

Who Hires Freelancers? Mapping Global Demand in the Digital Economy

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Abstract

The unprecedented expansion of online labour platforms in previous decade has transformed global labour markets, creating new opportunities for cross-border outsourcing and opened new channels for the integration of the workforce from around the world. This paper investigates the demand for freelancing services by analysing job postings collected from Upwork. The study examines key features of the demand for freelance services, based on more than 40,000 public job postings from the companies. Those features refer to the geographical distribution of demand, job characteristics, remuneration models, experience levels required from the companies, and the professions and skills most frequently requested. The preliminary findings reveal that North America represents the main market on the demand side, while Europe plays stronger demand than Asia. Further insights reveal that the most freelance jobs are short-term, part-time engagements, highlighting the entrepreneurial nature of digital work. There are, additionally, obvious differences in demand patterns in pricing models, remuneration, and sectoral composition. Regarding the pricing and remuneration strategies, differences emerge among Asian and employers coming from the other parts of the world, since the first offer more frequently competitive fixed-price contracts. Moreover, European employers generally pay higher hourly rates in several knowledge-intensive occupations. Regarding the sectoral composition, software development, creative and multimedia services, and sales and marketing account for the majority of job postings, while professional services command the highest hourly remuneration. These findings provide valuable insights for freelancers, universities, and policymakers seeking to align skills development with evolving labour market demand in the global digital economy.

Keywords: Platform Work; Online labour platforms; Upwork; Gig economy; Freelance occupations

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