unclosed list of projects, then if you get a new project, they will see that: 'oh, they are working on so many projects, they won't be able to help us. They won't have time'. (#1)

4.3 | Career exit and lock-in dynamics

The careers of freelancers do not necessarily unfold exclusively on a DLP. Freelancers leave the platform through exits at various career phases. On the one hand, an exit in early career phases can be forced if the freelancer fails and career advancement cannot be achieved. Therefore, the freelancer has to end the career on the DLP. On the other hand, an exit in later career phases can also be positive and used as a stepping stone for the career, which is

why a successful career does not only imply an advancement within the platform. Both types of exits and the influence of the platform working conditions on these exits are presented in the following. Furthermore, in the middle of the freelancer career, a tension between both exit scenarios arises in interaction with the career advancement dynamics, which we define as a lock-in mechanism which is also explained in the subsequent two sections.

4.3.1 | Forced exit

First, the interviews indicate that the freelancer should consider several platforms at the beginning of the career in order to choose the most suitable one and **switch the platform** if the competition is too strong, the compatibility of the platform is not satisfactory, or the job offers do not meet the freelancer's expectations. Therefore, exits due to platform switching mainly occur at the beginning of the platform career. One reason that switching only takes place at the beginning of the career is that there is still little dependence on the platform. Switching costs to other platforms are low, as these only increase when freelancers advance in their careers, build up their profile on one platform over time, receive platform-specific badges, and have built up their image and reputation on one platform. Thus, switching as an exit becomes increasingly difficult as the career progresses, since a new profile would have to be created on the other platform and started again in the beginner phase.

In the beginning, I had other accounts but so far, my profile grew the fastest [on one platform], so I use [this platform], exclusively. (#19)

Furthermore, a forced exit is possible in the first two career phases. When the **costs of building a successful career exceed the benefits**, freelancers leave the platform or even the form of work as a freelancer. In this case, freelancers perceive the time or monetary effort as too high, so that they do not continue their platform career. This is intensified by the working conditions on platforms, as there are high costs and time expenditure and financial instability due to self-employment and high uncertainty.

4.3.2 | Platform lock-in

When freelancers advance in their platform career and gain initial benefits from the platform, they do not necessarily have to exit the platform. If they succeed in earning their first money by completing jobs, this start of advancement (see Section 4.1.1) quickly brings high value and freelancers invest more and more in the platform career in order to advance further in their platform career. In this career phase, freelancers benefit most from the global accessibility to jobs and clients through the DLP. For example, freelancers in the U.S. can work with clients from Asia through the digital connection on the DLP and have a global view of supply and demand in their area of work. Freelancers also benefit from the platform as a third party between them and their clients, and thus enjoy their protection during and after job execution. For example, if a client gives the freelancer a negative review without any reason, the platform can intervene and remove the review from the freelancer profile. Moreover, the DLP as an instance between the freelancers and the clients ensures the payment of completed work.

Things turn out pretty well after you land the first job. [...] After you get the first one then you get a second one, and then you get your third one. Then things become quite easy and after that you may land with bigger projects as well and long-term clients as well. (#26)

The platform offers a time tracker and a chat. You get reports, you get statistics. You can see how often your profile was viewed, how you perform compared to the other freelancers in the same

segment. You can see how much you've earned in total and that's very cool, because you have everything in one platform. And [the platform] also handles the invoices for you. (#24)

However, further advancement dynamics (see Section 4.1.2) pull freelancers more and more into the platform. As a result, the value of the platform for freelancers increases less quickly than the dependency on the platform environment. The result is a mid-career **lock-in mechanism** created by the tensions between the two different exit scenarios in interaction with the dynamics of career advancement (see Figure 1). Platform dependency increases rapidly, especially since the reputation system is platform-specific. As freelancers complete more and more jobs on the DLP, their future job opportunities depend heavily on those completed jobs and their associated ratings. For example, clients of one platform do not see if a freelancer already has many positive reviews on another platform. The ratings cannot be transferred to other platforms.

You need your client base. Everything you did on [the platform], you start from scratch on another platform. That's why I stayed with [the platform]. [...] I can't very well transfer all my ratings to another profile on another platform. All that does not work. (#18)

In addition, many freelancers rely on the DLP as a source of income to make a living, especially since they earn a substantial share of their income on the DLP during this career phase. Moreover, freelancers rely heavily on DLPs as an alternative online labor market when the offline labor market does not offer good job opportunities. Furthermore, freelancers depend on the DLP because it gives them access to their established client network and determines the freelancers' visibility to clients through algorithmic management. For these reasons, freelancers are 'locked in' to the platform.

If [the platform] suddenly decided that all male developers over thirty from Germany would now be downgraded and no longer displayed as highly among clients, then I would have a big problem. To some extent, the dependency is there [...]. It's a softer transition from being an employee than if I were to say directly that I have to go from zero to a hundred clients myself and completely build up a business alone. I can first go to [the platform], get jobs from it, until I have a large enough client base myself that I can do that without [the platform]. (#24).

4.3.3 | Exit as stepping stone

One possible way out of the platform lock-in are further advancement dynamics (see Section 4.1.3) into higher career phases in order to target a positive exit as a stepping stone. In later and advanced career phases, the platform career can even be used as a kind of stepping stone if a new path for the career outside the DLP becomes possible. The more successful and famous freelancers become, the more likely they are to exit the platform. This development is supported by the positive working conditions on platforms in the form of high autonomy and flexibility as well as the numerous development opportunities and global job offers. Freelancers develop a network and client base on the platform over time. By building trust with their clients and often carrying out multiple joint projects on the platform, the role of the platform is less important in later phases than it was at the beginning of the career, and the dependency on the platform decreases. The protection of the platform as a third party within the relationship between client and freelancer is no longer necessary. To save financial costs (as platforms receive a portion of the project volume), freelancers pull clients from the platform and execute projects outside the platform environment. This **interception of clients** can therefore be an exit strategy.

We [the client and the freelancer] started [on the platform]. Then, we became friends, so the trust is there. We can move outside of [the platform]. [...] In [the platform] you have a cut from your earning. Of course, they provide the environment and protection to freelancers [...]. But as the time goes by, when you became comfortable with your customers [...]. You basically go outside of [the platform] or the freelance environment. For example, me and my clients usually deal directly. [...] We didn't pay [the platform]. I have these clients, maybe around 10 of them now. (#7)

Another exit strategy is to **continue the career outside the platform in a permanent position** in a company. The acquired platform expertise and experience increase the freelancer's chances of finding a good job in the offline labor market. Thus, the projects that were successfully completed during the platform career can also be used for the resume in the offline job market.

In addition, **starting their own business** is also an alternative to exiting the platform in advanced career phases. In this case, the skills, experience and client relationships developed during the platform career can be used to take up 'real' self-employment outside a DLP and leave the platform completely. In this case, freelancers often first start their own business in parallel with the platform career and use the platform to acquire clients, and finally leave the platform completely and focus on their own business.

It's a smoother transition from employment [to self-employment] than if I had to go from zero to a hundred clients myself and build up my business completely alone. So I can first go to [the platform], get jobs from it, until I have a client base that's big enough that I can do it without [the platform]. (#24)

Freelancers also have the opportunity to **work with other freelancers they have met on the platform as partners outside the platform**. Thus, for example, a start-up or a new company can be founded. This becomes relevant in the career phase as an establisher or celebrity, when the freelancer comes into contact with other freelancers as a team member or as an orchestrator of teams.

The last option to leave the platform is to **exit with clients as partners**. In the establisher and celebrity career phases, a client network is built up and regular clients are acquired. If, consequently, the relationship between client and freelancer becomes trusting, another option is for the two parties to work together as partners outside the platform and found a company together. Both parties can support each other financially and jointly implement project ideas that would not be feasible on their own.

I also had customers before that became my project partners [...]. To me basically, that's my main goal. I have a lot of project ideas in mind, but I don't have the resources or the money to fund the projects. [...] There are other ways. You can go to a venture capitalist [...]. But I'm never attracted to them. I'm more inclined to work with people that I have worked with before. I mean if the trust is good, confidence is good, synergies are good, maybe you can work on creating bigger projects like making a new company or doing a startup. (#7)

5 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to understand how freelancers' careers develop on DLPs. We examined careers of 33 freelancers and developed a long-term freelancing career model (Figure 1). We contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of DLPs and IT work by (1) highlighting and structuring a long-term freelancing career model and thus important advancement, decline and exit dynamics over time and (2) clarifying IT specifics of working on DLPs. Below, we outline the implications of our findings for theory and practice and discuss limitations and future research.

5.1 | Theoretical contributions

First, we develop and structure a freelancing career model and thus illustrate how the working conditions on DLPs influence the **dynamic career paths of freelancers**. Moreover, we relate the career path dynamics to platform **lock-in effects** and describe how they unfold. Therefore, we develop an alternative understanding of this important phenomenon of DLPs.

Especially our results regarding exit dynamics change the perspective on career advancement only within a DLP. Through this new perspective, freelancers' careers are not limited to the platform. Thus, we make a theoretical contribution to different literature streams. We explain how freelancers move through their careers and how careers evolve over time with the advancement, decline, and exit dynamics. It becomes clear that freelancers' careers do not fit the classic career theories (Super, 1957) nor the idea of boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Kost et al., 2020; Lo Presti et al., 2018). Careers on a DLP should therefore be given special consideration for two reasons.

First, our results illustrate that a platform career does not only consist of continuous phases (Super, 1957), but that freelancers can also experience career declines and that there is not only a steady linear career advancement. The platform working conditions and career mechanisms push freelancers again and again in different directions and keep them to a certain extent in a kind of quicksand, which is always in motion and which freelancers have to follow with appropriate strategies.

Second, we show that the boundaries within these platform careers are multidimensional. On the one hand, technical boundaries are still easy to overcome. Freelancers have new jobs all the time and can also easily switch between different jobs. On the other hand, the platform can be seen as an organizational boundary that cannot be easily overcome. Due to algorithmic management on the platform, reputation systems are crucial for career dynamics (Cram et al., 2020; Möhlmann et al., 2021; Straub et al., 2015). Switching between platforms is made much more difficult by the described platform lock-in effects and a certain dependence of freelancers on the platform. They are prevented from transferring their reviews to other platforms, leading to lock-in effects and high platform switching costs, making them vulnerable to platform exploitation (Ciotti et al., 2021; Farrell & Klemperer, 2007; Kost et al., 2020; Wohlfarth, 2019). We contribute to this line of research and offer an alternative explanation of the dynamics on DLPs by finding that the freelancers value and dependence on the DLP evolve differently, and thus the platform lock-in changes over career advancement (Bellesia et al., 2023; Jarrahi et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Whereas the value of the DLP increases rapidly for freelancers at first, the dependence on the DLP increases faster than its value for freelancers with further career advancement. Freelancers become increasingly dependent on the platform, as neither the reputation and reviews built and earned over time nor the designed profile can be transferred to another platform in case of a platform switch, which would set freelancers back in their career in case of a platform switch. As a result, actual boundary objects such as reviews or platform badges, which can facilitate entry and career advancement in early career phases and help quickly generate value for freelancers, become artifacts that bond freelancers to the platform over time (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Kost et al., 2020; Lo Presti et al., 2018). The role of the platform thus changes over the course of a career from a difficult environment for a career start, to a supportive and protective third party between clients and freelancers, to an environment on which freelancers are very dependent.

Moreover, our results regarding the different exit dynamics over time contribute to turnover literature. Information systems research has studied IT professional turnover, the voluntary leaving of an IT job for another job with another employer, since the beginning of the discipline (Joseph et al., 2007; Maier et al., 2015; Zylka & Fischbach, 2017). We show that turnover on a DLP (exit) differs from traditional turnover because of the described lock-in mechanisms. The classical turnover model of March and Simon (1958), which illustrates the desire to move and the ease of movement as antecedents of turnover intention, needs to be extended by the aspect of platform lock-in. This platform lock-in, as a new temporal perceived organizational factor, increases the desire to move and reduces the ease of movement. The desire to move (from DLP) increases with advancement on career phases as

freelancers become more successful within the platform and can leverage their skills and network, even without the platform as a protection and matching environment. However, it becomes increasingly difficult to leave the platform as more reputation is built on the platform. Due to the high platform dependency and the difficult transferability of reputation to other platforms, switching to another DLP means a complete restart as compared to switching employers in the offline labor market.

In summary, we propose a u-shaped relationship between career phases and platform exit probability that should be investigated in future quantitative research. The barrier to exit the platform career is low in early career phases. Most importantly, failure is a major reason to leave the platform. As freelancers advance in their careers, the value of the DLP quickly rises when initial income can be generated from acquired jobs. Freelancers build their reputation, relationships and expertise on the platform and invest time and money to build their career (Ciotti et al., 2021; Farrell & Klemperer, 2007; Wohlfarth, 2019). The platform receives a share of the revenue from each job (Parker & van Alstyne, 2005; Rochet & Tirole, 2003). However, as freelancers advance in higher career phases, their dependency on the DLP increases faster than the value. They want to give less money to the platform because they have established themselves in the platform market. The result is a platform lock-in. A way out is further career advancement, such that the DLP can be used as a kind of stepping stone for further career advancement independent of the DLP. Consequently, the platform lock-in decreases again in high career phases. Thus, our results show that the digital platform can be an inhibitor or facilitator for freelancers' dynamic career development, depending on the career phase.

Furthermore, one unique aspect regarding freelancer career paths is algorithmic management on DLPs. We have highlighted several critical implications of these algorithms in our findings. On the one hand, the potential misuse of the algorithms exists when freelancers use fake reviews to deceive clients. On the other hand, freelancers can be deceived when 'dummy projects' or 'bot generated projects' that do not really exist lead to wasted freelancer job application efforts. With these new insights, we contribute to research on algorithmic management that has already addressed power asymmetries (Kinder et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019) or freelancers' heavy reliance on a good reputation on the DLP, which makes generating fake reviews necessary first to cheat the algorithm (Cram et al., 2020; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Möhlmann et al., 2021; Tóth et al., 2022). Thus, our results enable an even more comprehensive understanding of the role of algorithms with respect to the dynamics on DLPs. Hence, we provide the starting point of developing appropriate measures to mitigate the negative effects of algorithmic management on digital platforms. To improve algorithms, we propose to complement the importance of reputation on DLPs with other indicators to make the evaluation basis of freelancers fairer. For example, completed tests or skill certificates should be given more weight regarding algorithmic management. Furthermore, clients and projects should be additionally verified by platform owners to prevent bot-generated projects and protect freelancers.

Second, we contribute to the IT literature by highlighting **specifics of IT work on DLPs**. Thereby, the analysis of career dynamics has highlighted two distinctive features: (i) skill obsolescence on DLPs and (ii) team collaboration of freelancers on DLPs. Therefore, we highlight the complexity of a new IT-specific career alternative and explore online IT freelancing as a new way to work in IT (Joseph et al., 2012).

On the one hand, we contribute to the literature that addresses skill obsolescence as a key challenge for IT professionals in the offline labor market (Ang & Slaughter, 2000; Fu, 2011; Rong & Grover, 2009; Tsai et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2012). This paper illustrates that on DLPs, the importance of skill obsolescence also plays a possibly even more significant role in career advancement and decline and changes over time. In early career phases, obsolescence can be used to position on the DLP to advance quickly due to high competition. On DLPs, freelancers gain high visibility into the skills needed in the global platform market. Skill requirements become more transparent than in offline labor markets as all job postings can be viewed online on the platform. Therefore, the phenomenon of skill obsolescence can be used for career advancement. However, in later career phases, skill obsolescence becomes a challenge because there are always new and up-to-date requirements that freelancers have to meet in order to remain specialists and not decline to lower career phases again. Thus, we add to the research on platform work the importance of the IT-specific problem of skill obsolescence (Claussen et al., 2018; Popiel, 2017; Sison & Lavilles, 2018).

On the other hand, we demonstrated that the importance of team collaboration plays a role in career advancement and career exit on DLPs and changes over time. In early career phases, freelancers can take on more jobs especially as part of a team, which can help them in career advancement. The variety of tasks and execution of large projects is difficult to organize alone, especially early in a career phase. That's why we highlight the importance of teamwork, which can boost IT freelancers' careers and help them advance. In later career phases, freelancers then tend to take on the role of an orchestrator and lead or manage freelancer teams to become even more famous and handle the wide range of jobs. In summary, team building is not actually common on DLPs, or is more difficult to address due to the purely digital and mostly anonymous interactions between platform participants. However, the IT-specific work characteristics require teamwork or some degree of collaboration. Thus, we contribute to research investigating the mechanisms of cooperation and coordination between IT teams (Kudaravalli et al., 2017; Levina, 2005; Majchrzak et al., 2005).

5.2 | Practical contributions

Some contributions to practice can also be derived from the results of this study for freelancers (job seekers), clients (job posters), and the platform owner.

It becomes clear that freelancers must react to the defined advancement and decline dynamics within their careers in order to be successful. For example, they should respond to skill obsolescence or use different platform features to advance in their career. Thus, different actions are required at different career phases. It should be added at this point that workers sometimes need to use actions that may be difficult and partly not allowed by the current state of the platforms, as DLPs are still very precarious and challenging for workers and difficult circumstances arise. Furthermore, the developed freelancing career model can provide valuable information that freelancers should understand for their long-term career development. Thus, platform work can be an attractive alternative to careers in the offline labor market. The various possibilities and freedom of task completion, the speed and implementation of career development, as well as the promising possibilities of platform exit in advanced career phases illustrate this attractiveness of platform careers.

For clients on DLPs, our results and the developed career model can also be helpful. It especially shows the difficult platform start of freelancers and can motivate clients to also give new freelancers a chance. In addition, we have clarified the importance of feedback and reviews for the career on platforms, which encourages clients to give fair assessments. In addition, we present DLPs and the prevailing dynamics in detail, which can alleviate clients' uncertainties and make offering valuable jobs more likely. Lastly, through our findings, we shed light on many problems in the relationship between freelancer and client from both sides, which can settle potential conflicts between both parties and lead to better business collaborations.

The results of our study may also be relevant for DLP owners. In order to improve their platforms and especially to better adapt them to the careers of freelancers, platform owners should understand the developed dynamics and career phases. To increase the attractiveness of the platforms and thus generate more value, appropriate strategies can be developed to address the IT-specific problems of IT freelancers as complementors on the platforms. Furthermore, platform owners may be able to prevent freelancers from leaving their platform or migrating to competing platforms if they can understand and quantify the motivations for their exits. Especially in the case of forced exits, platform owners could support freelancers early in their careers to retain potentially valuable workers on their platform.

5.3 | Limitations and future research

We acknowledge several limitations of this study. Given the exploratory nature of this study (Urquhart, 2013) and the interest in the careers of freelancers, this research represents a first step toward understanding the career

dynamics of freelancers on DLPs. However, our analysis was based on 33 exploratory interviews with IT freelancers and 2 with clients, which limits the generalizability of our findings. Therefore, for example, a large-scale survey with freelancers or, as a follow-up, with platform clients could be conducted in the future to test the generalizability of our career model. Future research should also examine the career model we developed for freelancers in other contexts and settings. Although we studied very different freelancers in terms of experience, career phase, and background, analyzing workers on other platform types, such as competition-based platforms (Top-coder) or micro-labor platforms (MechanicalTurk), could provide additional insights into how freelancing careers evolve. Moreover, a longitudinal study and observation of different freelancers could provide even more insight into the career dynamics. Hence, our proposed u-shaped relationship between career phases and platform exit probability could be explored in future quantitative studies. Furthermore, we hypothesize that career phases and dynamics may differ across individuals. We therefore call for further empirical research on how other aspects might additionally influence the careers of online freelancers (such as prior education, age, or individual motivation) and whether our career model is applicable in other contexts beyond IT (such as design or translation tasks). Future research could also shed more light on individual aspects of our career model, such as exit scenarios. Interviewing former freelancers who have already successfully mastered an exit could reveal further valuable insights into the career dynamics. Finally, it would also be worth exploring whether there are different paths and types of freelancers within the career model we have developed, who may go through different sub-phases of the four main phases we have identified within their careers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors.

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How to cite this article: Gussek, L., & Wiesche, M. (2024). Understanding the careers of freelancers on digital labor platforms: The case of IT work. *Information Systems Journal*, 34(5), 1664–1702. <https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12509>

APPENDIX A

A.1 Detailed presentation of the data structure

Data (interview quotes)	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'And I started to apply for jobs at a very low price and I always wrote honestly that actually I have some experience, but I have to learn a lot but I feel that I'm able to complete the job. And I can do it at a very low price because it's a learning process for me'.	Circumvent non-existing reviews	Start the advancement	Advancement dynamics
'So it's kinda hard for me to get new projects... first projects, but then I got to know the Upwork readiness test. It's kind of a test which helps you to have a badge actually. So this badge really help new freelancers, to show that they are really good potential freelancers, obviously, they have not any project'.			
'Yeah, I also wanted to mention that I have some colleagues that I work with on Upwork. So, I have a senior electrical engineer to me, he's retired, he lives in Brazil, and you know he's the one I mentioned before, who really helped me because he can come in and teach me so much of his prior knowledge'.	Leveraging personal network		
'So I actually started on Upwork and then I was having people who are my friends, so they are on the same team as well. I taught them how to get the projects and etcetera and help them to be successful with first two projects'.			
'What I did is like, I had implemented the solution in my daily job so what I did is I took the solution, half of it and submitted it in the proposal. So I think they got interested and I got the ping back so that's the trick I used actually I just gave the half solution'.	Get first job, whatever it takes		
'Because at that level is... it's almost like a piranha tank of people making new accounts and just scheming some money out of the platform or other...other very bad experiences that my clients have shared you know, trying to get a cheap job done. And that's where you kind of have to shoot in the beginning because you're an unknown quantity. I worked for \$25 an hour, I think. My first job was for \$10, and I did someone's homework, which I'm not proud to admit'.			
'I always put a little more into the work than the client wanted. Then it's a little over dosed and then you have a little buffer if	Image management	Getting credible	

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...now I can do more than 30 learning management systems and all the rest of the authoring tools that are available out there. So definitely it was a really huge career development and a skill development for me'.

And actually, my strongest skill, is not web development or full stack. It's about security. So, actually I'm not working on what I'm expert at, you know. Yeah, it's like just starting and keep going, you know. Like job after job. Probably I can get specialized this

(Continues)

Data (interview quotes)	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
way, just start in like life, you know. Like a lot of people start working as...in the in the base of the pyramid and start like looking. "Oh, this I'm good, this is not." and actually you just start looking for things you can do very quick and you can get the most money of that. "So what you can do, so I sent more offers. Some I think I just got out of luck, because it wasn't anything complicated. And what really helped me is that, is that I work with cloud services, and for cloud services there are not so many freelancers who really want to work for very little money". "You need to apply to as much as possible jobs on Upwork, but as jobs don't stand, when somebody posts a job, you need to be on the platform. So when the job just come in, be among the first persons that apply on it. So like that you have many more chance to be contacted". "When I am sleeping, they [the team] are awake so they can manage that and it really helps a lot. So it is like under the same umbrella there are multiple people and if one is available, he is taking over and he is doing the job". "Most time when you work with the team, you break down complex issues that could be resolved by different people. And because we are also sharing ideas from others, it makes the whole work easier for you. Sometimes you don't have to spend a lot of hours trying to figure out how to go about things when you have a good team you're working with, you could just say, I'm struggling with this, how could I go about it? And somebody say, can you try this? [...] So working with a team for me has more advantages". "I'm just trying to develop my business and start a company because of this I have now already taken 3 freelancers on board with whom I can also work in a team on the project, especially if the project is somewhat more extensive. That would be a bit beyond the scope for a single person at least according to the opinion of the clients". "I have an assistant actually who comes in. I just hired him, I had two assistants last year over the course of the year, one during the winter and one during summer. And yeah, I tend to hire an in-person assistant to work with me in my lab and I also pay them through Upwork. They make an Upwork profile, and I tell them "You're an independent contractor, congratulations"." "Yeah, as I said earlier you have to study the profile of the employer, to understand how big the company is, what are they doing. You should read their job post very well. After that you should search on the internet about the employer and try to study everything you can. Not even on the job, also you have to dig about the organization itself, to understand the full picture. That will help you a lot to understand what they need exactly from the job. Sometimes the person who is writing the job post is not a very technical person, that's your... I think that's your mission to discover what actually they need, not what have they written only". "In fact, I always try to... so for me it's a no-go to simply work through things as they are written and then at some point deliver a product without communication. So I like to challenge, that is, if, for example, the app developers have made suggestions on how they want to implement things, I also say on the basis of my experience that I have just said is it really the most useful or can we not here and here and that and that so that is a bit better, more effective. The clients now also outside of teams, if I's just direct clients I always try to bring my know-how, my experience with bring in if I see somewhere stumbling block, if I see somewhere okay, that could not be the best solution that I think of at least then I always try to be active there also advisory". "You should show commitment and deliver a product that satisfies the customer and not wipe the penny on a quick wave, but approach it properly and professionally". "You have to be very good at what you want to do. If you are only good, there is a lot of competition that can do it better".	Quickly complete many projects Membership in groups or teams	Becoming famous	Increase value creation by supporting clients in architectural & design decisions Be a specialist

Data (interview quotes)	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'I had a break at Upwork, a few months. I was pregnant and I wasn't feeling so great, so I took a break from Upwork. And after that, when I started again, well, when you have a break, it's a bit difficult to start again. And then I also looked on other platforms and I was looking for projects on Upwork at the same time'. 'Well, maybe one because it's really like up to date, now because I'm expecting my third child and I just wanted to know from upwork that, how can I go on maternity leave. You know, without losing any reputation'. 'I moved to Germany in 2019, yes in December 2019. And I would say my freelancing business is going a bit worse here, because I had to change my address on Upwork and my hourly rate. And honestly to say I had more offers, so more job offers when I was in Ukraine. I'm not sure why, actually I analyzed it, and probably the clients, they want to work more with Eastern Europeans, with Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Because actually quality and cost they are best balanced compared for example with European freelancers, they want more money but work quality is mostly not as high as with Eastern Europeans'. 'Normally I need to stay up late, because I was getting jobs in the nighttime, because most of the community stays in Canada and US. That is something which was affecting me'. '... randomness of the platform, if one is once banned or blocked. Then it is all gone from one day to the next. It was once blocked one day and then released again when a warning was checked. [...] At this point, it would be tragic if our profile was deleted. Ideally, at some point, 80% could be generated organically via our website or our company and 20% maybe via platforms, perhaps with a little diversification on 1–2 platforms, because you never know what will happen'. 'I worked for a company which I decided to work with outside of Upwork and I got scammed for three months without pay with promises of better future of the company and I was not the only one. We were like 10 or 15 people. The scam was something that set me back in my career. Me agreeing to work outside of the platform and then getting scammed. That was the main issue'. 'I stopped dealing with unverified clients. If it's related to a company or a team, I request the info about the company. If I find their... them unconvincible, so I just ignore them'. 'I think some of the projects, there are dummy projects right, they're just there. I don't have evidence right, but I think that some, I would say probably 40% of the projects maybe 30% are dummy projects like they don't really exist they're just posted there just to attract people to come in and look at the projects right. If you make a bid, nothing will happen right'. 'Because there are these millions of freelancers on the platform, and if you should not reply on the time, then the job just comes in 15 minutes and goes by'. 'You need to apply to as much as possible jobs on Upwork, but as jobs don't stand, when somebody posts a job, you need to be on the platform. So when the job just come in, be among the first persons that apply on it. So like that you have many more chances to be contacted'. 'You realize there that you'll be left behind relatively quickly if you don't develop further, and you'll always be stuck with some small, quotation marks, booger jobs, and I think that's what most people don't want in the long term'. 'So, at first, I focused more on system programming like doing back-end applications or tools utilities, and C or C++ and some scripting and then that was for the first maybe three, five years and then I realized that the trend has changed. The main trend that I see is there's a spike in security projects, because as you know securities is a big thing, right. There is that and then there's also demand on the networking. And the good thing is that's within the area of my expertise use a build design and create networking appliance, and so I always deal with networking and security like almost daily basis, so I focused more on my career in networking security, so I took certifications I had two certifications. One from network security plus, I'm not sure if you're aware of that organization, it was 30 plus I also had certification from the SEC. So, the importance of certifications because	Longer platform absence Move to another country Platform exclusion Unplanned waste of time for applications Not responding to client requests Skill obsolescence	Losing touch to the digital labor platform Drawbacks in the job acquisition phase	Decline dynamics

(Continues)

Data (interview quotes)	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
clients are inclined to give projects to freelancers who are certified right in these particular areas, especially when it comes to security and networking. So, I focus on networking and security and the last three years. First was more interesting programming and the middle more on security and networking and the last three years, I kind of also changed my career trajectory, so I focus more on devops so it's more on deploying services in the cloud and managing the life cycle of a project or a software. [...] I had to invest and learn new skills'.			
'I've had a negative experience in that regard too I'll say, where somebody called my work a tire fire and you know, tried to basically torpedo me out of the project, because they wanted to take full rein. And you know, they saw dollars and that was... so you have to watch out for that when you're working with other freelancers and building your team, you want people who are goal minded and work minded and not sort of greedy or petty'.	Team collaboration goes wrong	Drawbacks during project execution	
'I've often been part of teams that were built up through Upwork and the language barrier can be a real hindrance and critical to the success of the project, because you have to make fewer extra rounds for any adjustments and whatever else because you misunderstand each other four or five times. "			
'Some people feel furious: "Why didn't you answer me, why?" But I usually reply: "I had some family problems." Things like that. Depends on the type of person. If he's a good guy, he will pity you. Some clients just make a bad evaluation for you. If you are late replying to them'.	Bad accessibility		
'They need to have time routines, sleeping timing, sleeping routines...'			
'I got at the beginning...well one very angry client. I tried to do my best and unfortunately at the end he declined the work. I respect the client perspective. And it was... it was actually it was not... a large obstacles but he refused to continue and I respect his decision. And they moved to provide the best they can do for all other clients which, thanks to God, helped me to overcome this situation. So, the feedback...that helped a lot'.	Bad client evaluation (review)	Drawbacks in the job evaluation phase	
'A bad review will be like the hell for a freelancer because there is no contract, and the freelancer depends on reputation'.			
'I actually did have one project outside of Upwork, that had to come to a halt because of COVID. It just wasn't the time and they just put a stop to it, so that they could... you know take it back up when things were better. That's about it'.	Projects have to be cancelled by the freelancer		
'The best strategy is to have a very strong defined clear proposal for each job because there are always clients who always change the requirements, you know. It's like okay let's start the contract and I want these, these, these in this proposal, let's start it, okay after that requirement are developed the client see the product and say "Oh, I want this, I want this, I want this." and sometimes some clients want like that I do it for free. And that's not right. So, the best strategy is to be very clear before the proposal you know'.	Clients cancel projects		
'Somebody will post a job and say, do this. And when you start working, you finish doing the work and he will end the contract and pay nothing. So, we are discovered that has started happening. So they need to secure more the website and these clients, I don't know how they are, they have been accepted on Upwork, but as a freelancer, there are verifications and all those, but they don't do all that for customers. So anybody can just register and that's all. So they need to start also verifying the clients'.			
'He wanted it on time and I was trying to let him know I needed some time to finish all this and stuff like that. I couldn't finish the rest. He just had to cancel the contract. So he was not really patient with me in that aspect. He was not really patient'.			
'Most people see my profile, they see my work history, job completed successfully, no feedback given. "Oh, I wonder why?". And they'll see a feedback and then... the five stars... "Oh, he got three and a half on this one" and but they're very accommodating and I can see that it ended amenable. I tend... I've only had one contract end badly. And I took the feedback to heart, it's hard because I do try to help people be very successful. And I am a bit of a self-sacrificing person in that regard, so I do feel like...it's a personal failure when I don't... my clients don't succeed'.	Projects are not closed or not evaluated		

Data (interview quotes)	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'If you have multiple projects where they haven't given you feedback or haven't given you a review, that's bad for your rating and there are a lot of clients who forget about that or don't do that. They don't have time to do it. And I didn't know that in the beginning. And I didn't ask for it, for example, yeah'.			
'I didn't get any projects on Freelancer.com so I just dropped that one. I just joined Upwork. [...] I just forgot everything of my every experience with the Freelancer.com. I just thought this is a new platform I shouldn't be worried about my last one let's just go and try my best and let's see what happens'. 'I did try Freelancer and Fiverr and there was another one. Small gigs or something like that. I can't recall right now but its like micro gigs is what its called. But none of them convinced me. Actually Freelancer to me is just a rip off for a platform. Fiverr is more of a thing for projects that I can do this for you, I can do that for you. It never convinced me. It's like a very specific thing and the other one for micro gigs you need to get like an SMS and I never got it in order to get authorized. So I fell back into Upwork'.	Platform switching	Forced exit	Exit dynamics
'The difficulty in getting the job is the competition, both in terms of skills as well as cost. What I do plan to do is fine-tune my profile so that my skill set is more relevant to the jobs that I will be applying for. As well as reduce the costs that... the amount of money that I'll be requesting in the proposal to see whether that will increase... lead to actual positive responses. If that doesn't work I may consider Upwork to not be worth the effort'.	Exit after cost-benefit analysis		
'I didn't have, let us say... luck on Fiverr. I didn't have maybe enough some promotion or something I did not know. I didn't even actually pay too much attention they're'.			
'Once we referred to our website and said that they could also contact us through it. Thereupon we got a warning directly. [...] Some clients who were really satisfied with us approached us outside of Fiverr at some point, googled us and wrote to us directly by email. And there are now also 2-3 business relationships developed, which only run outside of Fiverr. They have then sought the way out the platform themselves'.	Interceptions of clients	Exit as stepping stone	
'I only work on Upwork. But obviously I have other clients, local clients from word of mouth. If they were able to find me on the platform then they will find me... but obviously if they saw my profile on Upwork and then they google my name and they come directly to my website and then they email me and ask me... then that's a different story because they didn't approach to the platform right. But if they approach through Upwork then I will go through that. But if they approach directly, through email then I will go directly. Because in that case, you found me also through Upwork yes, but then you google my name and then my name appears then it makes sense'.	Exit into permanent employment		
'Upwork is a big platform where you can obviously gain a lot of money with it but its never as much as when you leave the platform with the knowledge you gained [...]. Its a big knowledge giver. I think people should work on sites like Upwork just to get experience but not for a lifetime, just for long term means getting knowledge. Its just a place to grow, finally you should have a comfortable life, comfortable income and comfortable thinking'.			
'You will receive some sort of knowhow on Upwork. [...] So if you learn something new it increase your revenues. Like the more item in your CV the more value you have or will have'.	Exit into an own business alone		
'I then studied at some point and thought it was very cool and actually became very fond of the IT field for me, that is, software development and everything that has to do with data in any form, long before I graduated, which is why I already started my own business to some extent during my studies. At that time not yet via Upwork, but via various other German platforms where there were mini-jobs and jobs to be done as a student. Yes, and after graduation I joined a relatively large German online comparison company as a software developer. I have developed a bit there and then at some point I said that for me an employment relationship is not what I want in the long term and have therefore started to found. First as a freelancer and now I want to build up a business piece by piece with a company and all the trimmings'.			

Data (interview quotes)	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'I invest the time I spend on Upwork now in my own business [...]. Now I already have a few websites that I develop for myself as a business'.			
'It's like an exit strategy because I know five freelancers, they can do their job very good, so, I think it's very good to make a company outside of Upwork and provide the services'.	Exit into an own business with freelancers as partners		
'As I already have lots of experience in SAP, I have lots of friends and the same sort of technical skill people I've known them from the last five years, six years or something. So, what we did is we group together, and we call that the nine degrees. So that is what our group called, and, in this group, we have different sort of technologies, different people, so we are trying to build lots of projects irrelevant of technologies and get the projects and get that particular activity done'.			
'I have customers that I met really, they came to the Philippines, we drank beer, shared in stories, it's kind of good right. So that doesn't happen if you're just restricted in a type of environment, so I also have customers before that became my project partners, so we started a startup or company'.	Exit into an own business with clients as partners		
'I have a few contacts from the platform itself because they contacted me to hire me remotely. Not to work on the platform anymore, so to get out of the platform and we continued our job. So, I took the... let's say I took the contact from the platform, and they continued in... in another way so... It depends how you use it always, it's not said that they have to do something. It's just how you use it, the platform, it depends how you use it and what benefits to you'.			

A.2 | Example for the abductive reasoning

We derived the mechanisms between career phases identified in the final step of the data analysis from the empirical data and compared them to the existing literature (Gioia et al., 2013). Thus, we use an abductive research strategy based on existing theory and informed by the existing literature (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The initial understanding of careers from the literature provided a loose framework (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2) and allowed space for emerging insights from our empirical data. The abductive approach starts from, but is not constrained by, prior theoretical understanding (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), leading to theory development (Gioia et al., 2013).

An example of an identified mechanism between career phases is the ‘lock-in’, which results from the tension between forced exit at the beginning of a career and exit as a stepping stone at the end of a freelancer career. Within the aggregated dimension ‘exit dynamics’ which is divided into the two 2nd order themes ‘forced exit’ and ‘exit as stepping stone’ in the career model, we were able to derive the mechanism of lock-in by comparing it with the literature on career phases 3 and 4 in contrast to the literature on career phases 1 and 2. Thus, we combined existing knowledge on career phases from the literature with empirics to obtain new insights.

We started with knowledge from the literature about the first two freelancing career phases:

Starting from this, we drew on our empirical data and identified possible exit scenarios that we could first relate to career start by assigning freelancers to one of the career phases identified from the literature. Examples are:

Quote of a freelancer in career phase 1.

The difficulty in getting the job is the **competition**, both in terms of skills as well as cost. What I do plan to do is fine-tune my profile so that my skill set is more relevant to the jobs that I will be applying for. As well as reduce the costs that... the amount of money that i'll be requesting in the proposal to see whether that will increase... lead to actual positive responses. If that doesn't work, I may consider Upwork to **not be worth the effort**.

Quote of a freelancer in career phase 2

I **didn't get any projects** on Freelancer.com so I just **dropped that one**. I just joined Upwork. [...] I just forgot everything of my every experience with the Freelancer.com. I just thought this is a new platform I shouldn't be worried about my last one let's just go and try my best and let's see what happens.

Phase	Our label	Phase characteristic	Illustrative references
1	Beginner	Difficult platform start with a lot of competition	Blaising and Dabbish (2022), Claussen et al. (2018), Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022), and Strunk et al. (2022)
		No reputation on the platform yet	Rahman (2021), Stanton and Thomas (2016), Tóth et al. (2022)
		Many unsuccessful applications for jobs	Frenzel-Piasentin et al., 2022, Tóth et al., 2022
2	Slave	Reputation must be built	Ashford et al. (2018), Blaising et al. (2021), and Claussen et al. (2018)
		Only a small price can be charged for the work	Graham et al. (2017), Hu and Fu (2021), Idowu and Elbanna (2022), and Tóth et al. (2022)
		The profile on the platform must contain a lot of information	Holthaus and Stock (2018), Ludwig et al. (2022), Sison and Lavilles (2018)

Phase	Our label	Phase characteristic	Illustrative references
3	Establisher	a good rating must be developed and maintained	Alqazlan et al. (2022), Durward et al. (2016b), and Rahman (2021)
		the profile is now used and the client relationships must be established	Blaising et al. (2021), Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022), and Kost et al. (2020)
		The price for the work can be raised	Bellesia et al. (2019), Bihary et al. (2021), Idowu and Elbanna (2022), and Ke and Zhu (2021)
4	Celebrity	Trust between clients and workers is given and a network can be built up	Bellesia et al. (2019), Gu and Zhu (2021), Gussek and Wiesche (2023), and Lo Presti et al. (2018)
		Competition is no longer as strong as it was in the beginning	Frenzel-Piasentin et al. (2022), Idowu and Elbanna (2022), and Rahman (2021)

For example, the aspects identified from the literature of high competition and difficulty in getting projects at the beginning of the career could thus be linked to possible forced exit reasons.

We then observed a tension in the data on freelancers in later career phases and compared this again with existing knowledge from the literature on later career phases.

Examples from the empirical data are:

Quote of a freelancer in career phase 3

Upwork is a big platform where you can obviously **gain a lot of money with it** but its **never as much as when you leave the platform** with the knowledge you gained [...]. Its a big knowledge giver. I think people should work on sites like Upwork just to get experience but not for a lifetime, just for long term means getting knowledge. Its just a place to grow, finally you should have a comfortable life, comfortable income and comfortable thinking.

Quote of a freelancer in career phase 4

Once we referred to our website and said that they could also contact us through it. Thereupon we got a warning directly. [...] Some clients who were really satisfied with us approached us outside of Fiverr at some point, googled us and wrote to us directly by email. And there are now also 2-3 **business relationships developed**, which only run outside of Fiverr. They have then sought the **way out the platform** themselves.

For example, we were able to link the aspects of possible price increases and networking with clients in later career phases identified from the literature with possible exit reasons as stepping stones.

Thus, we combined the literature on career phases with the empirical data on the different exit scenarios to the tension in the middle of a freelancer career. We called this resulting mechanism ‘lock-in’, because it describes the situation of being locked into the platform when a forced exit is overcome, but an exit as a stepping stone is not yet possible. Finally, we also integrated this lock-in mechanism into our career model in the middle between the two exit possibilities.