

10-28-2019

An Autoethnographic Report on Freelance Employment in the Malaysian Oil and Gas Industry During Uncertain Economic Conditions

Fathullah Akmal Khalid
University of Malaya, f_akmal@hotmail.com

Wai Meng Chan
University of Malaya, chanwm@um.edu.my

Azlina Abdul Jalil
University of Malaya, azlinajalil@um.edu.my

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Benefits and Compensation Commons](#), and the [Training and Development Commons](#)

This Article has supplementary content. View the full record on NSUWorks here:
<https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss10/13>

Recommended APA Citation

Khalid, F. A., Chan, W. M., & Abdul Jalil, A. (2019). An Autoethnographic Report on Freelance Employment in the Malaysian Oil and Gas Industry During Uncertain Economic Conditions. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(10), 2592-2607. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3949>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



An Autoethnographic Report on Freelance Employment in the Malaysian Oil and Gas Industry During Uncertain Economic Conditions

Abstract

In this paper we present our study of the role of freelancers in the modern labour market, especially during times of economic downturns. Using an autoethnographic research approach, it presents the personal journey of Fathullah working as a consultant in the oil and gas industry in Malaysia. The study focuses on the impact of the 2014 oil price crash and his subsequent plight in taking his career forward during times of uncertainty. Based on the autoethnographic account, it explores various aspects of life as a freelancer such as the issues of job security and job satisfaction. Fathullah found that he enjoyed a different form of job security compared to the time when he was in regular employment, for he has direct market access and wider reach to organizations that require his skills. It follows that he also experienced better job satisfaction as a freelancer. This paper provides insights to aspiring job seekers, businesses in need of human capital and policy-makers aiming to modernize the labour market.

Keywords

Freelance, Autoethnography, Employment, Oil and Gas Industry, Economic Uncertainties

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

We wish to acknowledge that the research is funded by a grant from the University of Malaya (Project No GPF011I-2018) and thank the reviewers and editors of The Qualitative Report for their constructive comments which have helped us to improve the paper.

An Autoethnographic Report on Freelance Employment in the Malaysian Oil and Gas Industry During Uncertain Economic Conditions

Fathullah Akmal Khalid, Wai Meng Chan, and Azlina Abdul Jalil
University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

In this paper we present our study of the role of freelancers in the modern labour market, especially during times of economic downturns. Using an autoethnographic research approach, it presents the personal journey of Fathullah working as a consultant in the oil and gas industry in Malaysia. The study focuses on the impact of the 2014 oil price crash and his subsequent plight in taking his career forward during times of uncertainty. Based on the autoethnographic account, it explores various aspects of life as a freelancer such as the issues of job security and job satisfaction. Fathullah found that he enjoyed a different form of job security compared to the time when he was in regular employment, for he has direct market access and wider reach to organizations that require his skills. It follows that he also experienced better job satisfaction as a freelancer. This paper provides insights to aspiring job seekers, businesses in need of human capital and policy-makers aiming to modernize the labour market. Keywords: Freelance, Autoethnography, Employment, Oil and Gas Industry, Economic Uncertainties

Introduction

The global workforce landscape is an ever-changing environment. Traditionally, freelance workers or freelancers were viewed as a source of unskilled and low-priced labour. They were considered a predominantly shadow workforce employed to serve as substitutes for permanent employees (Burke, 2015). However, the landscape of the labour market is changing. There is a rise of a class of freelance and self-employed workers in the modern economy driven by technological advancements. This trend is observable across a broad range of industries. It has been recognized that freelance workers help shape the modern economy to be more flexible, agile, entrepreneurial and innovative (Burke, 2015). They serve a dynamic role in organizations, mainly working as complements to employees and frequently undertaking innovation which leads to job creation (Burke, 2015). As a result, freelancers now include highly skilled individuals with high-income (Burke & Cowling, 2015).

In Malaysia, the emergence of this new class of workers is also evident (Kaur, 2017) by the multiple online freelance marketplace platforms as well as the rise of digital nomads. Examples of online freelance marketplace include TheLorry and HonestBee that match freelance workers with employers for short-term, one-off jobs. Digital nomads on the other hand are a class of freelance workers who are highly dependent on the telecommunications technology to earn a living. They do not require a permanent address to live or work, for they work in any location, serving clients that may be located halfway across the globe. Physical evidence of the rise in this new class of workers, is evidenced by the growing number of co-working spaces, providing freelance professionals with shared office facilities, especially in the Klang Valley. According to Krishnamoorthy, Baharudin, and Karkonasasi (2016), the

increasing number of freelancers in Malaysia is driven by the need to stay competitive and achieve financial security against the rising cost of living.

It is recognized that there is emergence of new areas of research on the freelancing industry due to the recent developments and rapid changes faced by the industry (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2016). The same was also mentioned by James Collings, the Chairman of the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self Employed, UK (Burke, 2015). Our paper aims to evaluate the suitability of freelancing as a career path, especially for highly skilled and innovative individuals.

Using an autoethnographic approach, our study explores the plight and challenges faced by Fathullah working as an employee in an oil and gas consultancy facing low volume of work. It investigates Fathullah's personal experiences, feelings, emotions and actions after having his employment contract terminated due to redundancy, his struggles and his subsequent venture into freelancing so that he could continue his professional development and at the same time provide for his young family.

In particular, Fathullah found that due to direct market access and wider reach to organizations that require his skills, he enjoyed a different form of job security compared to the time when he was in regular employment. It follows that he also experienced better job satisfaction as a freelancer. Our paper provides insights to aspiring job seekers, businesses in need of human capital and policy-makers aiming to modernize the labour market.

The organization of our paper is as follows: The next section provides a review of freelance employment related literature in both the Malaysian and global context. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology employed in this study, and an account of Fathullah's personal experience and self-reflection of working under a traditional employment contract and as a freelancer. Next is a discussion of the Fathullah's account vis-à-vis findings from previous research. This paper concludes with the important role played by freelancers in making the labour market more efficient.

Literature Review

Talent Management in the Oil and Gas Industry

Malaysia is resource-rich, and the oil and gas industry plays a significant role in its economy. In the past, the country's economic development was largely related to the development of the oil and gas industry. The local industry was supported by many oil and gas businesses as well as highly paid professional workers.

Bahuguna (2014) highlighted major challenges in recruitment and talent management in the oil and gas industry, particularly before the oil price crash in 2014. The industry faced a talent crunch as on one hand the industry required skilled workers but on the other hand it was faced with increasing retirement rates. Rigorous talent management systems were deployed to attract and retain the best employees with a focus on young professionals and graduates. At this time, the use of freelancers for projects were unheard of as this was inconsistent with the long-term recruitment aims of the industry to ensure a constant and uninterrupted talent pipeline that was important to sustain the industry.

Although the use of freelancers was not prevalent, Vestre (2016) reported that outsourcing in the oil and gas industry was commonly practised and well established in both core competencies and supportive activities such as in the area of risk management. Outsourcing was used as a strategy for long-term stability and to achieve efficiency in operations to stay ahead of the competition. The findings support Ravago (2007) that reported the use of business process outsourcing in the oil and gas industry as part of the strategy to finding a complicated balance between rising demand and diminishing existing reserves.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that jobs were outsourced to firms and not directly to individual freelancers.

In mid-June 2014, crude oil prices began falling after reaching a peak of USD115 per barrel. It was found that this was due to the surging production of shale oil since 2008, an alternative to the conventional crude oil. Since oil demand was price inelastic, this surge in supply resulted in significant drop in price. The surge in the production of unconventional oil (shale oil) had also rendered the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) ineffective in controlling world oil price. As a result, oil price dropped to about USD25 a barrel in early 2016, before it rebounded to about USD60 at the end of 2017.

There were signs of recovery in global capital expenditure spending by oil majors but its impact on the Malaysian market would continue to be flat (Rozidin, 2018). Similarly, for the 2018 - 2020 outlook, PETRONAS had planned for a “lower for longer” environment – where oil prices would hover around USD50 - USD60 per barrel (Petronas, 2017). There would be a continuation of the previous drive to keep costs down and improve efficiency, driven by economies of scale and exploring new frontiers with technology.

Definition of Freelance Employment

Freelancers may be defined as those genuinely in business on their own account, working alone or with partners in skilled non-manual occupations. Freelancers perform assignments, either in series or in parallel, for several different organizations or clients on a commercial rather than an employment contract basis (Krishnamoorthy et al., 2016). The freelancers do not work for a single firm. They contract out their services and move on to other projects and companies after completion (Ayers, Miller, Park, Schwartz, & Antcliff, 2016).

Freelance Employment Trends

Freelance employment is a force to be reckoned with. Shevchuk and Stebkov (2015) reported substantial increase in freelance numbers in post-socialist Russia. It was found that freelancers represent a new generation of well-educated and motivated workers engaged in ICT and creative industries, which are crucial for modernising the economy. Similarly, Kitching (2015) found that there was a substantial increase in freelance numbers and growth as a proportion of all workforce jobs in the past 20 years in the UK.

Then upward trend of freelance employment could be explained from the perspectives of both organizations and freelancers. According to Kitching (2015), organizations could engage workers using various employment options to suit their operational requirements. Specifically, organizations had restructured their operations to match labour inputs with commercial requirements with flexibility and cost savings in mind. Incorporating freelancers in the available talent pool was one of the means to achieve these aims. Additionally, the shift from manual labour towards skilled labour in the knowledge economy increased the demand for professional freelance workers. Lastly, technological changes have made it possible for freelancers to serve their clients remotely with a portable computer and the advent of increasing broadband internet penetration further reduced the barriers of freelancing.

The Freelance Industry Report surveyed 1,491 freelancers in more than 50 different fields and professions with the goal to better understand these groups of people (Gandia, 2012). The global study found that most of the respondents choose freelancing because it offered both freedom and flexibility and allowed them to pursue their passion. There was also a significant size of respondents who did not plan on becoming a freelancer but were instead driven to freelancing due to downsizing or an inability to find full-time employment.

Use and Value of Freelancers

Currently, freelancers have a unique position in the labour market and in most cases, they are no longer regarded as mere substitutes to traditional employees. Burke and Cowling (2015) revealed that freelancers are perceived by managers to be a relatively high value-adding segment of the labour force, particularly useful in dynamic and innovative business environments. They found that freelancers allow business to reduce barriers to entry as it allowed start-ups and businesses run by young entrepreneurs to compete with larger and more established players in the market.

Additionally, Burke and Cowling also found that freelancers reduce risk and financial requirements for business expansions and enhancements, allowing the business to be agile, flexible and efficient. By employing freelancers, businesses can reduce its labour overheads such as costs associated with downtime (idle time), allowing organic growth without the risk of unsustainable labour costs in case the growth plan did not materialise. Further, an organization may gather freelancers such as scientists, engineers and innovators to work on individual projects. It follows that the concept of the production of a film which requires many people of different skills and talents and thus, is popularly referred to as the Hollywood model of employment.

Prior researchers also found that freelancers are highly skilled and contribute to innovation, both for themselves and for their client firms (Ayers et al., 2016; Burke, 2015; Shevchuk & Strebkov, 2015; Van Stel & De Vries, 2015). The freelance environment allows businesses to use a greater specialisation of labour (Burke & Cowling, 2015). At the same time, the freelance working environment allowed individual freelance workers to focus on developing a niche skill set that is in demand by the market.

In sum, by employing freelancers who are specialised in their respective skills, businesses can adopt a variable cost (pay as you go) labour model that facilitates agility, flexibility and efficiency.

Freelancing, Flexible Work and Job Satisfaction

Freelancing is often associated with flexible work arrangements as it gives the worker a higher level of control over when and where work is performed. On the downside, one of the defining characteristics of freelancing is its uncertain working conditions (Webster & Randle, 2016). Ordinarily, freelancers do not enjoy a steady stream of work and income as compared to traditional employees. Hence, job security is a concern among freelancers. Freelancers typically rely on word-of-mouth marketing techniques, mass marketing strategies, positive feedback and referrals from clients to grow their business (Gandia, 2012). Thus, freelancers have to employ various tools to showcase capabilities and previous works to woo new jobs. It follows that freelancers must be creative and innovative to provide a unique selling point to prospective clients.

Though prior studies have shown that job security has a positive impact on job satisfaction (Idrees, Hafeez, & Kim, 2017; Zeytinoglu et al., 2012), Müller (2016) found that freelance professionals enjoy high job satisfaction despite low job security. This could be due to other dominant factors, resulting in more job satisfaction for freelancers despite the job insecurity. Meager (2015) found that freelancing and self-employment involve higher intrinsic job quality and job satisfaction than working as a regular employee in a traditional employment contract. This finding is also supported by Syrett (2016) who opined that professional freelancers and contract workers are happy about the way they work and thus experience job satisfaction.

In addition, it was also observed by Lucky, Minai, and Hamzah (2015) that the job security enjoyed by permanent employees is highly dependent on the current economic situation. During times of economic downturn, permanent employees are equally facing uncertain conditions ranging from loss of employment-related benefits, pay cuts to loss of employment. On the other hand, exceptional skills that are valuable to organizations can help a freelancer enjoy job security even during turbulent times.

Research Approach

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses the researcher's self-observation and reflective investigation in the context of ethnographic fieldwork and writing (Maréchal, 2010). It is a research method that uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences, and at the same time acknowledges and values the researcher's relationships with others (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Autoethnographers rely on memory and recall emotions to narrate experience. They step back in time and examine the moments that are etched in memory; the important moments in life that have impacted them (Parke, 2018).

As the researcher employs deep and careful self-reflection or reflexivity to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the specific and the general, the personal and the political, the autoethnographic approach shows the reader the experience of the researcher's process of figuring what to do, how to live and the meaning of the researcher's struggles. This research approach allows intellectual and methodological rigour, emotion and creativity to be balanced.

As a qualitative method, autoethnography focuses on specific knowledge rather than general information about large groups of people. It offers nuanced, complex and detailed knowledge about certain lives, experiences and relationships. The research looks at human intentions, motivations, emotions and actions (Adams et al., 2015). This is different from generating demographic information and general descriptions of interactions as per the output of quantitative research.

Though the use of autoethnographic approach is relatively scarce in the field of business research, this method is slowly gaining recognition (Davie, 2008; Gibbon, 2012; Nair & Devi, 2015; Syrett, 2016). Using autoethnography in the field of business research allows for a personal but critical perspective to be adopted in the search for alternative explanations involving individuals and business phenomena. For example, in Syrett (2016), the researcher drew on his own experience to explore the well-being of professional freelancers.

Justification

In this paper, we adopt an autoethnographic research approach by using Fathullah's personal experiences and self-reflection in exploring the subject matter. This research approach allows the autobiographical story to be associated with a wider cultural, social and political meanings and understandings. This method offers a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding (Wall, 2008).

Additionally, this research approach allows the study to examine nuanced and complex elements of social life, detailed and intimate personal experiences, professional and personal relationships, related to life as a freelancer in Malaysia. Although hard sciences and mathematics can be used to investigate employment trends or develop mathematical models to

predict the labour market, they can never provide a deep insight of what a freelancer feels, thinks, says or does.

Although there is an increase in the importance of freelancers in the modern dynamic and innovation-driven economy, traditional research has only focused on regular employees and this does not resonate with the labour market performance of more highly skilled freelancers (Burke, 2015). By using autoethnography, this paper contributes by comparing existing research findings and theory in the field of freelancing with Fathullah's personal experiences as a freelance worker. This is a powerful tool that offers valuable deep insights by allowing scholars to connect these two sources of knowledge.

Further, using the autoethnographic approach allows this research to be accessible to multiple audiences by engaging a wide range of readers. It calls for a storytelling approach using language and ways that best engage academics and non-academics alike. Specifically, the work has scholarly content whilst at the same time being available and accessible to the masses. In contrast, traditional esoteric academic articles are usually shelved and skimmed quickly online. This limits their impact and potential to create change in the lives of the readers. This study hopes to overcome that limitation.

This paper is part of a larger study (Project No. GPF011I-2018) which examines freelancing from the views of players in the oil and gas industry as a result of the recent oil crisis. In this current study the focus is on employees and insight was gained from Fathullah's experience as a freelancer. All authors worked together to identify the themes and constructed the paper.

Vignettes of Fathullah

Fathullah's personal account is provided in the form of vignettes and written in chronological order, beginning from the time he graduated.

Professional and Career Background

I graduated in 2008, at a time that was relatively good for job seekers especially fresh graduates. Armed with a chemical engineering degree, I managed to secure work and reported for duty in Kuala Lumpur as an internal auditor. As an internal auditor, I gained immense work experience and insight into the inner workings of large organizations. It was my experience that subsequently helped me to secure a position as a risk and safety consultant with a multinational consultancy company in Kuala Lumpur; a position that required me to review and analyse the safety aspects of my client's operations and advise them on areas of significant risk in accordance with established safety regulations. Almost all my clients came from the oil and gas industry, where there is a need for highly complex studies to protect personnel from fire, explosion and toxic hazards.

"Think carefully, why do you work? Do you really need to work?" a question I frequently pondered even to this day. I was under the impression that most people work for money, not only to pay bills and necessities, but also to enjoy the luxuries of life. Was I going to be the same? I hoped not. I considered working as the way I contribute to the betterment of myself, my family and the people around me. Through working professionally, I contributed directly to the nation and society. And why did I feel this way? Well, my family and society had brought me up, they gave me the best world-quality education that subsequently unlocked multiple career opportunities. With this privilege, I realised that I have the responsibility to shape the future of this nation and make a positive impact on its people.

I believed that salary and other employment benefits that a worker draws is influenced by how others perceive his professional contributions to society: those who make better

contributions created more value and command a higher salary. By applying this logic, I concluded that a surgeon is paid more per hour than a teacher because society perceives the effort of saving human lives is much more important than the effort invested in educating others. Hence, to ensure that my income increases in accordance with my needs, I had to always improve my professional expertise, so that I may deliver high-quality work and create better values for others.

As a risk and safety consultant, I learnt a lot from my colleagues and teammates. The team consisted of Malaysians and a small number of highly skilled expatriates. There was one expatriate who inspired me: a 70-year-old Dutch, who has extensive work experience in this field. He was sought after in Malaysia and other countries in the region. He was not a person who knew everything in the field, but he knew a small part of the discipline, which made him highly respected and highly sought after in the industry. Inspired by this, I set my career ambition to become an expert in the field of safety risk. Similarly, I wanted to become a highly skilled expert in a niche field so that I would be the first person to be consulted whenever people in the industry encounter a safety issue.

Besides the company I was working for, there were also several other similar consultancies in the market that were regarded as competitors. Most of these companies would compete for jobs from oil and gas asset owners to perform risk analysis and produce safety reports on their assets and facilities. Examples of oil and gas asset owners in Malaysia are PETRONAS, Shell, SapuraKencana and UMW Oil and Gas. Although my company mainly served the Malaysian market, there was also a healthy number of international projects. Due to the steady number of projects, most of these consultancies employed a mix of graduates, experienced workers and expatriates to make up the workforce using permanent or long-term employment contracts.

Uncertainties in the Malaysian Oil and Gas Industry

The Malaysian oil and gas industry was highly influenced by the movements of the world oil market. Throughout history, there were fluctuations in the global oil price. The latest round of decline started in mid-June 2014 (Samuelson, 2014). Effects of the oil price crisis were not immediately felt as we still had many projects in the pipeline. However, due to reduction in the economic activities in the oil and gas industry, eventually work dried up. Some jobs were cancelled. At that time, the local oil and gas industry was not efficient due to the high number of independent small consultancies. Some of them exited the market, while others merged or were acquired by larger companies.

As a consultant, my productivity was measured by the industry using a term called chargeability. It was a percentage score measuring the amount of time in a week spent on chargeable projects (invoiceable projects under active contract with a client). A chargeability of 90% meant that in a typical 40-hour week, 36 hours or 4.5-man days were used to work on chargeable projects. Before the oil crisis occurred, consultants like me were recording a chargeability of 80% to 90%. By 2015, the chargeability rate dropped into the range of 10% to 20% as all work had been exhausted. To make matters worse, there was also strong negative price pressure from clients. This meant that not only the hours worked were reduced, the rate that we were paid per hour was slashed.

To make up for the low chargeability, my colleagues and I found that we were reassigned to generic duties and internal projects that were unrelated to our main expertise in risk and safety consultancy. For example, we had to sell software to clients, attend industry and networking events to upsell our services and work on projects with other business segments that required a different set of skills. There were weekly internal training and experience sharing sessions where one of us would share various topics with others. In short, although we

were still employed, the amount of time spent while employed did not contribute to our professional development! I realised that instead of becoming an expert, my colleagues and I were slowly becoming a jack of all trades, master of none. Additionally, we found that corporate events were scaled down, our overtime benefits were revoked, and a plethora of cost-cutting measures was introduced.

Notwithstanding, even though 2015 was an uncertain and unproductive year, there was no redundancy in our team. Perhaps, the management was still expecting this slump to be temporary and retaining us, even at a loss, meant that they could immediately serve the market once it recovers. Nevertheless, colleagues started to leave the company for better opportunities offered by competitors and other employers in the market. There were companies in the market that were using this opportunity to gain talents when the market was depressed. When one of us left, those who remained had to take over their legacy projects.

As more of my teammates left the company, the number of legacy projects I had to handle increased; working conditions worsened. I began to wish I could leave for a better job. So, I let the job market know that I was actively seeking for another job. My opportunity came in mid-2015 when a recruiter offered to match me with an employer who had a vacant position due to an employee leaving the company. It was a smaller consultancy. They gave me an offer that was even better than my current job. As a plus, I could move to a new company with a clean sheet by leaving all legacy projects I inherited from others behind.

Even though I managed to secure a new position, there were not many changes in the market – the gloomy outlook remained. When I joined, we had a team of three consultants. Initially, there was plenty of work for everyone, but this eventually dried up. My chargeability dropped to a point that I believed I was not contributing to the company's profits and thus, unsustainable to the company. In 2016, I started to hear news of layoffs involving my colleagues. We started 2016 with a team of three consultants and by the end of the year, I was the only one to remain.

Due to the uncertainty, I had to prepare myself and my family so that we could handle the undesirable event that my employment is terminated. I had to save a large bulk of my salary to prepare for unemployment. To make the best of this downturn, I also enrolled as an MBA student in a local university with the hope to gain an MBA degree when the market recovers, thus boosting my employability and competitiveness in the labour market.

Termination of Employment

“Fathullah, I'm sorry but we have to let you go,” said the general manager who just arrived from Perth a day before for his regular business visits to Kuala Lumpur. We stared into each other's face and I could clearly see he was deeply concerned. Anxious thoughts passed through my mind, “Finally, this is the day! It finally came!” He did not have to explain this dreadful decision, as we both knew the reasons and conditions at that time. One could say that I was prepared for this to happen. I expressed my gratitude for having me as part of the team and more importantly, for retaining me until that day. I strongly believed that my chargeability was very low and that the company incurred losses by retaining me in the workforce. That day, I knew the company could no longer afford to keep me. The signs were clear, for instance, not long ago, most of my colleagues in Kuala Lumpur and Perth were put on a four-day work week which also came with a 20% reduction in salary. The general manager told me that the company hopes to re-engage me when the market recovers. “We didn't want to let you go, it's hard to get good talent,” he said. We shook hands and I returned to my desk. Upon reflection, I was happy with the way the meeting turned out to be, and nothing could have made it any better.

The company gave me two months' notice for the termination of employment in accordance with my employment contract. It was more than ample time for me to hand over

my duties. I also used the extra time I had in office to update my resume and gear up for another round of job hunting. My quest for a regular full-time position was not successful. I had plenty of enquiries and requests for resume for positions both local and overseas, but few face-to-face interviews and zero materialised offers.

I found that in a span of two years, the job market had worsened. Moreover, many of my former colleagues in the industry were either unemployed or had exited the industry. Even those who were still working were not happy with the market conditions. I kept asking myself, “Does this mean I am no longer required by society? As a displaced worker, how am I supposed to contribute to society and what role can I play? How am I going to provide for my family?” I was worried. My wife was working but her income was insufficient to support the family. My financial contribution was significant and crucial. Besides that, I was also concerned with the unemployment gap that would appear in my resume, knowing that employers have higher regards for job seekers who are currently employed than those who are unemployed.

Initiation as a Freelancer

One day I was approached by an acquaintance from the industry. His company had recently downsized, but he was still getting small risk and safety consultancy projects albeit fewer in numbers from his existing clients. He did not want to abandon his long-term clients. At the same time, he did not have assurance from his clients that there would be a regular stream of work to justify employing a permanent staff under the company’s payroll. He proposed to me a long-term associate employment contract. It was basically a freelance contract where I would get a cut for serving his clients as an agent of his company. To me at that time, that was the next best alternative to unemployment. Therefore, I accepted it.

What intrigued me about this arrangement was unlike a traditional employment contract, there was no clause in the agreement that forbid me from accepting work from another employer. However, this contract would be terminated should I choose to accept a full-time position elsewhere. Immediately, I realised that I was not bound by an exclusive employment relationship. I was free to seek jobs from other parties! This meant I could take up multiple jobs and have potentially unlimited income streams. Upon realising this, I contacted all my previous employers and clients offering myself as a freelancer. They agreed to contact me if there were freelance opportunities.

Working as a Freelancer

The expiration of my two months’ notice period marked the start of a new journey in my professional life, a life as a freelancer. For the first time as a working adult, I was no longer employed, a status that I had enjoyed continuously for more than nine years since my graduation. I was no longer required to leave my house early in the morning to face the rush hour traffic. I found that I could take vacations without obtaining permission from any employer. I was free to pursue various sports and hobbies, some of which I had left during my university days. I enjoyed flexitime, working from home and flexible work arrangement. This was somewhat liberating. However, there were also negative points, the most significant of all was the absence of an employer who would credit my bank account with a monthly salary.

This marked a significant change in my life’s career perspective. I was raised in a working-class household, where both my parents were lifelong salary earners in the Malaysian private sector until they reached the age of mandatory retirement. They were loyal workers and had remained with the same employer for almost 30 years. The same could also be said for their siblings and immediate family members, most of them were long-time employees either in the private sector or the public sector. To them, the job-hopping phenomenon practised by

Generation Y employees today (Lub, Bijvank, Bal, Bloome, & Schalk, 2012) was something unheard of back then. Being a freelancer provided me with a different view – you are not a salaried employee, you are not a business owner, but you are a freelancer occupying the middle space between these two extremes.

My first breakthrough came not long after I started this new phase. I was tasked to deliver a two-day training in a remote part of Vietnam. Usually, this client would send a trainer from Australia, but the Vietnamese party was not agreeable to the cost. Instead, they agreed to have me. Not only was this my first freelance assignment, it was also my first working overseas trip in over three years!

Later, I found out that market conditions were favourable to freelancers like me. Adverse economic conditions had caused many companies to downsize or exit the market. The low volume and intermittent nature of work did not justify employing a permanent staff under the company's payroll. Some of these companies had effectively become "project management" companies, in the sense that they would assemble a team of freelancers to execute a project awarded to them. By paying freelancers a cut of the overall contract value, the company made a profit without the overhead costs of employing staff. At the same time, the company was able to maintain its presence in the market, retaining their clients, negating the need to re-establish its market presence once the economic conditions recover. Besides that, the processes for hiring and terminating freelancers were much simpler than hiring and terminating permanent employees. Freelancer hiring was usually done using the corporate purchasing process, instead of the traditional recruitment process required to hire permanent employees.

After a few months into this new journey, I found that the volume of work was surprisingly higher than what I used to enjoy in my previous position as a salaried employee. The variety and quality of work had also increased. Previously, I depended on the company for jobs. As a freelancer, I suddenly discovered I had a more direct access to the job market with a wider reach. I found that sometimes, companies were too big to accept small jobs. Previously, my employer would reject work requests from outside the oil and gas industry because the work volume was small, and the pay rate was lower than expected. As a freelancer, I was open to accepting jobs from other industries no matter how small the job was. This expanded my clientele base to include those from other business segments. As an added advantage, the client would also gain cross-industry skills and expertise by having me on board.

I had to admit that the amount of work was not continuously steady; there were periods where I found myself idling. The difference was, as an employee I was assigned menial desk jobs so that the management could make full use of the time they paid me. As a freelancer, I was free to brush up my skills and continue training myself for professional development. I had also experienced periods where there was a sudden surge of jobs in the market. I discovered that I had the power to decline jobs, especially if I was engaged by another client. This was another perk that I did not enjoy as a full-time employee. Imagine how many of us would say no to a task assigned by the boss? The repercussions of doing this could be severe.

I also found that a freelancer needed a larger-sized emergency fund to sustain expenses in-between jobs. The unsteady nature of freelance jobs also meant that income would also vary from time to time. There were times when the income was insufficient and there were times of surplus. Hence, I found it prudent to save during times of excess.

So far, I have never had a non-paying client. I was cautious not to invest too much time on projects without a formal agreement – this might come in the form of a freelance contract, work order or purchase order. However, depending on the client, the time taken for me to get paid after work was completed was significantly longer than usual. A small number of clients were generous by providing an advance fee before I commence work. Most of them required me to raise a 30-day invoice after work has been completed. There were also cases where I

needed to get a client approved timesheet before I could issue the 30-day invoice. This would take longer, hence the need for a larger-sized emergency fund.

It was difficult to say whether I enjoyed better job security as an employee in times of economic uncertainties. As an employee, I had a steady paycheck, but I was constantly exposed to the fear of losing my job due to the unfavourable market environment. I could still remember a suffocating feeling of dread felt by my colleagues and I whenever someone from the regional office in Singapore or Perth came visiting. Losing your full-time job is traumatic; it is equivalent to a major loss of income because you derive your main source of income from this employment. In contrast, as a freelancer, I had a more direct and wider access to jobs. Furthermore, there was no limit to the number of jobs I could accept. Moreover, being a freelancer meant that losing a job did not have a severe impact because I could focus my efforts on delivering other jobs that I had on hand.

I would say that I had better job satisfaction as a freelancer during this turbulent time. While freelancing, I received immediate feedback for the work I did, something that is highly valuable for Generation Y members like me (Hurst & Good, 2009). It meant that I would receive full cash compensation for every job that I complete. In contrast, as an employee, the salary I drew every month was constant, regardless of the amount of time and effort I put into the job. Feedback was only given at the end of the year during annual performance reviews and this only translated into bonuses and salary increments that materialise during the next year. Besides that, I had my own freedom to set and negotiate rates for my services with my clients. I also had the freedom to do work according to my own schedule, at my own place as long as I deliver results on time.

Based on my observations and discussions with practitioners in the industry, it seemed that there were more freelancers compared to before the oil price crisis of 2014. Before the crisis, the use of freelancers by companies was unheard of. However, due to the crisis, companies in the oil and gas industry had to downsize and this resulted in the use of freelance workers to make up for the inadequate human capital required to deliver projects. Most of these freelancers were previously attached to companies in the oil and gas industry.

I also noted that geographical barriers do not prevent my colleagues from performing as a freelancer. After being out of work, some of them moved overseas to join their spouses who were posted there. Most of the work could be performed remotely and if the presence of the freelancer was required, employers were prepared to bear the travel expenses.

One downside of being freelancer is the impossible task of forecasting work for the coming months. This might be due to the sector I specialised in, i.e., risk and safety. Based on experience, clients would usually ignore safety requirements until the very last minute. Sometimes, clients would only contact a risk and safety specialist when a project suffered a major setback due to non-compliance of some safety standards. In cases like this, clients had to fork out a premium to get consultants to work on their projects and overcome the safety hurdle on an urgent basis. This means that the industry needed consultants that are highly flexible, competent, dependable and can deliver within the required time frame. Assembling a group of consultants for a project needed to be done quickly so that work could commence as soon as possible.

In summary, I discovered that the uncertain economic conditions caused by the 2014 oil price crash had caused changes in the workforce arrangement in the oil and gas industry. Previously, companies in this industry had a permanent workforce who were employed based on long-term strategies. The contraction in the industry had caused these companies to reduce their core workforce and depend on freelancers or subcontractors to perform work.

The global oil crisis in 2014 caused changes to the workforce arrangement in the oil and gas industry in Malaysia. Prior to the crisis, oil and gas asset owners outsourced certain supportive activities to consultancy firms, which have in their employment individuals to carry

out the tasks. However, after the crisis, the consultancy firms engage freelancers to carry out the tasks. The consultancy firms are akin to project managers.

Discussion

In this section, we identify and discuss major themes from Fathullah's autoethnographic account. The themes are compared with findings from previous related research and studies.

Employment Trends

The narrations provided in this study highlight the increasing role of risk and safety consultant freelancers in the Malaysian oil and gas industry, in the period after the oil price plunge in 2014. There was an increase in the number of freelancers, and this is consistent with the findings of Kitching (2015), Shevchuk and Strebkov (2015) and Krishnamoorthy et al. (2016). However, this increase is not mainly driven by individuals looking to gain extra income or by getting another job as reported by Krishnamoorthy et al. (2016). Rather, it was due to the workers' inability to find full-time employment after being displaced, in agreement with Gandia (2012).

The autoethnographic account applied in this study demonstrates the industry's increasing acceptance of a freelance workforce. It draws attention to how companies and organizations have to restructure their operations to match the flexibility and cost savings demands by incorporating freelancers into the corporate talent pool. It can also be seen that the industry as depicted in the narrations is an example of an industry in the knowledge economy with high dependence on skilled labour. These factors influence the favourable reception of the freelance workforce as mentioned by Kitching (2015).

Freelancer's Job Security

The turbulent global and national economy directly contributes to the job insecurity and displaced workers in the oil and gas industry. Fathullah's personal account shows that freelancers also enjoy a different form of job security as compared to regular employees. In a regular employment, the employee's job is guaranteed by the employer. On the other hand, freelancers enjoy job security through direct market access and a wider reach. This explains the survey findings by Gandia (2012) which reported freelancers feeling more secure than they did as a regular employee.

Freelancer's Job Satisfaction

The narrations provided in this autoethnographic account reveal details that affect job satisfaction. The uncertainties in the economy have forced employees to be idle and assigned menial tasks that do not relate to professional development in the field and negatively impacted his job satisfaction. Hence, this explains the findings of Meager (2015) and Zeytinoglu et al. (2012) that job satisfaction is positively related to job security.

A freelancer, could choose the place and time of work, negotiate pay rates and work terms, and may decline tasks. More importantly, it brings to light the satisfaction of working life outside the corporate world independent of an employer. Besides that, it highlights the ability of a freelancer to focus on a niche skill set that is exceptional and valuable to the job market. The freelancer is also exposed to better task quality and job variety. This demands better use of abilities and initiatives. These findings are consistent with job satisfaction factors identified by Meager (2015), Müller (2016) and Zeytinoglu et al. (2012).

Use and Value of Freelancers

The use and value of freelancers for firms and the industry are extensively featured in this autoethnographic account. It demonstrates how freelancers enable businesses to use a greater specialisation of labour whilst concurrently being able to avoid the cost of expensive downtime associated with using specialised employees. It illustrates how freelancers can help businesses to reduce risk relating to economic uncertainties by having them handle small scale projects that do not warrant a permanent hire. Fathullah's personal account described how freelancers help a downsized company to maintain its market presence and serve its clientele. Fathullah is also able to practise and develop his craft by serving clients from different industries, regardless of the job complexity and size. This contrasted with Fathullah's experiences as a salaried employee in particular the limited avenues for professional development during times of economic uncertainties. Since a freelancer can serve multiple clients across different industries, freelancers are also a source of innovation and facilitate knowledge transfers across industries. In addition, freelancers allow companies to achieve greater flexibility and agility. These unique selling points of freelancers are consistent with the findings of Burke and Cowling (2015).

Fathullah's autoethnographic account supports the argument that freelancers help make the labour market more efficient. Firstly, this is achieved by lowering the hiring barrier (barrier to entry) by simplifying the recruitment and dismissal process. Freelancers are often hired through a service contract that goes through the purchasing channels. Secondly, it allows for a more equitable labour market as freelancers and employers can negotiate rates and terms. These are often project-based and limited to the duration of the project. They can be negotiated based on the complexity of the work. In addition, employers do not have the obligation to provide yearly increment or annual bonuses. Thirdly, freelancers could be the answer to the immobile labour problem. Freelancers are no longer limited by geographical barriers and can take jobs from other industries. As stated in the account, remote freelancers can contribute to projects in Malaysia. Perhaps, this could reverse the negative effects of brain drain. This is largely in agreement with the mobile and dispersed feature of freelance workers as stated by Webster and Randle (2016).

Conclusion

This paper focused on the impact of the 2014 oil price crash on the Malaysian oil and gas industry and investigates its effects on those working in this industry. The use of autoethnography as a research approach has provided this paper with a personal touch to understand the experiences of a Malaysian worker. This approach allows the reader to obtain an insider view of the industry, both working as a salaried employee and as a freelancer. This is particularly important as freelance workers have yet to be considered as a significant component of the labour market – national data and statistics on freelancing in Malaysia is non-existent. The use of autoethnography overcomes this limitation by giving attention to this segment of the workforce. In addition, the use of autoethnography allows this paper to contribute to the scholarly discourse by comparing existing research findings with Fathullah's personal experiences as a freelance worker.

The autoethnographic account addresses the issue of job security and job satisfaction at times of turbulence. This paper touches on the issue of job satisfaction among freelance workers and the factors influencing this which includes job security, task quality, job variety, use of abilities and personal initiatives. This paper also highlights the different form of job security enjoyed by freelancers compared to the one enjoyed by regular employees. As seen in Fathullah's personal narrations, even regular employees do not enjoy job security in times of

economic uncertainties. Specifically, it is people with exceptional and valuable skillsets that would be protected from job insecurity caused by economic downturns. This is similar to the sentiments reported by Gandia (2012) who reports that freelancers feel more secure working freelance than they did as an employee.

This paper also explores the roles freelancers play to make the labour market more efficient. Freelancers reduce the employer's hiring barrier, allows for a more equitable labour market and addresses the immobile labour problem. Moreover, freelancers can also be a source of innovation and a strategy for business risk reduction. Hence, governments and regulators could introduce policies that modernise the labour market and provide social protection to freelance workers.

References

- Adams, T., Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ayers, A., Miller, K., Park, J., Schwartz, L., & Antcliff, R. (2016). The Hollywood model: Leveraging the capabilities of freelance talent to advance innovation and reduce risk. *Research-Technology Management*, 59(5), 27-37. doi.org/10.1080/08956308.2016.1208041.
- Bahuguna, P.C. (2014). Recruitment trends and talent management - 10 years: A panoramic view. *The Way Ahead*, 10(3), 8-9. doi.org/10.2118/0314-008-TWA.
- Burke, A. (2015). Introduction: A freelancing and self-employment research agenda. In A. Burke (Ed.), *The handbook of research on freelancing and self-employment* (pp. iii-viii). Dublin, Ireland: Senate Hall Academic Publishing.
- Burke, A., & Cowling, M. (2015). The use and value of freelancers: The perspective of managers. In A. Burke (Ed.), *The handbook of research on freelancing and self-employment* (pp. 1-14). Dublin, Ireland: Senate Hall Academic Publishing.
- Davie, S. (2008). An autoethnography of accounting knowledge production: Serendipitous and fortuitous choices for understanding our social world. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 19(7), 1054-1079.
- Gandia, E. (2012). *2012 Freelance industry report: Data and analysis of freelancer demographics, earnings, habits and attitudes*. Marietta, GA: International Freelancers Academy.
- Gibbon, J. (2012). Understandings of accountability: An autoethnographic account using metaphor. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 23(3), 201-212.
- Hurst, J., & Good, K. (2009). Generation Y and career choice: The impact of retail career perceptions, expectations and entitlement perceptions. *Career Development International*, 14(6), 570-593. doi.org/10.1108/13620430910997303.
- Idrees, M. D., Hafeez, M., & Kim, J-Y. (2017). Workers' age and the impact of psychological factors on the perception of safety at construction sites. *Sustainability*, 9(5), 745. doi.org/10.3390/su9050745.
- Kaur, D. (2017, October 27). More Malaysians prefer freelancing jobs now. *The Malaysian Reserve*. Kuala Lumpur. Retrieved May 14, 2018, from <https://themalaysianreserve.com/2017/10/27/msians-prefer-freelancing-jobs-now/>
- Kitching, J. (2015). Tracking UK freelance workforce. In A. Burke (Ed.), *The handbook of research on freelancing and self-employment* (pp. 15-28). Dublin, Ireland: Senate Hall Academic Publishing.
- Krishnamoorthy, R., Baharudin, A., & Karkonasasi, K. (2016). Intention to adaption and influence of using online freelance portal among Malaysians. *International Journal of Applied Engineering Research*, 11(19), 10020-10026.
- Lub, X., Bijvank, M., Bal, P., Bloome, R., & Schalk, R. (2012). Different or alike? Exploring

- the psychological contract and commitment of different generations of hospitality workers. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 24(4-5), 553-573. doi.org/ 10.1108/09596111211226824.
- Lucky, E.-I., Minai, M., & Hamzah, A. (2015). Employee's job security during economic downturn. *International Journal of Management and Enterprise Development*, 12(4-6), 321-330.
- Maréchal, G. (2010). Autoethnography. In A. J. Mills, G. Durepos, & E. Wiebe (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of case study research* (Vol. 2, pp. 43-45). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Meager, N. (2015). Job quality and self-employment: Is it (still) better to work for yourself? In A. Burke (Ed.), *The handbook of research on freelancing and self-employment* (pp. 39-50). Dublin, Ireland: Senate Hall Academic Publishing.
- Müller, J. (2016). Engineering lifestyles: Career choices. In J. Webster & K. Randle (Eds.), *Virtual workers and the global labour market* (pp. 37-56). London, UK: Springer Nature.
- Nair, S.S., & Devi, S.S. (2015). An autoethnographic vignette: The case of tax relief and sibling caregivers in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Business and Accounting*, 8(1), 179-206.
- Parke, E. (2018). Writing to heal: Viewing teacher identity through the lens of autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(12), 2953-2972. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss12/5>
- Petronas. (2017). *Petronas activity outlook 2018 – 2020*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Petroliaam Nasional Berhad.
- Ravago, M. (2017). *Outsourcing in the oil and gas industry*. Tholons. Retrieved July 12, 2018, from http://www.tholons.com/nl_pdf/071130_OutourcingintheOilGasIndustry.pdf
- Rozidin, I. (2018). *Malaysia oil and gas*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Alliance DBS Research Sdn Bhd.
- Samuelson, R. (2014, December 3). Key facts about the great oil crash of 2014. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved July 12, 2018 from https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/robert-samuelson-key-facts-about-the-great-oil-crash-of-2014/2014/12/03/a1e2fd94-7b0f-11e4-b821-503cc7efed9e_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.f3d651bbdcef.
- Shevchuk, A., & Strebkov, D. (2015). The rise of freelance contracting on the Russian-language internet. *Small Enterprise Research*, 22(2-3), 146-158. doi.org/10.1080/13215906.2015.1052341.
- Syrett, M. (2016). Independent professionals (IPros) and well being: An emerging focus for research? *Journal of Management & Organization*, 22(6), 817-825. doi.org/10.1017/jmo.2016.54.
- Van Stel, A., & De Vries, N. (2015). The economic value of different types of solo self-employed: A review. In A. Burke (Ed.), *The handbook of research on freelancing and self-employment*, (pp. 77-78). Dublin, Ireland: Senate Hall Academic Publishing
- Vestre, V. (2016). *A critical assessment of outsourcing in the oil & gas industry*. Stavanger, Norway: University of Stavanger. Retrieved July 12, 2018, from https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2414430/Vestre_Vivien.pdf.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38-53.
- Webster, J., & Randle, K. (2016). Positioning virtual workers within space, time, and social dynamics. In J. Webster & K. Randle (Eds.), *Market, virtual workers and the global labour*, (pp. 3-34). London, UK: Springer Nature.
- Zeytinoglu, I., Yilmaz, G., Keser, A., Inelmen, K., Uygur, D., & Özsoy, A. (2012). Job satisfaction, flexible employment and job security among Turkish service sector

workers. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 34(1), 123-144. doi.org/10.1177%2F0143831X11434845.

Author Note

Fathullah Akmal Khalid is a professional Risk and Safety Consultant serving clients in the oil and gas industry in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He pursued a freelance career after being made redundant in 2017 and attained his MBA in 2018 from University of Malaya. He specialises in safety risk management and auditing, helping hazardous industries to protect human lives, assets, environment and company reputation. He is also a self-taught programmer, with deep interests in functional programming. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: f_akmal@hotmail.com.

Wai Meng Chan is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Business and Accountancy, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: chanwm@um.edu.my.

Azlina Abdul Jalil is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Business and Accountancy, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: azlinajalil@um.edu.my.

We wish to acknowledge that the research is funded by a grant from the University of Malaya (Project No GPF011I-2018) and thank the reviewers and editors of *The Qualitative Report* for their constructive comments which have helped us to improve the paper.

Copyright 2019: Fathullah Akmal Khalid, Wai Meng Chan, Azlina Abdul Jalil, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Khalid, F. A., Chan, W. M., & Jalil, A. A. (2019). An autoethnographic report on freelance employment in the Malaysian oil and gas industry during uncertain economic conditions. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(10), 2592-2607. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss10/13>
