

# FREELANCER

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## Fostering future and current entrepreneurs' soft skills and self-employability through market adapted training

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### Task 2 of Work Package 2:

Mapping and stock taking of Entrepreneurship challenges for aspiring freelancers

## Country Snapshot Europe

Developed by: IHF

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## Introduction

Self-employed people, entrepreneurs, independent professional. Many names to identify a single concept: Freelancing. Before delving into the detailed analysis, it is essential to clearly define the concept of freelancing and its role in contemporary employment.

In the first instance, it is important to understand how the European landscape considers this professional. The most important thing that emerges from the different opinions issued by the organizations operating on the European scene is that currently there is no single definition of freelancer, but surely everyone agrees that the freelancer is independent, flexible way of working and organising work, prepared to provide services both remotely and in person, and a qualified professional to carry out these services (see definitions of European bodies<sup>1</sup>).

These professional figures were born in the 1980s, when companies began to consider the outsourcing of certain services more cost-effective, in the face of a technological and economic evolution that began in those years but increasingly current.

According to Eurostat data, it is more than 25 millions of freelance workers around the Old Continent, and with the advent of digitalization and shifts in work patterns, the number in Europe is steadily increasing, significantly impacting the economy and the labour landscape, being the share of self-employment and, more generally, of all employment, which is growing faster throughout Europe.

The very nature of this new broad professional branch leads freelancers to be an invaluable resource for companies and customers, who can secure quality professional jobs by having a wide range of subjects to choose from, but at the same time brings the freelancers themselves to enjoy a freedom never seen before.

In this context, this report aims to examine the current situation of freelancers in Europe, analysing the trends, challenges, and opportunities characterizing this rapidly evolving sector.

The discussion will aim to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of the European freelancing landscape, offering both static (general and specific) and dynamic (long-term and short-term) statistics on the phenomenon. Subsequently, the European policy framework regarding freelancing will be outlined, along with the training opportunities available to freelancers and aspiring freelancers, as well as an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses currently characterizing this type of independent professionals. The goal will be to gain a clearer understanding of the phenomenon and how it is addressed, as well as any potential gaps to be filled, whether they are endogenous or structural within the system.

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<sup>1</sup> **OECD**, Self-employment rate: <https://data.oecd.org/emp/self-employment-rate.htm>.

**European Commission**: "a freelancer is a self-employed person offering services, usually to businesses, on a contractual basis for a defined period of time. They may work on several projects simultaneously and may work for multiple clients simultaneously."

**EESC**: "A freelancer is a professional who works independently offering specialized services or skills to different organizations or clients, usually on a project basis. They have control over their working hours and conditions, and they are not bound by an employment contract."

**ILO**: "A freelancer is an individual who is self-employed and provides services to one or more clients on a contractual basis, often working remotely and using technology to communicate and deliver work."

**Cedefop**: "A freelancer is a self-employed worker who provides services to various companies or clients without being employed full-time by any of them. Freelancers can work in various sectors and are characterized by their independence and flexibility in work."



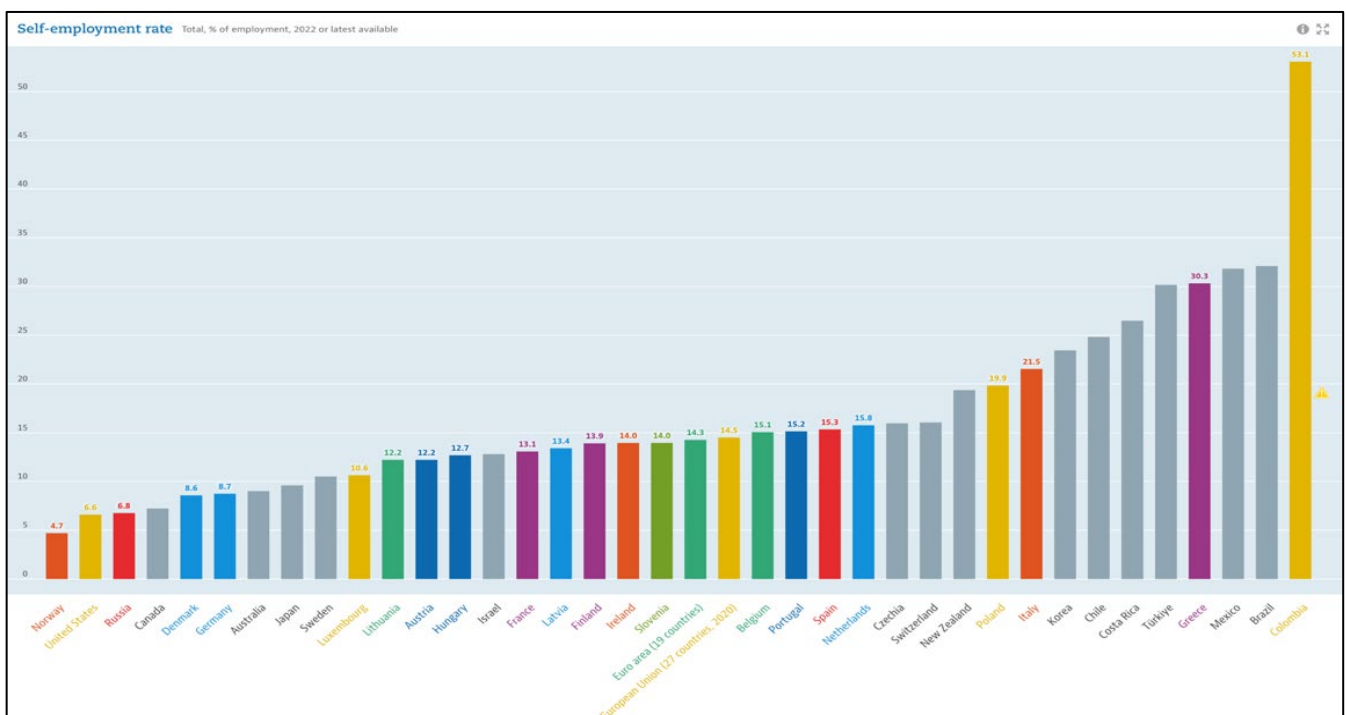
## Quantitative indicators on freelancing and self-employment in Europe

The phenomenon of the liberal professions is increasingly important in the contemporary economy, representing a flexible and dynamic alternative to traditional work. They offer specialized services to different companies or customers, without being bound by long-term contracts.

This segment of the labour market is distinguished by its independence and ability to quickly adapt to the needs of the market. On this basis, it is useful to focus the lens of the examination of the phenomenon on the world context, thanks to the data provided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD<sup>2</sup>).

Such data show us how the rate of self-employment varies significantly between countries, reflecting different economic and cultural conditions. This diversity highlights the heterogeneity of the phenomenon of freelancers worldwide, with some regions showing a greater propensity for this form of work than others.

**Exhibit 1:** The rate of self-employment



**Source:** OECD (2024)

Narrowing the scope of our analysis lens exclusively to Europe, we can observe how significant disparities persist. These data are supported by the analysis of <sup>3</sup>Statista presented in the table below, that offers an analysis of self-employed workers in Europe in 2022, detailing the numbers per thousand workers by country.

As of 2022, there are approximately 27.66 million self-employed people working in the European Union. Italy boasted the highest number of self-employed workers in Europe, followed by the UK, France, and Germany. On the contrary, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Malta report the

<sup>3</sup> **STATISTA**, Number of self-employed workers in Europe in 2022, by country:  
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1197059/self-employment-in-europe-by-country/>

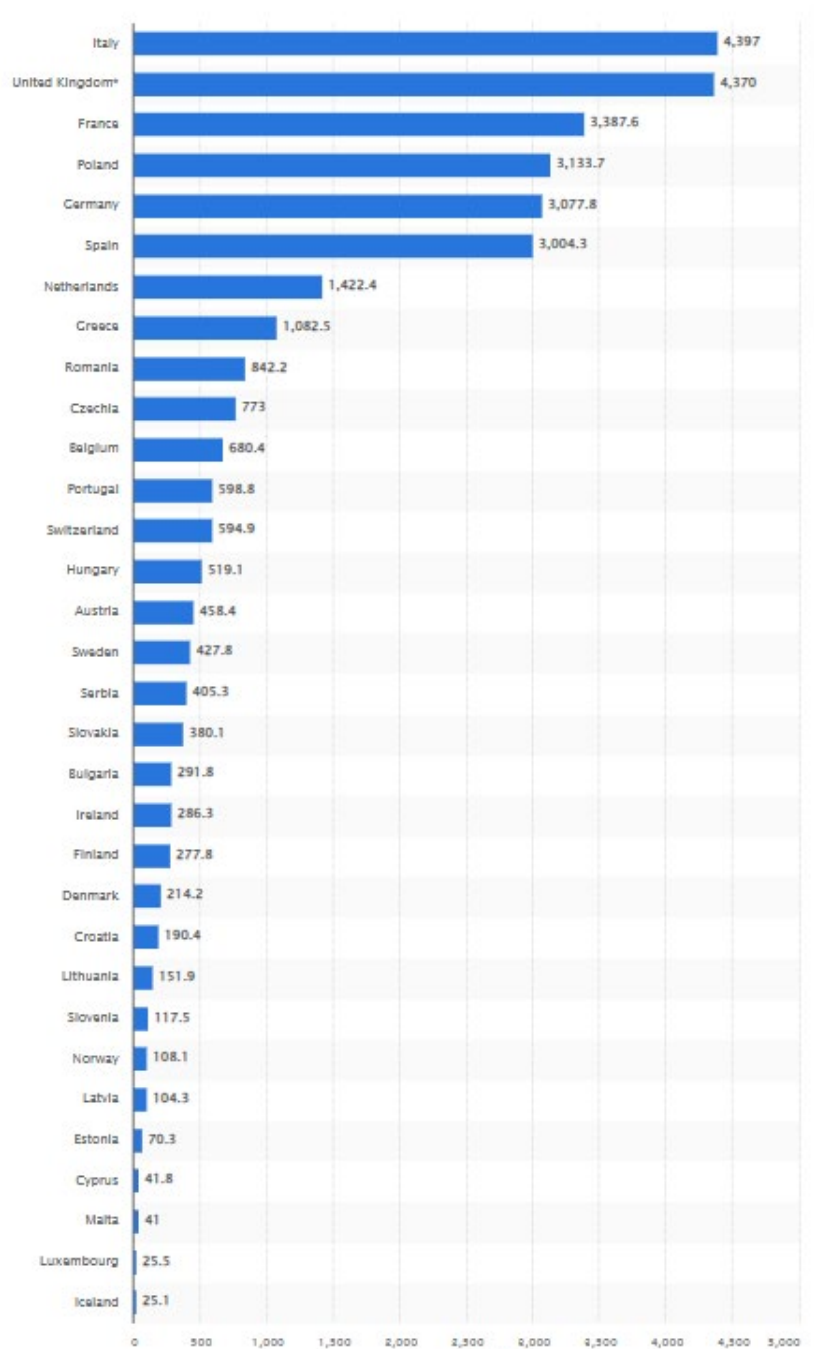


lowest numbers of self-employed individuals, with each country having fewer than 50,000 of these workers.

This difference in total number of self-employed persons is obviously a relative figure because it is highly dependent on the number of people in the different countries, but also on their economic situation and tradition.

For example, Italy may have more freelancers than France and Germany because of the increased presence of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), a sector in which Italy particularly excels. In fact, SMEs and family businesses tend to hire freelancers to carry out specialized jobs. Relevant factors such as business climate, different labor policies and work trends could also justify these differences.

**Exhibit 1:** Number of self-employed workers in Europe in 2022, by country (in 1,000s)



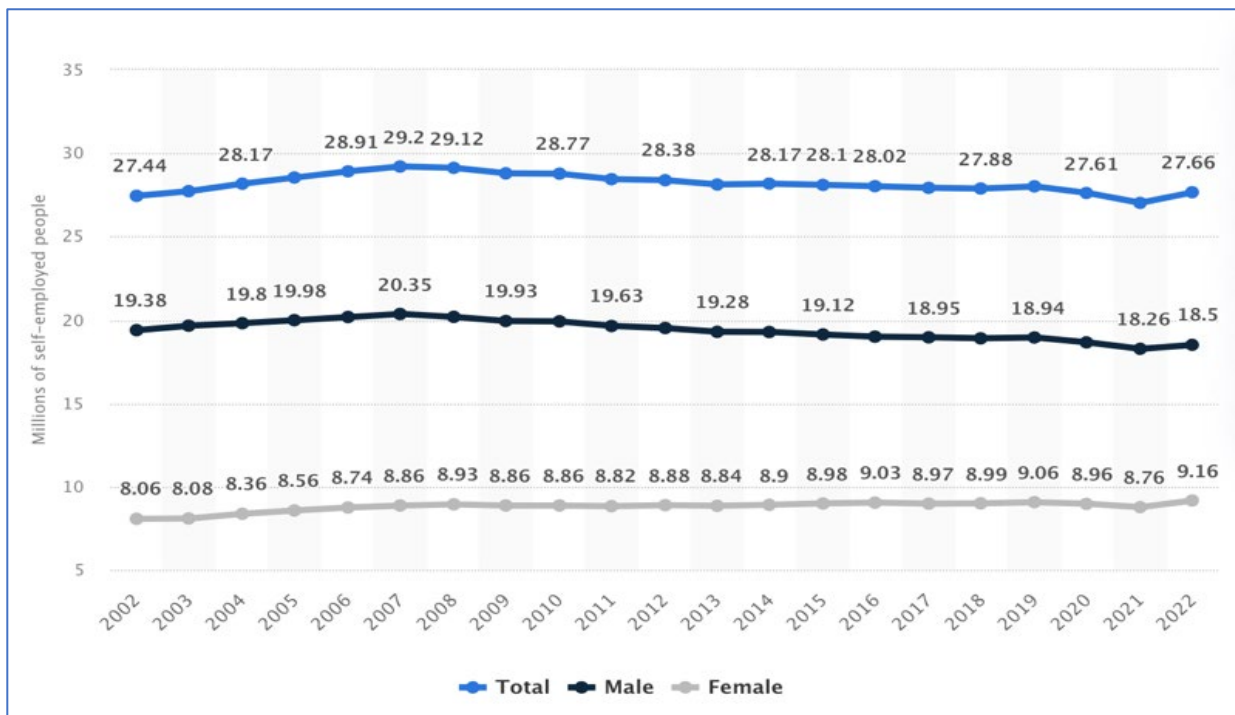
Source: Statista



Once we have provided a photograph of the freelancing phenomenon in Europe, we can analyse the same from a dynamic point of view. Analysing the historical evolution of the freelancer phenomenon in Europe, a changing picture emerges. Let's start by saying that about 95% of them started moving their first experiences as an employee (at least 5 to 9 years) before moving to the status of an independent worker.

After which, <sup>4</sup>Statista data (Nov 16, 2023) allow us to have a complete historical overview. In the period before the pandemic, there was a steady increase in the number of self-employed workers, with the peak in 2007, followed by a contraction during the pandemic and a subsequent recovery in 2022, particularly among women.

**Exhibit 2:** Number of self-employed people in the European Union from 2002 to 2022



**Source:** Statista data

These data are supported by a further statistical table published by <sup>5</sup>Eurostat where it is noted that the the working hours of workers belonging to each category fell between 2019, 2020 and 2021.

This last statistic introduces us to the need to focus more on the period between the pre and post-pandemic, based on the awareness that the global health emergency has been a fundamental watershed creating turmoil in the economic from numerous points of view. By comparing the data provided by Eurostat, we can gain a clear and detailed understanding of the evolution of self-employment before and after the pandemic, highlighting trends and differences among EU member states.

<sup>4</sup> **STATISTA**, Number of self-employed people in the European Union from 2002 to 2022:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/946989/self-employed-persons-in-eu/#:~:text=Number%20of%20self%20employed%20people%20in%20the%20EU%202002%2D2022&text=There%20are%20approximately%2027.66%20million,estimated%20to%20be%2029.2%20million.>

<sup>5</sup> **EUROSTAT**, Archive: Hours of work and absences from work - quarterly statistics:

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Hours\\_of\\_work\\_and\\_absences\\_from\\_work\\_-\\_quarterly\\_statistics&oldid=559412](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Hours_of_work_and_absences_from_work_-_quarterly_statistics&oldid=559412)

<sup>6</sup> **EUROSTAT**, Self-employed person: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20190430-1>



<sup>6</sup>An article published on April 30, 2019, revealed that in 2018, self-employed individuals accounted for 14% of total employment. Across EU countries, Greece had the highest percentage of self-employed individuals in 2018, at 30%, followed by Italy at 22%, Poland at 18%, and Romania at 17%.

These countries were followed closely by the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Spain, each at 16%, and Portugal and Slovakia, each at 15%. Conversely, self-employed individuals represented less than 10% of total employment in Denmark and Luxembourg, both at 8%, as well as in Germany and Sweden, both at 9%.

Another article published by <sup>7</sup>Eurostat on March 1, 2022, highlighted a decrease in self-employment during the pandemic. At the EU level, 13.2% of employed individuals were self-employed. Greece (28.2% of self-employed individuals in total employment), Italy (19.8%), Poland (17.9%), and the Netherlands (15.3%) recorded the highest percentages of self-employment in the second quarter of 2021. Conversely, Germany (7.4%), Luxembourg (7.6%), Denmark (8.0%), Sweden (8.5%), Bulgaria (9.9%), and Cyprus (10.0%) reported lower percentages of self-employment.

It's interesting to note that during the pandemic (from 2020 to 2021) <sup>8</sup>Malt, a significant marketplace where freelance and project owners meet through tools that facilitate easy connection, saw a 39% increase in overall freelancer sign-ups and a 63% increase in job categories considered 'established' previously (such as project manager and support functions, for example).

These data indicate the significance of the new paradigms introduced in the world of work, along with its digitization, during those critical years for the future development of the freelance profession. This has led to substantial growth in the post-pandemic period.

Returning now to the current situation, it is interesting to focus on those disparities in the world of European freelancing, to start projecting ourselves to those that seem to be weaknesses and strengths of the same. The issue has been considerably deepened by a <sup>9</sup>Eurostat study that refers to the generational, gender and educational level.

In Europe freelancers are mainly male (65%), 40+-year-old highly educated individuals (>75% have a 3-year higher-education degree). In 2022 the gender gap among self-employed individuals aged 15 to 64 was larger among those with low education levels (a difference of 8.4 percentage points), followed by those with medium education levels (gap of 7.2 pp) or high educational levels (gap of 5.8 pp).

This gender gap grew with age, with a difference of 5.7 pp for people aged 25-49, which then increased to 9.9 pp for those aged 50-64. In the same period, 21.3% of men in employment aged 50-64 were self-employed as opposed to 14.9% of men in employment aged 25-49. Among employed women aged 50-64, 11.3% were self-employed, compared with 9.2% of women aged 25-49.

Based on the level of education, the gender gap for the self-employed was wider (12.4 pp) in the 50-64 age group with a low level of education, where 23.9% of employed men were self-employed as opposed to 11.5% of women. The gender gap was minimal in the 25-49 age group with a high level of education (4.3 pp): 14.2% of employed men were self-employed, compared with 9.9% of women.

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<sup>7</sup> **EUROSTAT**, Self-employment: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/skills-intelligence/self-employment?year=2022&country=EU#2>

<sup>8</sup> **MALT**, Freelance in Europe 2022: [https://cdn.malt.com/resources/reports/2022\\_freelancing\\_in\\_europe\\_en.pdf](https://cdn.malt.com/resources/reports/2022_freelancing_in_europe_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> **EUROSTAT**, Gender gap in self-employment rises with age: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20230307-1>



From these data it can be deduced that the field of the freelancing is in strong evolution and development, turning out a fundamental resource for the companies and the European economic panorama. However, significant gender, age and educational disparities persist in the sector.

The evidence underlines the importance of addressing gender and socio-economic inequalities in the freelancing sector through targeted policies and initiatives to promote greater inclusion and equality of opportunity for all self-employed people.



## Qualitative indicators on freelancing and self-employment in Europe: skills-gap and need assessments

Entrepreneurship is a major driver of innovation, competitiveness and growth. The entrepreneurship competence is indispensable for the self-employed, but also relevant for employees within firms of any size independent professionals in Europe are directly impacted by EU legislation daily.

Given their status as micro-businesses, it's paramount that regulations affecting freelancers are straightforward, comprehensible, and not overly burdensome. A significant portion of legislation pertaining to independent professionals originates from the EU. Consequently, while Member States address these policies, the bulk of them have already been enacted, leaving national governments with the task of implementation without the ability to influence their content.

Currently, the European landscape lacks specific policies tailored to freelancers or solo entrepreneurs. On the political landscape, the European Parliament has not expressed itself through direct acts focused on the figure of the freelancer or on entrepreneurship in general.

In this context Eurofund<sup>10</sup>, formally known as the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, has expressed his opinion in its article "Exploring self-employment in the European Union," highlighting various policy discussions surrounding self-employment.

These discussions address the issue from different perspectives, including:

- **Job Creation:** some policymakers promote self-employment as a means of fostering job creation, seeking ways to encourage more individuals to start their own businesses and become self-employed.
- **Employer Responsibilities:** there are concerns that certain forms of self-employment are utilized to evade employer responsibilities, taxes, and social security contributions.
- **Precarious Situations:** the article underscores the precarious situations faced by some self-employed individuals, prompting some Member States to combat bogus self-employment or economic dependence through legislative measures.

Overall, Eurofound articles play an important role in shaping political debate and influencing the development of European policies through the production of reliable data, inclusive policy advice, and promotion of the sharing of best practices. In particular, the inclusive entrepreneurship policies are to reduce inequalities of opportunity so that everyone, regardless of their personal characteristics and background has an opportunity to start and run a business.

These policies, along with the schemes and measures used to implement them, seek to support groups that are under-represented in entrepreneurship (e.g. women, immigrants, youth, seniors, the unemployed, people with disabilities) in starting and growing businesses.

However, the European Commission demonstrates a clear interest in entrepreneurship at large. Initiatives such as the Entrepreneurship 2020 Action Plan and the Communication on Rethinking Education provide a cohesive framework for entrepreneurship education. While EU countries formulate education policies, the Commission primarily serves as a catalyst and facilitator, championing entrepreneurship education.

Their efforts include raising awareness, facilitating the exchange of best practices among EU countries, developing support tools, and implementing projects with high EU-level added value.

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<sup>10</sup> **EUROFUND**, Exploring self-employment in the European Union: [file:///Users/user/Downloads/ef1718en%20\(1\).pdf](file:///Users/user/Downloads/ef1718en%20(1).pdf)



The Commission promotes and supports entrepreneurship education through various means:

- **Funding:** the Commission provides funding to European projects that create reference models for further exploitation through calls for proposals;
- **Promoting Exchanges:** it facilitates exchanges of good practices and experiences at the EU level. Organizing of workshops for policymakers and practitioners;
- **Workshops:** the Commission organizes workshops for policymakers and practitioners.;
- **Networking:** it assists policymakers and other stakeholders in networking.
- **Guidelines:** the Commission publishes guidelines based on existing good practices in Europe.
- **Research and Data:** it releases studies, indicators, and conducts data collection.

As part of the Commission's plan to support entrepreneurship, and particularly the education of entrepreneurs themselves, there is a project called<sup>11</sup>"Mini companies in secondary education", o simulate the management of an entrepreneurial activity in secondary schools.

A student company is defined as a pedagogical tool based on practical experience through running a complete enterprise project and on interaction with the external environment. These activities allow students to acquire basic business skills, but also to develop personal qualities and transversal skills that have become increasingly important for living and working in the knowledge society. I

n fact, through participation in mini-companies, students display their creativity, develop enthusiasm and self-confidence, learn how to work in a team, become more willing to take responsibility and to use their initiative. However, students participating in mini-company programs are still a minority. This low participation may be because entrepreneurship is not included in the national curricula for vocational education in most European countries, at least to some extent.

There is a perception of a gap to be filled in terms of effectiveness. Some major reasons for this gap include:

- **Entrepreneurship not being included in all parts of the VET system.**
- **Limited student participation.**
- **Ineffective teaching methods.**
- **Lack of practical elements in entrepreneurship education.**
- **Teachers' insufficient competence.**
- **Lack of linkage between entrepreneurship and specific training subjects or professions.**
- **Inadequate involvement of business people.**

Despite the current situation being increasingly encouraging, entrepreneurship education in European vocational schools still faces challenges in uptake and effectiveness. A partial lack of

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<sup>11</sup>Mini Companies in Secondary Education [file:///Users/user/Downloads/mini\\_companies\\_en\\_3560.pdf](file:///Users/user/Downloads/mini_companies_en_3560.pdf)



competence of teachers, especially in practical entrepreneurship experience, is perceived as a significant issue.

While administrative obstacles to cooperation between schools and enterprises are minimal, ensuring the participation of small and micro-enterprises can be challenging. Regardless of the vocational training area, practical projects and activities emphasizing learning by doing are most effective in teaching entrepreneurship.

Returning to the initiatives taken by the Commission, relevant is certainly the<sup>12</sup>European Skills Agenda, a five-year plan launched in 2020. This agenda aims to ensure that all European citizens have access to high-quality education and training, as well as to develop the skills necessary for employability, economic growth, and active participation in society.

Within this agenda, gaps in entrepreneurial skills are addressed through various actions, such as updating education and training programs, aligning skills with labor market needs, and supporting entrepreneurship and innovation. These European policies and initiatives are crucial for bridging the gaps in entrepreneurial skills and promoting a dynamic and innovative entrepreneurial ecosystem in Europe. The Agency's European policies and initiatives have been designed to promote a dynamic and innovative business ecosystem in Europe and to bridge the skills gap between entrepreneurs.

Specifically, the gaps that can be considered as particularly relevant, and on which we are intervening are:

- **Entrepreneurial Skills Gap:** not all individuals possess the entrepreneurial skills necessary to successfully start and manage a business. There may be a gap in entrepreneurial skills, such as business planning, financial management, product development, marketing, and sales, which could limit entrepreneurs' ability to succeed in their entrepreneurial endeavors.
- **Access to Training and Education Gap:** entrepreneurs may face difficulties in accessing training and education opportunities that are relevant to their entrepreneurial needs. There may be a gap in access to educational and training programs aimed at developing entrepreneurial and digital skills, as well as in accessing funding and resources for entrepreneurial training.
- **Awareness of Resources and Support Services Gap:** entrepreneurs may not be fully aware of the resources and support services available to them, such as mentoring programs, business incubators, financial resources, and professional networks. This gap could limit entrepreneurs' ability to access support and resources that could help them grow and succeed in their businesses.
- **Digital Skills Gap:** despite the growing importance of digitalization in the modern economy, there may be a significant gap in digital skills among entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs in Europe. This gap could involve a lack of specific technical knowledge, the ability to effectively use digital tools for marketing, operations management, and technological innovation.
- **Time and Organization Management Skills gap:** the ability to manage your time efficiently and organize your activities is critical for freelancers. However, some might struggle to balance different projects and meet tight deadlines.
- **Marketing and sales skills:** although a freelancer may be experienced in their field of work, they may have difficulty promoting their services and finding new customers.

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<sup>12</sup> **European Skills Agenda** <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>



Marketing and sales skills are essential to attracting customers and developing loyal customers.

- **Technical skills:** many freelancers may have a good understanding of their industry, but they may lack the specific technical skills needed to tackle complex projects or use specific tools and technologies.

Starting from the actions implemented within the European Skills Agenda, specific training areas of interest to nurture the digital readiness and business acumen of aspiring self-employed individuals can be extrapolated. The European Skills Agenda commits to providing comprehensive training in digital skills, addressing the gap in digital skills among entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs in Europe.

This includes training programs that develop the ability to effectively use digital tools for marketing, operations management, and technological innovation. Additionally, it commits to including access to educational and training programs aimed at developing entrepreneurial and digital skills, as well as increasing awareness of the resources and support services available to entrepreneurs.

Although the gap in digital skills still must be bridged for aspiring freelancers in general, they already play a key role as they possess a mix of entrepreneurial acumen and technological competence, exploiting their experience in digital projects. As reported by <sup>13</sup>BCG interview, over 80% of freelancers work in tech/ data, communication/marketing and web/photo/ sound creation professions. Their specializations cover several major job categories, including:

These areas of interest are those where freelancers make the most of their skills. Nevertheless, these areas are very changeable and consequently require continuous training, upskilling and reskilling, which leads the learning process for aspiring freelancers and freelancers to tend to infinity.

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<sup>13</sup> BCG, Freelance in Europe 2022: <https://web-assets.bcg.com/31/47/1090a2524cbcbbf93606b233ce3b/freelancng-in-europe-2022.pdf>



## Opportunities: training available and operational tools

Research conducted by Malt and BCG<sup>14</sup> sheds light on the motivations driving individuals to choose freelancing as a career path. Across various markets, the primary motivating factor for freelancers is "independence", closely followed by "flexibility in their agenda," "the ability to choose their work location," and the "power to select clients and projects" aligned with their interests and expertise.

Moreover, highly skilled professionals increasingly find freelancing appealing due to the autonomy, flexibility, and improved work-life balance it offers. Malt and BCG's data also reveals that freelancers devote an average of four hours per week to developing their skills or staying updated in their field. Furthermore, freelancers confirm that companies often collaborate with them to leverage their specific expertise, highlighting the growing need for upskilling within organizations.

Their dynamic nature and high level of skill make them valuable assets for companies striving to keep pace with digital transformation. The burgeoning freelance phenomenon and its increasing significance within companies have prompted attention of the EU, which has set up training channels. Freelancers and the self-employed are being addressed within the European landscape from an educational and training standpoint, facilitated by frameworks such as EntreComp<sup>15</sup>.

Developed by DG Employment and Social Affairs and Inclusion EntreComp identifies and describes essential entrepreneurial in 15 skills in three main areas:

- ***ideas and opportunities;***
- ***resources;***
- ***the action.***

These skills apply in a general way and are not specialist, they can be individual or collective and are suitable for all life paths, building a bridge between the world of education and the professional one. The 15 skills include a total of 60 thematic threads, each of which is divided into eight skill levels, resulting in 442 possible learning outcomes.

You can use EntreComp in various ways, including:

- **Support of strategies** and practices to develop the entrepreneurial mentality;
- **Designing programs** to develop and assess entrepreneurial skills at all levels of formal and non-formal education, as well as lifelong learning for adults;
- **Support for the training of educators**, trainers and teachers to achieve entrepreneurial competence;
- **Development of programs** to promote entrepreneurial learning in various sectors of the economy;
- **Recognition and certification** of skills and competences.

1. **Information and data literacy:** to articulate information needs, to locate and retrieve digital data, information and content. To judge the relevance of the source and its content. To store, manage, and organise digital data, information and content.
2. **Communication and collaboration:** to interact, communicate and collaborate through digital technologies while being aware of cultural and generational diversity. To participate in

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<sup>14</sup> Article citation MALT x BCG already inserted above.

<sup>15</sup> EUR-Lex, EntreComp: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/IT/legal-content/glossary/entrecomp.html>



society through public and private digital services and participatory citizenship. To manage one's digital presence, identity and reputation.

3. **Digital content creation:** to create and edit digital content to improve and integrate information and content into an existing body of knowledge while understanding how copyright and licences are to be applied. To know how to give understandable instructions for a computer system.
4. **Safety:** to protect devices, content, personal data and privacy in digital environments. To protect physical and psychological health, and to be aware of digital technologies for social well-being and social inclusion. To be aware of the environmental impact of digital technologies and their use.
5. **Problem solving:** to identify needs and problems, and to resolve conceptual problems and problem situations in digital environments. To use digital tools to innovate processes and products. To keep up-to-date with the digital evolution.

The European Union provides funding<sup>16</sup> for various initiatives aimed at supporting entrepreneurship, including freelancers. These programs often include training components focused on skills development, business management, and access to funding. Some of the programmes strongly focused on this objective are Erasmus+ and Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, an exchange programme for entrepreneurs offering the opportunity to work alongside an experienced entrepreneur in another participating country.

As regards the training of young entrepreneurs, <sup>17</sup>OECD (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development), publishes recommendation (adopted in June 2022) on creating better opportunities for them. It is an International Organization who work with governments, public policy makers and citizens to define international standards to address the social-economic challenges of our times. The Recommendation outlines can implement government-wide strategies to support young people, including through skills, education, employment, social and public governance policies.

The Recommendation is structured around five building blocks and recommends that adherents:

- **Ensure** that young people of all backgrounds and in all circumstances acquire relevant knowledge and develop appropriate skills and competencies;
- **Support** young people in their transition into and within the labour market, and strive to improve labor market outcomes for young people, and especially those in vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances;
- **Promote social inclusion** and youth well-being beyond economic outcomes, with measures targeted at young people in vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances;
- **Establish** the legal, institutional and administrative settings to strengthen the trust of young people of all backgrounds in government, and their relationships with public institutions;
- **Reinforce** administrative and technical capacities to deliver youth-responsive services and address age-based inequalities through close collaboration across all levels of government.

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<sup>16</sup> Citation EUROPEAN COMMISSION, EU funding programmes, already inserted above.

<sup>17</sup> OECD, The missing Entrepreneur 2023: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/230efc78-en.pdf?expires=1713369545&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=74D9AE285273A282FEEB322E5B936A04>



It calls on governments to promote equitable access to entrepreneurship, including social entrepreneurship, through counselling (including post-creation coaching), training of entrepreneurial competencies, and access to finance and networks, as well as facilitate the promotion of innovative entrepreneurship in post-secondary institutions.

In most countries, there is a variety of organizations co-existing providing training and protection of workers' interests, including self-employers. For example, Chamber of Commerce, business network that aims to advance the interests of the business community, ensure the providing of vocational training as well as the Employer organizations that ensure information and training.

All the examples of supported discussions and policies constitute practical evidence of how the European Union is addressing the training issue for those who want to try their hand at entrepreneurship. This includes freelancers, who are deeply involved in the matter. Opportunities such as available training and operational tools are crucial for aspiring freelancers.



## Challenges

As we have observed by analysing the European landscape, the phenomenon of freelancing is continuously expanding and evolving, aligning with modern digitalization and the current needs of the labour market. The following section of the report examines the challenges that negatively impact the development and professionalization pathways of aspiring freelancers in Europe. These challenges can stem from a variety of factors, both endogenous and structural.

<sup>18</sup>OECD research reveals that many entrepreneurs face significant barriers in starting and sustaining their businesses, falling into four broad categories: institutional barriers, finance accessibility issues, lack of entrepreneurial skills, and limited networks. These barriers are often interconnected; for example, someone with low levels of entrepreneurship skills will have more difficulty identifying sources of potential financing for their business and will likely have difficulties building strong networks since they are less effective at identifying opportunities.

They are also influenced by various factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, and employment status, resulting in disparities across different entrepreneur groups.

<sup>19</sup>In the Malt and BCG'S research have been catalogued and identified the major challenges currently faced by freelancers.

The research focuses on data collected by freelancers from France, Spain, and Germany, but these issues can be considered common among various European self-employed individuals. "Negotiating with clients" emerges as the most identified pain point across all markets, followed by "being paid on time" and "handling administrative tasks".

These challenges are to be considered with endogenous factors to the freelance world, as they depend mainly on the skills and resources of the individual freelancer rather than the structural support of the market. Negotiating with clients often proves to be complex, which may be associated with another similar issue which is the negotiation of contracts, as freelancers act as their own sales representatives. This necessitates adept negotiation skills and the ability to assert conditions with seemingly more powerful counterparts.

This self-representation can also pose challenges in clients acquisition and marketing, especially for new freelancers; in fact, this requires marketing skills and a solid professional network of contacts. Obviously, when we talk about customers, we also refer to the companies themselves. As already presented above, administrative tasks, including financial management, present another sore point for freelancers. Effective financial management, encompassing invoicing, tax handling, and long-term planning, is crucial but can be daunting without proper training or resources.

In addition to endogenous challenges, freelancers grapple with structural issues within their operating systems. Access to social protection systems and contribution payment issues are notable challenges. Self-employed individuals are responsible for their social protection enrollment and contribution payments, which can be daunting for those with limited or irregular incomes, leading to limited job protection and access to social security and health insurance.

Unlike employees, freelancers may have limited access to social security, health insurance, and other employment benefits. Furthermore, society and legislators lack comprehensive understanding of freelancing, hindering the establishment of adequate rules to ensure freelancers' access to financial instruments, health insurance, and social protection. This lack of understanding of the phenomenon at the institutional level inevitably leads to a difficult knowledge of it at the local level, by the citizens themselves.

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<sup>18</sup> Citation OECD, The missing Entrepreneur 2023 inserted above.

<sup>19</sup> Article citation MALT x BCG already inserted above.



Knowledge of freelancing in the most isolated areas of the EU (as in small countries and rural areas), can be influenced also from other challenges including:

- **Low awareness:** in some rural and isolated communities, the concept of freelancing may not be well understood or known. This may be due to lack of exposure to non-traditional work patterns or limited access to information and resources on the issue.
- **Established working tradition:** in many rural areas, traditional work activities such as agriculture, livestock and local trade can be more widespread and considered the main sources of income. As a result, the concept of freelancing may be less relevant or less known.
- **Limited connectivity and resources:** rural and isolated communities may also have limited access to high-speed Internet and other resources that are essential for freelance work, such as online platforms and digital tools. This can limit the opportunity for residents to explore or engage in freelance work.

Moreover, despite the existence of platforms and networks that support EU freelancers, such as <sup>20</sup>Upwork, <sup>21</sup>Freelancer, <sup>22</sup>Fiverr, or the afore mentioned Malt, there are no awareness programmes directly set up by institutions that focus on the direct support of freelancers at local level.

In general, the level of knowledge of freelancing in remote areas will depend on several factors, including resource accessibility, local work traditions, demographic age, and availability of alternative employment opportunities. Raising awareness and education on this topic could be useful to raise awareness and adopt freelancers in these areas, as well as to reduce the gaps previously mentioned as "Awareness of Resources and Support Services Gap" and "Access to Training and Education Gap:"

Speaking instead of youth entrepreneurship<sup>23</sup>, this is also going through significant difficulties and challenges. While many young people express interest in entrepreneurship, few translate this ambition into action. For example, a new survey in the EU shows that 39% of young people would prefer to be self-employed over working as an employee. In 2022, about 7% of youth were self-employed in the EU.

While the self-employment rate has remained relatively unchanged over the last decade, the share of self-employed youth with employees has decreased. Factors such as the COVID-19 crisis, cost-of-living challenges, and shifts in youth entrepreneurial motivations contribute to the stagnation in self-employment rates among youth in the EU.

In summary, freelancers encounter a multitude of challenges, both intrinsic and systemic, underscoring the need for comprehensive support mechanisms and policy interventions to foster a conducive environment for freelancing and youth entrepreneurship in Europe.

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<sup>20</sup> **UPWORK:** One of the largest freelance platforms in the world, connecting freelancers with clients around the world for various projects.

<sup>21</sup> **FREELANCER:** Similar to Upwork, Freelancer is a global platform that offers freelance job opportunities in a wide range of industries.

<sup>22</sup> **FIVERR:** Fiverr is a platform that allows freelancers to offer their services in a variety of categories, from graphics to marketing, to writing and more.

<sup>23</sup> **Citation OECD,** The missing Entrepreneur 2023 inserted above.



## Conclusions

The analysis conducted regarding the situation of freelancing phenomenon in the European context leads to a significant overview regarding the future development of the sector. Freelancing appears to be more alive than ever, albeit permeated by the complex intersections of economy, society, and politics, in a globally changing landscape increasingly propelled towards digitalization and the gig economy boom.

Through quantitative and qualitative data, we have reached several conclusions that outline both the opportunities and challenges freelancers face in the contemporary European context. First and foremost, we have observed the remarkable geographical and economic diversity characterizing the freelance landscape in Europe. This heterogeneity reflects not only differences in the size and economic structure of countries but also variations in labour policies and occupational trends, although countries like Italy, the United Kingdom, and France play a leading role. European freelancing has nonetheless had to face and is still facing common and unequivocal challenges.

The pandemic has been a real test for freelancers, with a contraction of activity during the health crisis. Gender and generational disparities in the freelance sector remain a significant challenge. The male predominance and the greater representation of older age groups highlight the importance of promoting inclusion and equal opportunities for all self-employed workers, regardless of gender or age.

Despite the challenges, freelancers already play a fundamental role in the European economy, offering a unique combination of specialized skills, flexibility, and innovation. In particular, the word "flexibility" fully describes the world of freelancing, especially in relation to the corporate world.

A company can choose an external freelance consultant and enjoy several advantages, including being able to entrust the work to a professional with specific skills and choose another freelancer at the end of the job if those skills were not satisfactory. Collaboration, in any case, is fluid and brings innovation and new stimuli to the company. Freelancers tend to have enthusiasm to spare, to make themselves known, and to expand their online reputation.

All this drives the freelancing movement towards increasing solidity and attractiveness, which can only suggest a trend change soon, bringing about greater involvement of the population in a broader sense, especially regarding its younger component. It is essential to provide them with the necessary support to face daily challenges, from negotiating with clients to administrative management and access to social protection. In this regard, the European Union has and will have a key role in promoting self-employment and entrepreneurship through a series of initiatives and policies.

In conclusion, addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities offered by the freelance sector requires collective commitment from governments, institutions, and sector organizations. Only through synergistic collaboration and joint commitment will it be possible to create a favourable environment for the growth and prosperity of freelancers in Europe, thus contributing to shaping the future of work in the digital age.



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