

# Social network participation and employability among freelancers

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# 1 | INTRODUCTION

Recent economic and organizational changes have fostered an increasing diversification of the workforce and call for a reconsideration of the notion 'careers'. The traditional career path, characterized by long term employment with a single employer, is no longer the norm, a trend which is reflected, amongst others, in a growing proportion of freelancers or 'independent professionals'. These changes create new challenges for the sustainability of careers of all workers. The promise for employment security has been replaced by the notion of employability. Employability can be seen as the key factor for workers who need to protect their added value in the modern career era that is characterized by fast changing labour market developments, demographic changes, new production concepts, new technology, and increased commercialization, to name just a few (Presti, Pluviano & Briscoe, 2016). Yet, whilst most research on employability has focussed on traditional employees, employability as a topic has not received much attention when it comes to freelancers. This is an important omission as freelancers need to deal with fewer formal rights and greater uncertainty regarding their professional future, and are typically held individually responsible for finding sources of work and remaining employable (Presti, Pluviano & Briscoe, 2016). Differently stated, freelancers have to perform various critical actions in order to survive and succeed in the modern economy, both in short- and long-term.

Participating in social networks can be an important means for sustaining and promoting their employability. Building strong relations with client organizations and putting substantial effort into developing and maintaining strong professional networks with other freelancers, thus developing their own professionalism, is fundamental for freelancers to buffer against the risks of being on their own (van den Born & van Witteloostuijn, 2013).

As we discussed in the first research report on this topic (Stuer, De Vos & Laurijssen, 2018), almost every organisation today works with one or more freelancers, yet few of them have developed a formal approach regarding why, when and how to work with externals. In the second report, we further elaborated upon the organisational approach towards engaging external talent, inspired by Peter Cappelli's thinking about how to create and realize a 'talent on demand' strategy (2008). This third paper examines social network participation among freelancers and the social support needs that they are experiencing. Moreover, this report pays attention how freelancers experience their career (with specific focus on self-determination theory), how they see their future career planning and their employability.



## 2 | ABOUT THIS STUDY

The findings reported in this paper are part of a large-scale research project exploring both the employer and individual perspective upon flexible talent within five European countries. It fits within the research agenda set by SD Worx and Antwerp Management School for the SD Worx Chair on “Next Generation Work: Creating Sustainable Careers”. Since 2011, as part of this chair research is being conducted on the changing career context, and what this implies for organizations and for the workforce. Through yearly surveys and qualitative studies we keep track of the people challenges the VUCA context brings along, the changing career and talent policies within organizations in response to these challenges, and the ways in which individuals are dealing with their careers.

In March 2018, we surveyed (1) a representative sample of 1,074 employers and (2) a representative sample of 1,874 independent workers in the following five countries: Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Potential respondents were contacted using an online panel, with sampling based on size and industry for the employer survey and age and gender for the independent professional survey.

In the current paper we report data from the freelancer survey.

# 3 | RESULTS

The independent workers survey contained questions about their reasons for opting for an independent career, the type of work they are doing, their engagement and career satisfaction and their view upon their current and future employability. Results of this research project will be discussed in detail in this section.

## 3.1 Working as a freelancer

Employees' careers unfold within the context of organizations in which tasks and assignments are guaranteed by their employer. In contrast, freelancers are independent from an employer and thus even more responsible for the continuity of their career and the organization of their work. Freelancers are responsible for the planning and execution of short term and long term client assignments (figure 1). About half of the participants of our survey works with client assignments (47.7%). From this group, the large majority has multiple assignments with different clients (76.6%), whilst a smaller group of freelancers executes a long term assignment for one client (23.4%).

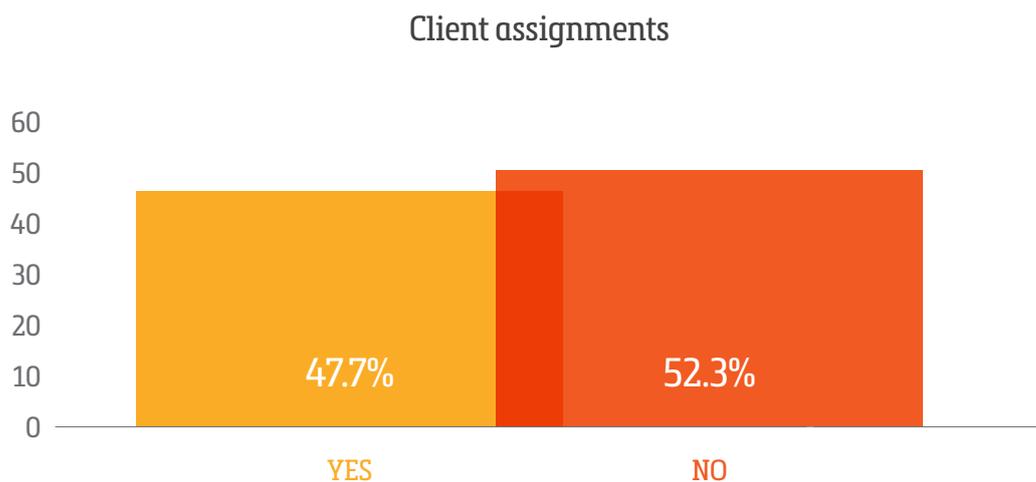


fig. 1

The last decennia we can see changes in the locations where people work, and a growing flexibility in work location, and this is particularly the case for freelancers. Workplaces can range from a home office to a large office building. The importance of flexibility and the development of new communication technologies has also led to the development of virtual workplaces that are not located in physical space. The majority of the respondents in our sample indicates that they mainly work at home (47%), whilst a substantially smaller number of freelancers works at the location of the customer (26.7%) or in a different office building (19.5%). Only a small group of respondents mentions that they often work in a co-working space (figure 2).

## Workplace

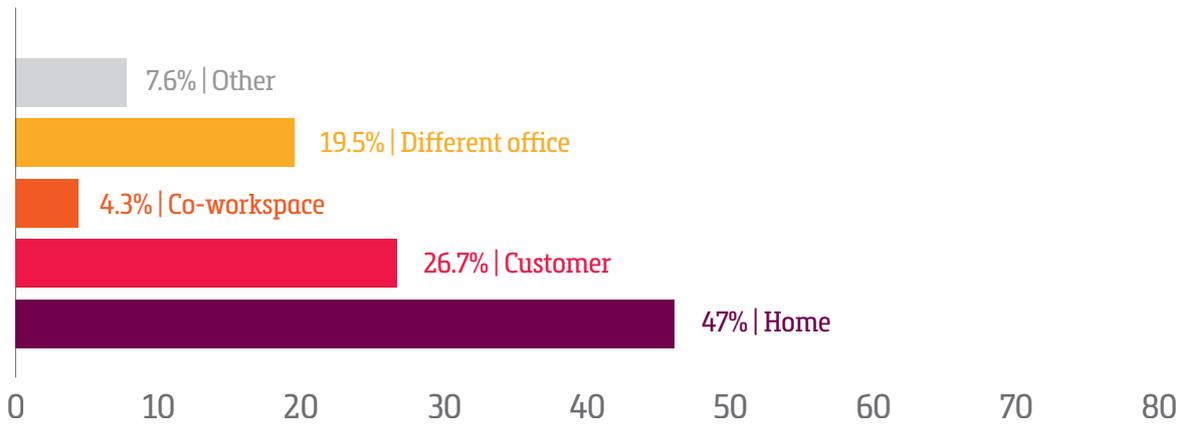


fig. 2

### 3.2 Social network participation

Scientific research has shown the importance and the career benefits of employees participating in formal/informal networks. A network can help and reinforce one's professional status and also supports a sense of security (Gold & Fraser, 2002). Recent economic and organizational changes have led to a greater variety in the workforce, with freelancers becoming a significant, yet relatively underexamined, proportion of the contemporary workforce. Although individual ownership and career agency are considered to be important for all workers, for employees their careers unfold within the context of organizations which are likely to provide some degree of career support to their employees. In contrast, freelancers are independent from an employer and thus even more responsible for the continuity of their career. Therefore, building strong relations with client organizations and putting effort into developing and maintaining professional networks with other freelancers can be fundamental in sustaining and promoting their employability, career success and future career prospects. Surprisingly, only 27.7% of the independent workers participate with other freelancers in a social network. Of this group, the majority of the participants is part of an informal network (56.8%). A smaller group is part of a structural network through a partnership.

When asked about why they engage in formal or informal networking activities several reasons are being mentioned (figure 3). About half of the respondents build a network in order to obtain information that is helpful for doing their current work (48.3%) or to get support from relevant others (49.7%). Moreover, 44.6% indicates that they network with others in view of their employability and future opportunities and 43.1% ask for advice about training and experience that would be needed for future professional prospects. Furthermore, 40.8% build a social network to get help and advice in order to increase their professional opportunities.

### Social network participation (% agree)

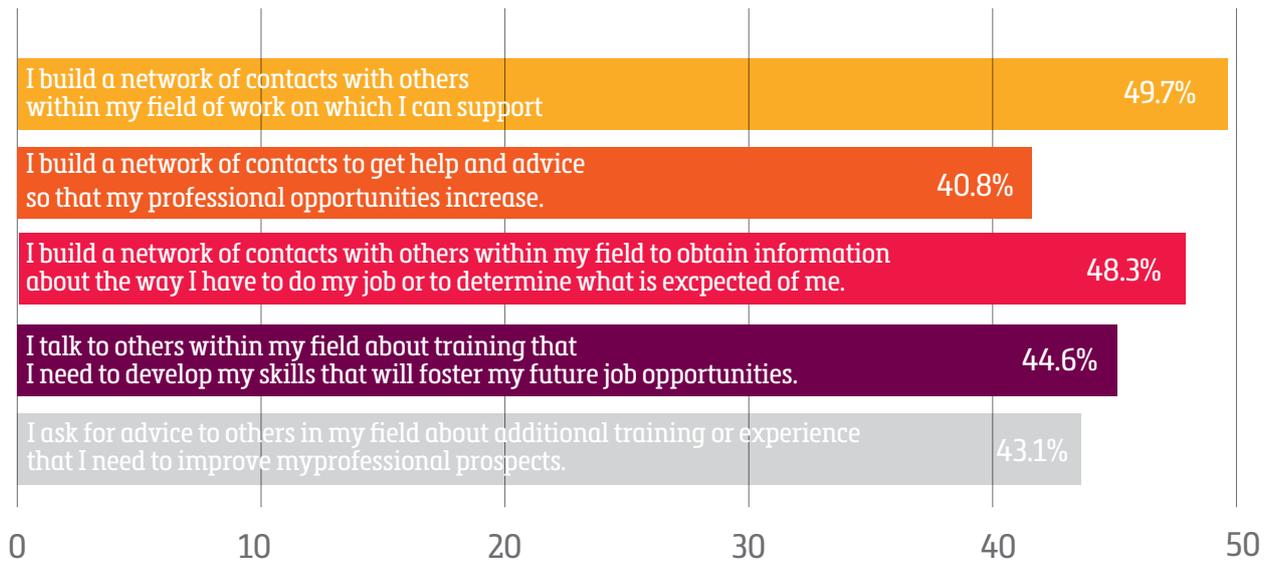


fig. 3

Those independent workers who collaborate with others in a network, mention different reasons for such a collaboration (figure 4). A majority of independents collaborates with others in order to exchange knowledge (79.4%). Furthermore, other goals that are being pursued through collaboration are: complementarity in knowledge or skills, (67.2%), building a personal network (66.6%), permanent education (60.9%), work together on projects (59.7%), common sales and marketing (46.3%) and at least investment in material (40.6%).

### Goals social network participation (% agree)

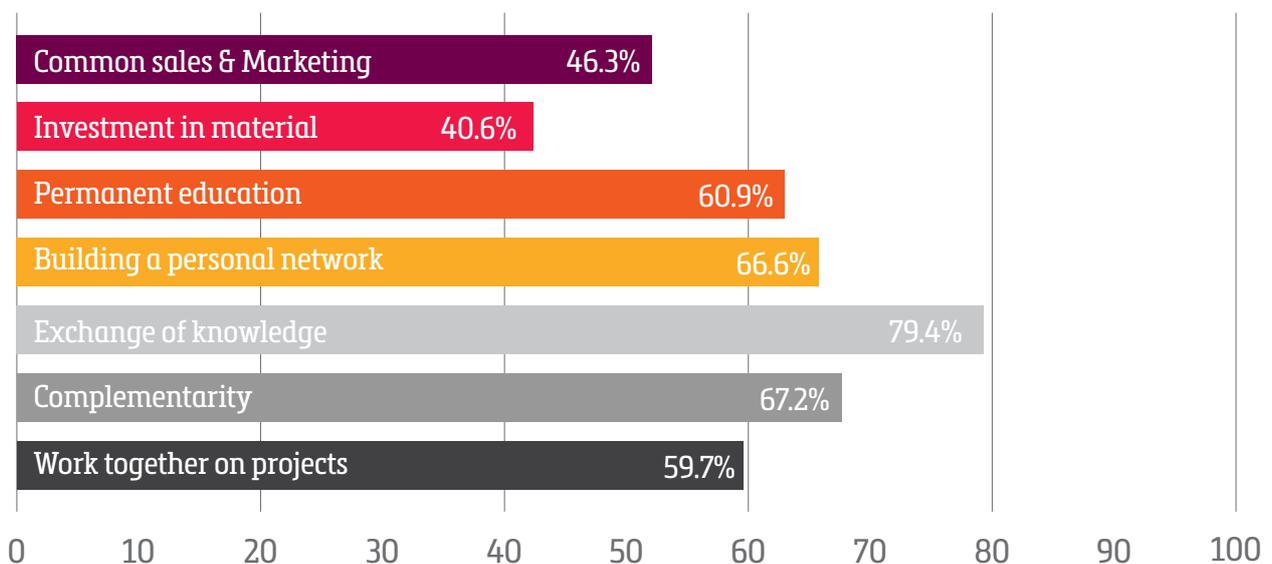


fig. 4

Working as a freelancer also means that one cannot benefit from the HR or administrative support one receives from an employer when working as an employee. Today, independent workers can contact several external persons or organizations to make use of different forms of support (figure 5). Surprisingly, only a small amount of the participating freelancers in this research project, uses such type of support on a structural basis. The data also show that independent workers mainly make use of support concerning financial advice (69.5%), insurance (62.5%) and legal advice (56.9%). In addition, a lot of participating independent workers has never asked for help regarding career advice (66.1%), developing management skills (60.9%) and marketing/IT support (55.3%).

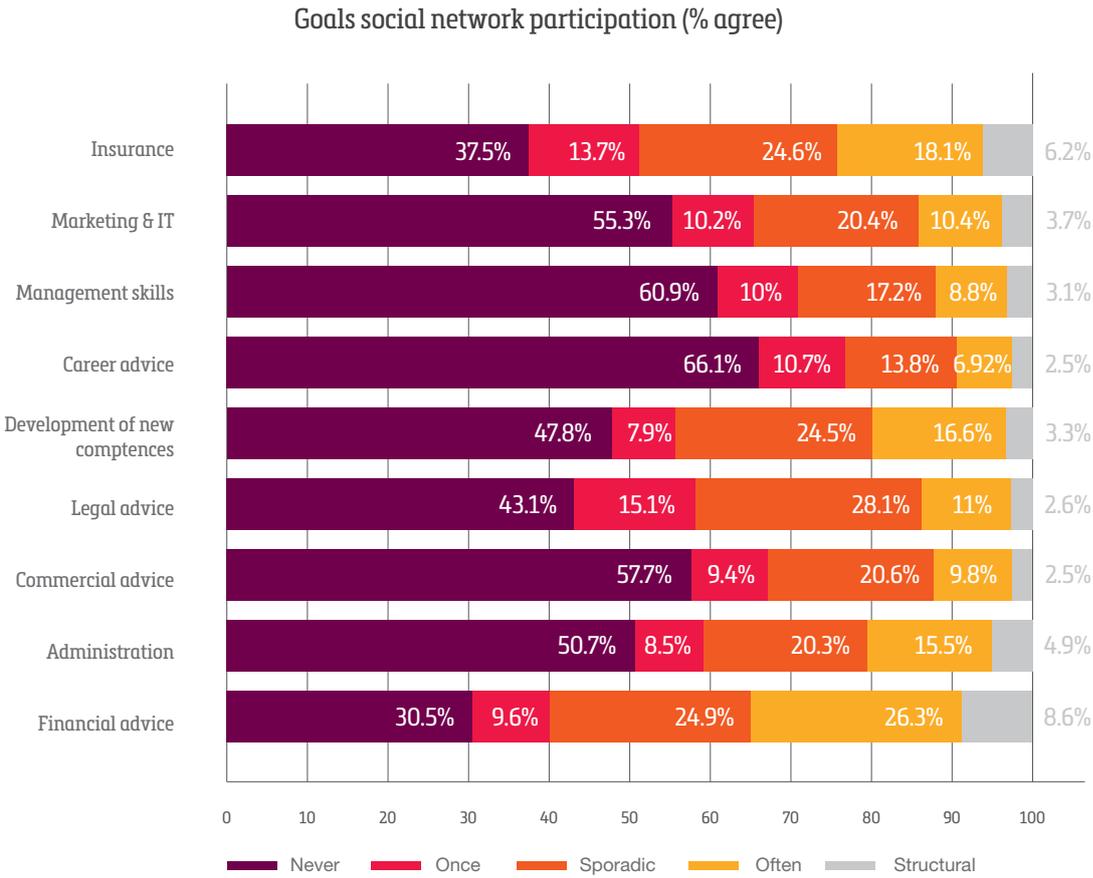


fig. 5

Next to the question about the extent to which independent workers currently ask or have already asked for support from an external person or organization, our data also provide information about the support they believe they would benefit from. Figure 6 gives an overview of these results. For instance, 31.5% say they would like to receive more support in terms of financial advice, 30.7% would need support concerning the development of new competencies, and 27.5% would need help regarding marketing/IT.

Call for support on different domains (% agree)

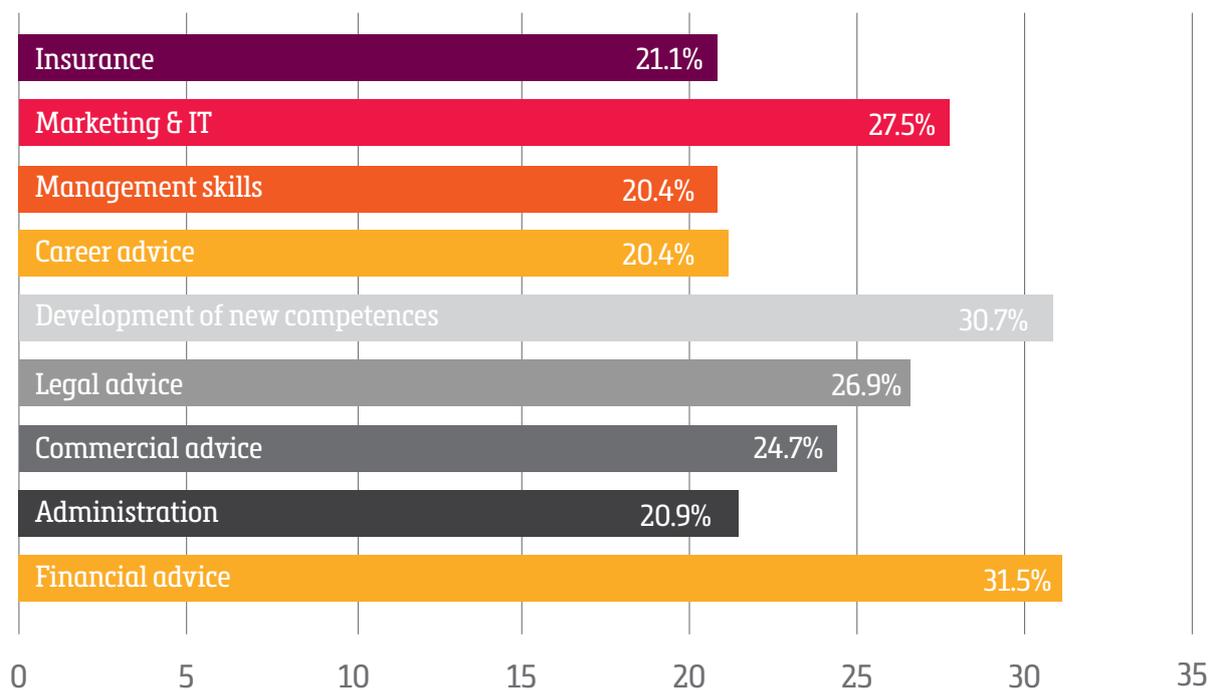


fig. 6

Concerning the different types of support and help that are mentioned on the previous page, independent workers were asked where they think they could find such support. More than one third would look for help by contacting a professional organization/federation (37%), an accountant (36.9%) or a training organization (36.7%). Furthermore, 29.2% of the respondents would contact a lawyer and 27.4% would search for support from bank/insurance firm. The table below, figure 7, gives a more detailed overview of all the answers.

### Look for help and support at different stakehlovers (% agree)

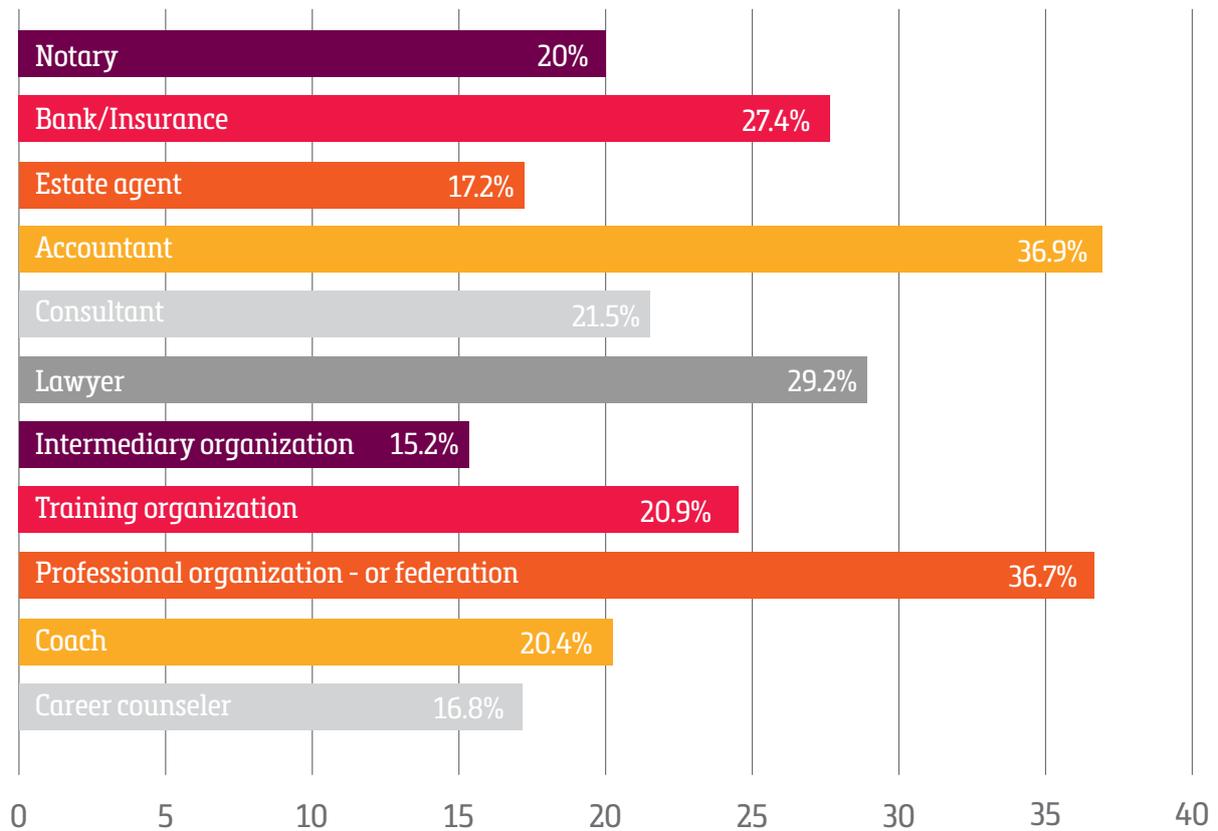


fig. 7

Hiring power and sourcing processes aside, what further compounds the problem of positioning HR towards independents, is that in 22% of organisations surveyed HR is not informed when an independent gets hired. Moreover, in only 35% of organisations HR is responsible for the actual contracts with independents.

These numbers imply that in quite some organisations, there might be blind spots in HR towards this potentially important workgroup.

### 3.3 Current and future career vision

#### 3.3.1 Current career vision: autonomy, competencies and belongingness needs among freelancers

The self-determination-theory is one of the most well-known motivational theories, based on three basic psychological needs: autonomy, belongingness and competence. These variables can influence personal development and contribute to a sense of well-being.

The need for autonomy refers to the desire to be able to act in a psychologically free way and not to be under permanent pressure (de Charms, 1968, Deci, 1971). Autonomy is mostly understood as 'being able to decide for yourself'. Karasek (1979) defined autonomy in terms of decision-making and control possibilities, while Hackman and Oldham (1976) equated autonomy with personal freedom and independence. According to self-determination theory, most important is the feeling of functioning without pressure. This feeling of psychological freedom exists when people have the opportunity to decide for themselves or to when they can make choices themselves. However, it can also occur when tasks are assigned with sufficient responsibility. Autonomy will be perceived in another way by different people. Intuitively, we have the expectation that the degree of autonomy among freelancers will be high because this group in the workforce is responsible for their own work organization. The data of this research project are in line with that expectation (figure 8). In general, the participating independent workers experience a high degree of autonomy in the execution of their job. 79.2% of the freelancers feels free to do their job in a way that it feels good to them. Furthermore, 68,7% indicates that their job tasks correspond with what they really want to do. Only 18.4% of the respondents has the feeling that they have to do what others command them at work. A small number of freelancers (20.8%) has the feeling of working under permanent pressure and of being forced to do things they don't like. In addition, 23.3% reports that they would organize their work differently if they could choose.

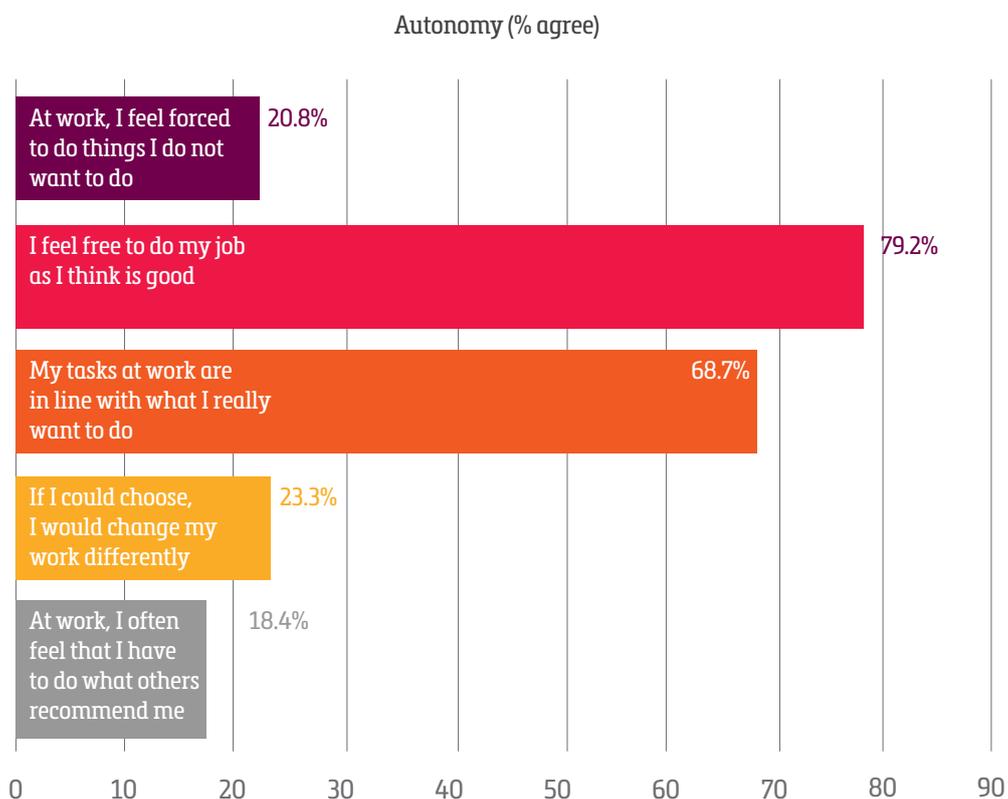


fig. 8



A second psychological need is belongingness. This can be defined as the desire to build positive relationships with others, to be loved, to be cared for and to provide care to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Employees can feel connected with others when they are part of a team and can share their personal feelings and thoughts with colleagues. The importance of social relationships has been recognized for a long time. Jahoda (1982) saw social contacts as an important latent function of labor. Self-determination theory emphasizes that social contact must be meaningful in order for employees to feel truly connected (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000).

Freelancers typically accomplish temporary assignments. In addition, they can organize their work in flexible way and work from different workplaces. Previous results of this research project did show that only a small amount of freelancers is participating in social networks. All this can make it harder to connect with others on the workplace. Despite the fact that freelancers often present themselves as independent entrepreneurs, and they value their autonomy, feeling that one belongs to a social context when carrying an assignment might also be important for their motivation. According to the data, approximately half of the respondents experience a high degree of belongingness (figure 9). 55.2% feels that they are 'part of the group' when accomplishing an assignment in an organization. In addition 52.7% respondents indicates that they can talk with others about things that they find really important. 43.7% consider their colleagues as real friends. Finally, a small amount feels lonely among colleagues/clients (17.4%) or not connected with other people at work (21.9%).

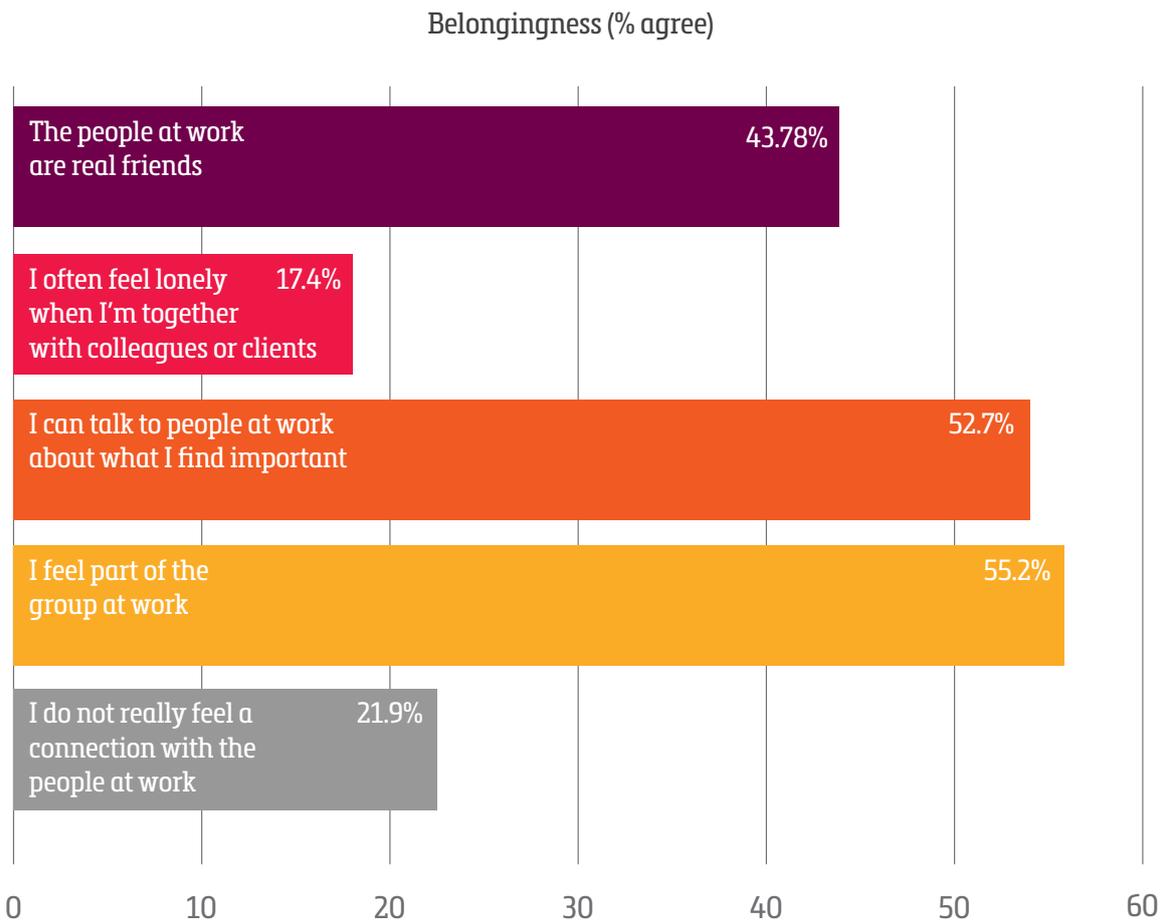


fig. 9

A third and last psychological need that is mentioned in self-determination theory, is competence. The need for competence can be understood as the desire to explore, understand and control the environment. Many other perspectives emphasize that it is important that employees feel competent. According to the Self-Efficacy theory, the subjective expectation to perform tasks successfully is an important motivator. The need for competence is also in line with the perception of personal effectiveness as described in the Goal-Setting Theory. This theory also pays attention to the feeling of being effective, which arises after reaching a goal. As in self-determination theory, according to the Goal-Setting Theory, this feeling meets a universal psychological need and leads to better well-being (Latham & Locke, 2006). According to the results of the independent workers survey, we can conclude that freelancers mostly feel competent (figure 10): 84.7 of the respondents indicates being good in their job and 83.4% feels competent. Moreover, 80.5% say that they have the feeling that are able to accomplish difficult tasks in a good way. Only a small amount of freelancers (14.1%) doubt whether they can carry out tasks in a correct way. A last result is not in line with the previous outcomes: only 36.7% says that they fully understand the tasks that they need to fulfill.

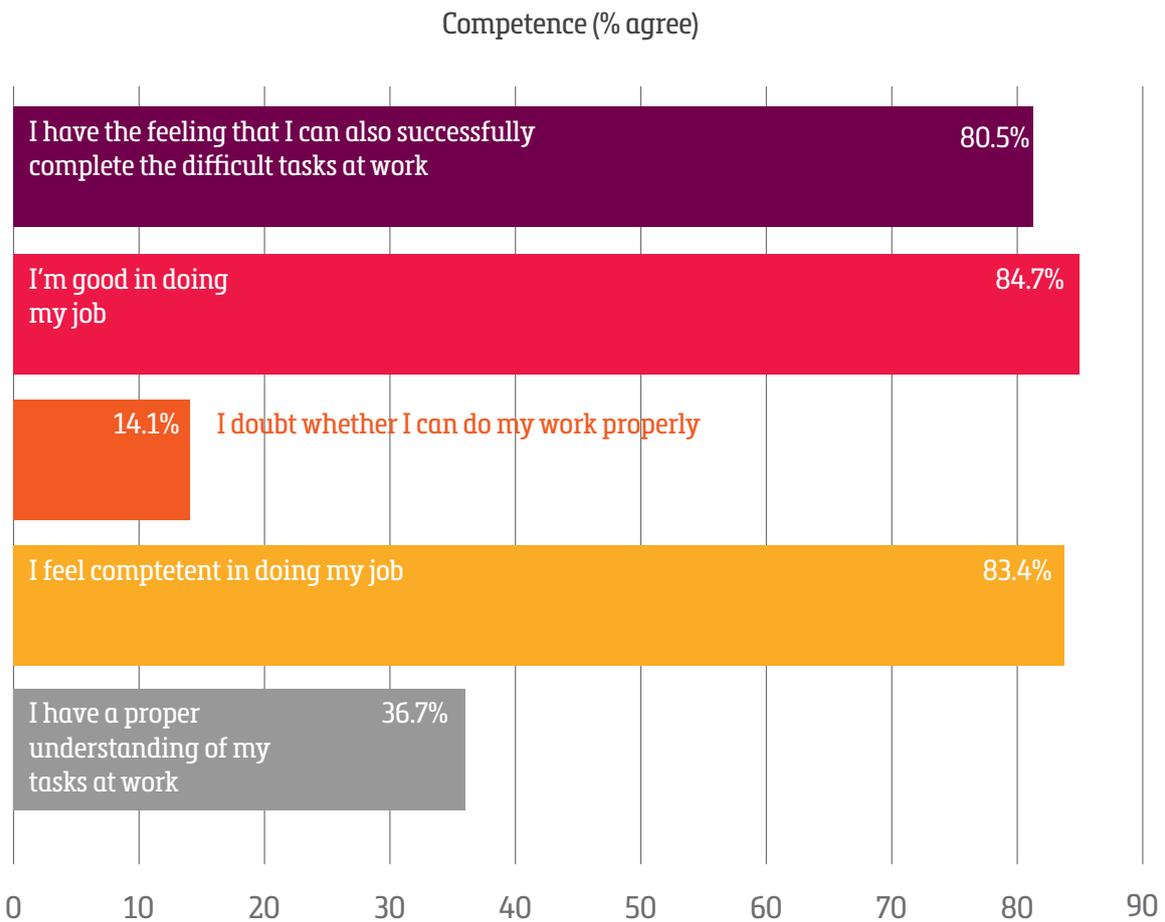


fig. 10

The results mentioned above have important practical implications. Scientific studies have shown that people who feel autonomous, competent and connected, are more motivated and function better than their colleagues. When psychological needs are fulfilled, people are more satisfied with their work, are more vital and less exhausted (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, De Witte, & Lens, 2008). In addition, they will voluntarily spend more time at work (Gagné, 2003; Kasser, Davey, & Ryan, 1992), accept organizational changes more easily (Gagné, Koestner, & Zuckerman, 2000; Lynch, Plant, & Ryan, 2005), are less inclined to leave their job (Vansteenkiste, et al. ., 2007) and perform better (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Moreover, in general it ensures a better well-being at work and outside the work context (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001).

### 3.3.2 Engagement among freelancers

Kahn (1990) described work engagement as being fully physically, cognitively and emotionally connected with work roles in order to reach work-related goals. In 2004, Bakker proposed another definition which can be considered as the most frequently used definition of work engagement: an active, positive work-related state that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Important to mention is that work engagement must be distinguished from job satisfaction, work related flow and motivation.

The results of our survey show that freelancers are generally highly engaged (figure 11). A large amount of the participating independent workers (78.7%) is proud of the work they do and indicates being enthusiastic about their work (74%). 72.6% say that their work inspires them and 70.7% are completely absorbed in their work. Moreover, 70% of the freelancers is feeling happy when they work intensively whilst 68.1% feel fit and strong while being at work. In addition, about two thirds of the participants indicates that they feel good about going to work in the morning (64.7%) and 63.4% burst with energy at work.

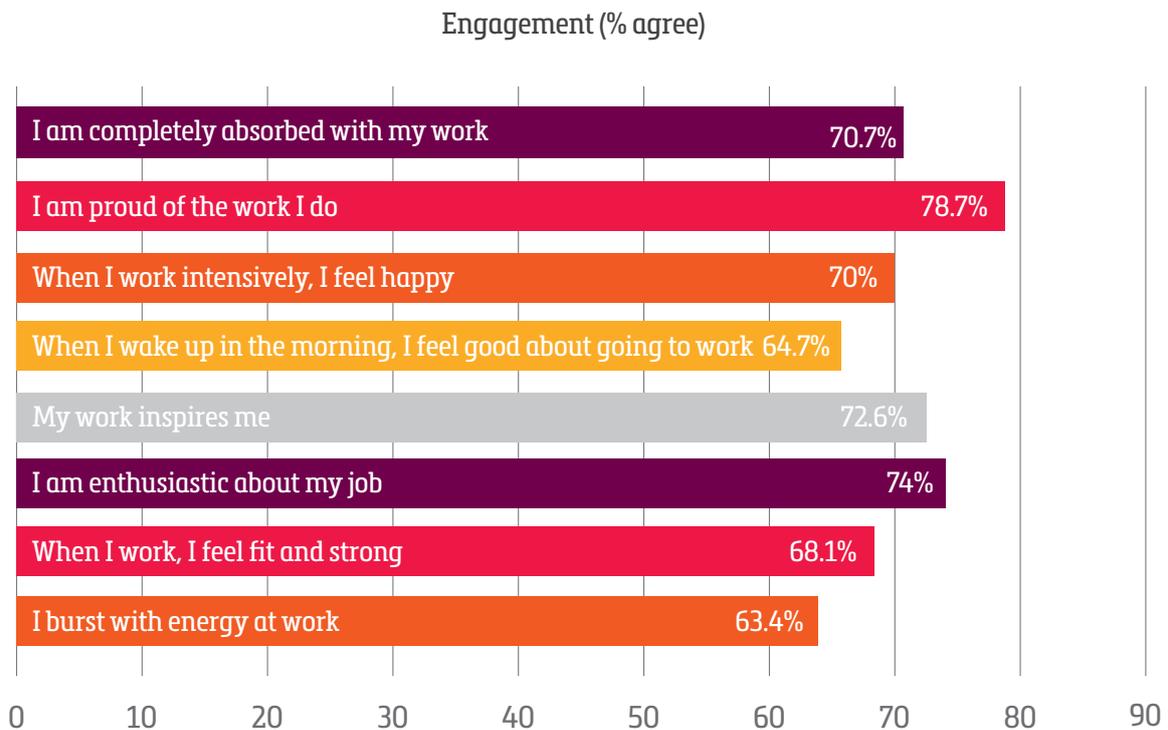


fig. 11

### 3.3.3 Future career vision: making plans for the future

In the first paper we already addressed freelancers’ optimism regarding their future career. As reported, 70% of the participating freelancers is optimistic about obtaining future assignments for the same work with their current clients, 62% is optimistic about obtaining the same type of assignments elsewhere, while only 53% believe they could easily get assignments or projects that differ from what they are currently doing. When taking a look at their more distal future, 62% feels capable of continuing their current type of work until retirement.

Next to career optimism, the independent workers survey examined the future career plans of freelancers. A distinction was made between short-term plans, mid-term plans and long-term plans (figure 12). Freelancers are responsible for the development of their own career. They need to be aware of this in order to construct plans that will enable them to accomplish goals, analyze potential career areas, and invest in the permanent growth of their skills and competencies. (Antrariksa, 2007). More than half of the independent workers (55.6%) wants to continue working as an independent in the short term. This percentage decreases regarding to mid-long term (46.7%) and long-term plans (38.8%). About one third of the freelancers want to expand their self-employed activities in the short term (28.8%), mid-long term (29.9%) wants to retire. Slightly less than 5% has no ideas about future career plans in the short and mid-long term, instead of 8% in the long-term.

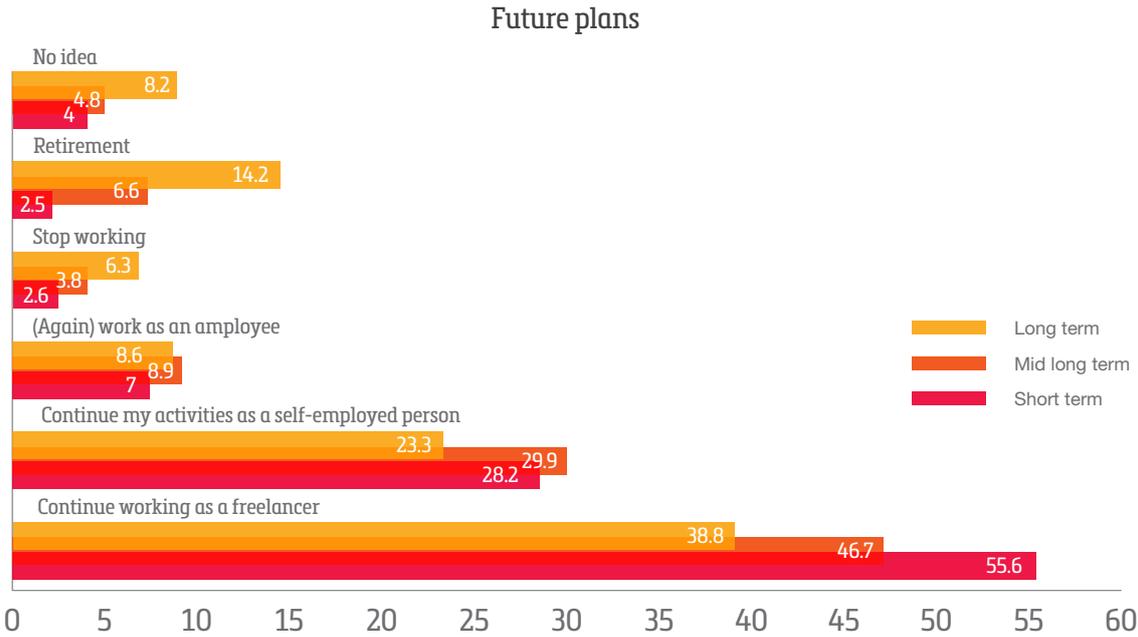


fig. 12

### 3.3.4 Employability among freelancers

Parallel to the growing presence of freelancers in the workforce, the discussion about employability has intensified during the past years, both in Belgium and internationally (Süss & Becker, 2012). Research mostly focusses on employability of employees while freelancers often have been neglected in the discussion on employability. It can be assumed that the employability of freelancers is subject to specific or other requirements than the employability of employees (Süss & Becker, 2012). A possible reason can be the temporary nature of independent employment. It is important for freelancers that they rapidly adapt to unfamiliar company situations and become quickly competent in unknown situations. Knowing which components contribute to freelancers' employability is important in order to secure it.

According to Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) employability refers to an individual's capacities that enable the potential for permanent acquisition and fulfillment of employment. A five-dimensional scale was developed to measure the concept of employability. The five-dimensional operationalization combines occupational expertise (1) with four generic competences: anticipation and optimization (2), personal flexibility (3), corporate sense (4) and balance (5) (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). The second and the third dimensions are flexibility dimensions. The dimension 'anticipation and optimization' is a proactive/creative variant whilst 'personal flexibility' can be seen as a passive/reactive variant. On the other hand, corporate sense captures social competences that can be exerted with an organization. The fifth dimension, balance, takes into account different elements of employability like a current job versus career goals, employers' versus employees' interests, and employees' opposing work, career, and private interest. The independent workers survey made use of this five-dimensional instrument to measure employability among freelancers.

The first dimension, occupational expertise, is about knowledge and skills. Our results suggest that almost two third of the participating independent workers consider themselves as scoring good on the dimension of 'occupational expertise': 63.9% feels competent to set priorities while performing their job, about 63.4% of the freelancers feels competent to do their job accurately and to reason out the benefits and disadvantages on particular decisions. In addition, 63% feels competent to take decisions with respect to how they approach their work. Moreover, a majority (74.8%) rates their skills as being high (scale going from fairly high to very high).

### Employability - occupational expertise % good-very good

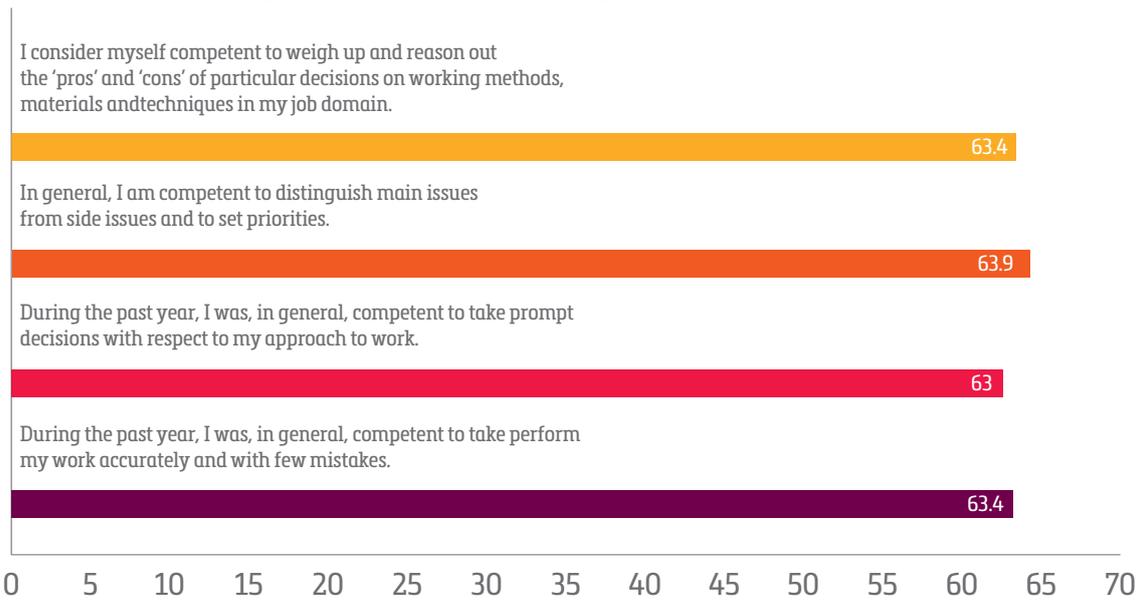


fig. 13

Independent workers were also asked to score themselves on several statements regarding the dimension 'anticipation and optimization'. Our results show that 41.1% says to spend time to improve their knowledge and skills that will benefit their work. Yet, 39% indicates that they devote attention to applying new knowledge and skills. In addition, a smaller amount of freelancers associates themselves with the latest developments in their job domain (30.,6 %) or was actively engaged in investigating similar job areas (21.1%).

### Employability - employability - anticipation and optimization % often - very often

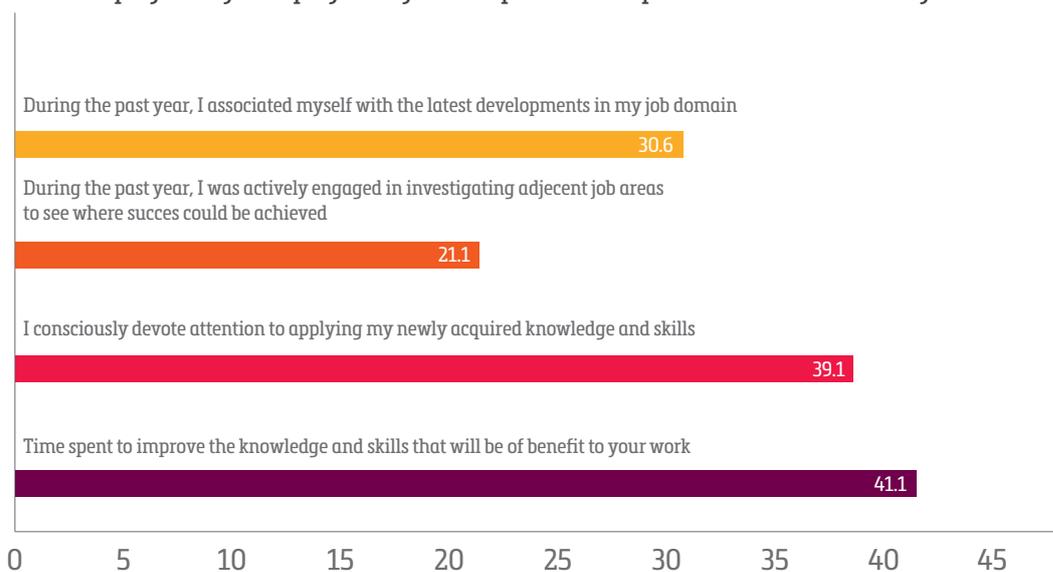


fig. 14

The third dimension is called ‘personal flexibility’ and is about the attitude to change and the possibility to adapt to changes in different domains, such as workplace, function, work and organization. A last topic that can be categorized under this dimension is the variety in the range of duties and tasks. The results of the independent workers survey show that a large majority of the freelancers quickly adapt to changes in their workplace (83.4%, range quite fast to very fast). In addition, a large amount of freelancers say they adapt easily to changes in their function (78.2%) and changes in work/organization (77.4%) In general, the attitude to change is positive. 85.6% say that they have a positive or very positive attitude towards changes in their position. Moreover, 85.4% has a varied job with different tasks and duties.

On the other hand, the survey also examined corporate sense. About half of the respondents (44%) shares experience and knowledge with others. In addition, one third of the freelancers (37.7%) indicates that they contribute to the vision, values and goals of the organizations for which they work and 37.3% says to support operational processes when working for an organization and 37.1% takes initiatives for sharing responsibilities with colleagues.

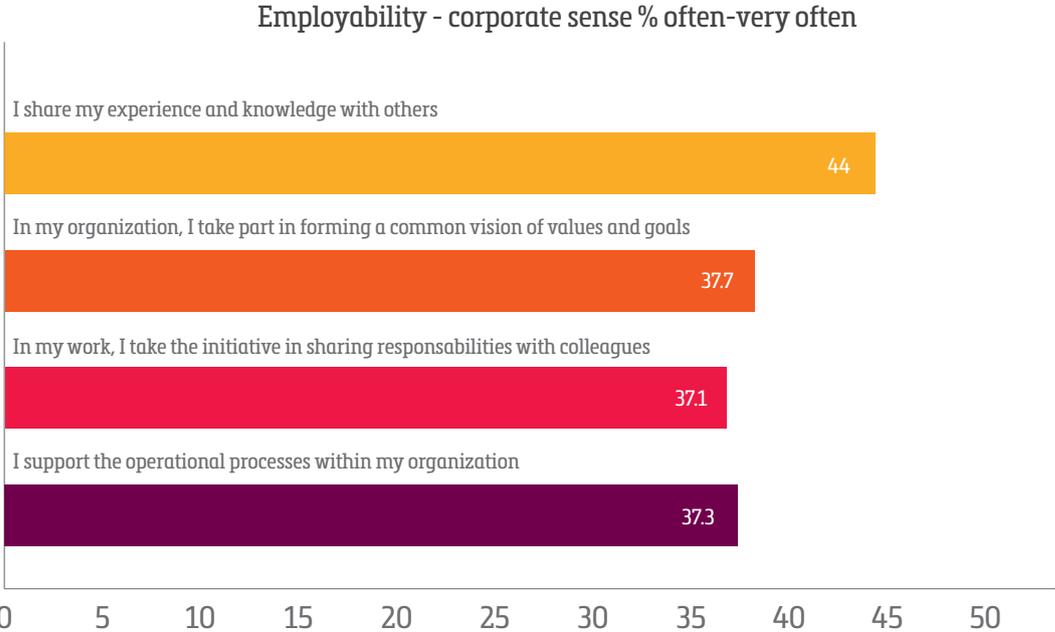


fig. 15

Like mentioned before, the dimension ‘balance’ takes into account different elements of employability. 38.1% of the freelancers surveyed say that their work and private life are in balance. Our figures also show that only 35.6% has the feeling that their work efforts are in proportion to what they get in return and 35.1% achieves a balance in alternating between reaching their own work goals and supporting their colleagues. Only 32.2% of the freelancers indicates that the time spent on their work/career development are in balance with personal development and relaxation.

### Employability - balance % to a great extent - to a very large extent

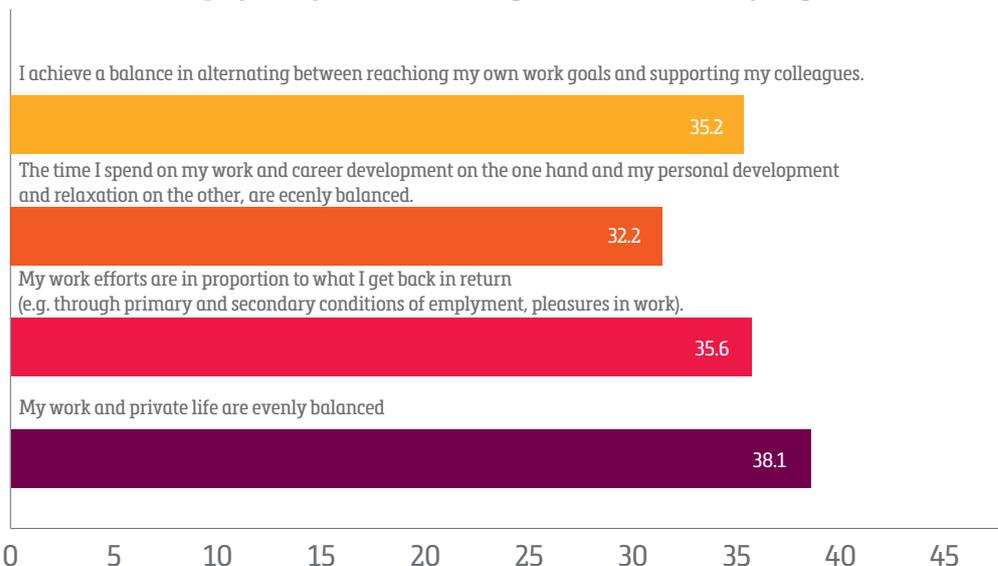


fig. 16

## 4 | RELATIONS BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT VARIABLES: SOCIAL NETWORK PARTICIPATION, SELF-DETERMINATION AND EMPLOYABILITY

Finally, we examined some associations between different variables of the survey. We note a significant negative correlation between working at home and the fulfillment of belongingness needs. In general, freelancers who mostly work from home are likely to experience a lower degree of belongingness. In addition, we see a significant positive relationships between the five dimensions of employability and the three psychological needs (autonomy, belongingness, competence) which means that these 8 variables are mutually associated with each other. Considering social network participation, we note positive association between social network participation and future career optimism, and social network participation and career success.

In the first paper, we discussed several reasons of becoming a freelancer. The most frequent reasons that were reported are: more interesting job content (69.3%), better fit with their interests (68.2%), freedom in choosing the kind of work they do (68.2%), better fit with competencies (67.7%) and more responsibilities (59.4%). In addition, quite some respondents indicate that they have opted for an independent career out of necessity. In general, a distinction can be made between intrinsic (voluntary) and extrinsic (necessity) reasons for becoming a freelancer. We examined the associations between these two clusters of reasons and psychological needs fulfillment, future career optimism and career success.

These analyses show that freelancers who opted for an independent career out of extrinsic reasons are likely to experience lower degrees of fulfillment of autonomy, competence and belongingness needs. On the other hand, intrinsic reasons for becoming a freelancer are positively correlated with fulfillment of autonomy, competence and belongingness needs. We note a negative correlation between extrinsic reasons and career success whilst intrinsic reasons are positively associated with career success. Results about future optimism are in the same line. We see a significant positive correlation between intrinsic reason and future optimism and a small negative correlation between extrinsic reasons and future optimism. In general, people who opted for a freelancer career for intrinsic reasons appear to be more optimistic about the future and experience higher degrees of career success. The opposite applies to those freelancers who opted for an independent career for external reasons.

We also used linear regression analyses to have a more detailed understanding of the association between different variables. Results show that 28% of the total variance in perceived career success and 35% of the total variance in engagement can be explained by the degree of fulfillment of needs for autonomy, competence and belongingness. On the other hand, our results show that 39% of the total variance in career success and 49% of the total variance in engagement can be explained by the employability competencies (occupational expertise, anticipation and optimization, personal flexibility, corporate sense and balance). Finally, we also looked at future optimism; 24% of the total variance in future optimism can be declared by the fulfillment of autonomy, competence and belongingness needs whilst 39% of the variance in future optimism can be explained by the different dimension of employability. This means that both fulfillment of basic psychological need and employability competencies are explicative of the extent to which freelancers experience career success, feel engaged at work and are optimistic regarding their future career outlook.



## 5 | CONCLUSION

Our findings show that a large amount of freelancers is not participating in (in)formal social networks but that they do experience a need for support in several domains. This needs further examination because social network participation can possibly influence the position of a freelancer on the labour market in terms of security and support. In addition, social network participation could be a critical factor for their sustainable career development. Moreover, a large majority of the participating independent workers indicates feeling autonomous and competent at work, whilst only a small amount of people scored themselves high on belongingness needs. As mentioned before, the fulfilment of these psychological needs are associated with positive career outcomes. Regarding freelancers, belongingness needs can be a challenge.

A large part of this paper was dedicated to employability and employability competencies. Results of this survey show that freelancers are scoring high on occupational expertise and flexibility. On the other hand, freelancers consider themselves scoring way lower on the dimensions corporate sense, optimization/anticipation and balance. Regarding sustainable career support, this needs further consideration.

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