

SPOTLIGHT

Joyeeta Banerjee stumbled upon online freelancing as she was looking for ways to earn money while beginning her studies at a private university in Chittagong. Her father being a retired public servant, Joyeeta couldn't afford to take a Tk. 15,000 course at an outsourcing institution which would equip her with skills that were in demand. Despite a lack of knowledge about the online marketplace, Joyeeta went on to make a profile on Upwork last year, listing the only skill she felt confident in—writing.

Joyeeta had to first convince her parents to install an internet connection at home for her to be able to work from there. Joyeeta then asked her mother for two months' time to see if she could make something of herself on the online platform.

Online freelancers such as Joyeeta are interpreters, internet marketers, virtual assistants, graphic designers and social media managers. They work on large online freelancing platforms such as Upwork (formerly Elance-oDesk), Fiverr, Freelancer, Guru and PeoplePerHour. The online labour market is characteristic of the 'gig' economy in vogue worldwide, where permanent jobs with

second highest score (after Sri Lanka) in financial attractiveness to clients.

Within a month of joining, Joyeeta had a successful bid and did several small jobs over the course of the next three months. At that point, Joyeeta earned a paltry hourly rate of \$3. Her first paycheck of Tk. 9,000, she used to repay her parents for their costs in setting up the internet connection at home.

"My parents were shocked that I'd made money online, with no physical effort required or any tangible work done," remembers Joyeeta. Later, she went on to earn a steady monthly income of \$600 from one client alone, which was more than her university tuition fees per semester. She now finances her own education and helps support family expenditures.

Not just about money

"Freelancing is more than earning. It has given me the opportunity to learn multiple skills," says Joyeeta. Starting out as content writer for an Asian travel website, she went on to perform varied jobs, such as a virtual assistant for a writer and social media manager for an American music company. Joyeeta is currently working as an internet marketing specialist for an entrepreneur in New York and sub-editing for a

problematic as freelancers' earnings are exempt from tax and can be directly transferred to their local bank accounts from the respective online platforms abroad. Still, says Joyeeta, banks create problems. "I have been repeatedly asked to explain why large amounts of remittance are coming into my student account. When I explained that I am a freelancer, the bank manager was initially unaware that this type of job existed."

Initially, the freelancer has to show their bank proof of earnings, ideally a contract with the client. From then on, the money from the online platform is paid directly to their bank accounts. Other than the \$5 (a new payment method has brought this fee down to \$0.99) for the wire transfer to a local account, Upwork freelancers, for example, also have 20 percent of their billings with each client taken by the freelancing platform. Some freelancers resort to other payment methods such as BA Express and Xoom than through local banks, because of the low rate of the dollar.

Joyeeta now manages a team of 10 freelancers – including Bangladeshis, Americans and Indians – to handle her established clientele. "I hire them to handle smaller tasks so that I'm free to do the important tasks for my regular

clients," explains Joyeeta. Handling so many tasks that she has to sub-contract out to others and managing a global team is no small feat for a 22-year-old student.

While Joyeeta herself earns \$15 per hour for a job such as content writing, she pays her team at lower rates of \$10 for the same job. The online marketplace, especially for new freelancers, can be cutthroat—not unlike that of lawyers billing every hour possible. "Every hour is valuable for me. I get work done between classes and late at night. I can write a 1000-word article in 30 minutes of spare time," says Joyeeta.

Giving up the 9-to-5 job

Freelancers work in non-traditional jobs often with self-taught skills and without family or institutional support. Farzana Sufi, for example, transitioned to online freelancing mid-career. Older than the typical freelancer, 37-year-old Farzana left a full-time job as an assistant manager at a medicine manufacturing company for an online career four years ago. Stuck at home sick for a few months, a bored Farzana turned to using her skills and passion for graphic design for paid freelance work.

A month-and-a-half after posting her profile on then-oDesk (now Upwork), Farzana landed a job. After a few jobs,



CARTOONS: EHSANUR RAJA RONNY

has been building his portfolio but is not hopeful of his prospects. A follow-up mentoring LEDP programme is uncertain. He has only completed 10 small jobs on Fiverr for which he earned a total of \$111. He's on his own now.

State Minister for ICT Division Zunaid Ahmed Palak, however, says that the LEDP is the most successful example of employment generation projects initiated so far in Bangladesh. According to Palak, "This project is a model for such ICT trainings to be provided by other institutions as well. Of the 11,920 graduates of the programme, 5680 have since earned \$4,30,474 from freelancing," Palak cites these numbers in response to concerns of quality of LEDP. "We have also intervened with the Bangladesh Bank to ensure hassle-free payment for the freelancers. We are trying our best to introduce Paypal locally as soon as possible to facilitate international transactions," says Palak.

The government's race for numbers in the name of development is nothing new. In this case, short training programmes are not enough to create skilled freelancers. Shakil attributes a loss in the reputation of Bangladeshi freelancers internationally to this project. Clients are turned off by substandard work, as these new freelancers lack the skills to compete

THE YOUNG AND THE TECH-SAVVY

With greater independence in work and better pay, many Bangladeshi workers are turning to freelancing in the online marketplace

MALIHA KHAN

benefits are eschewed in favour of freelancers with short-term contracts.

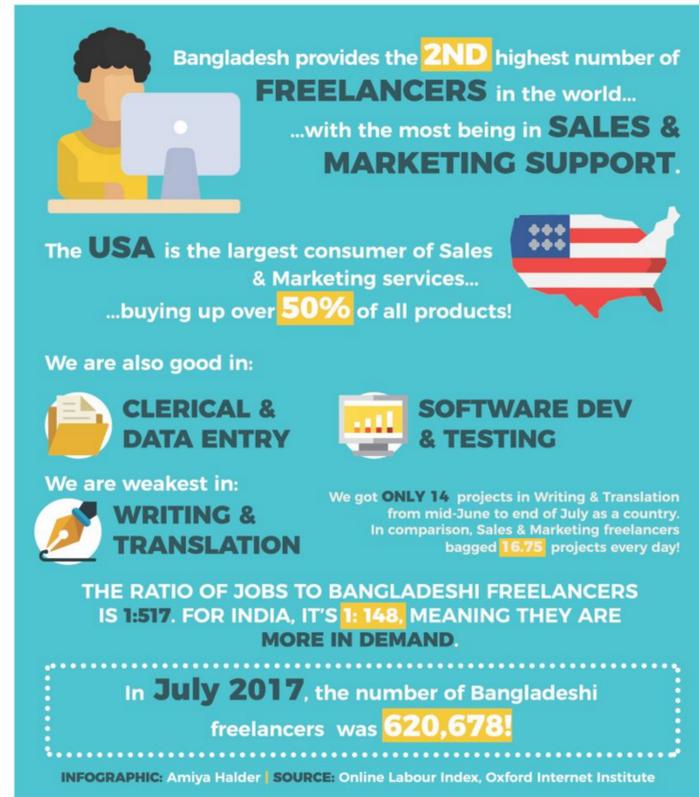
According to a study by the Oxford Internet Institute, a department of the University of Oxford dedicated to the social science of the internet, Bangladesh provides the second largest labour force (16 percent) of online workers after India (24 percent). The categories of work most Bangladeshi freelancers take up are sales and marketing support, creative and multimedia, and software development and technology in that order.

Foreign companies looking to cut costs following the global economic downturn have increasingly been turning to freelancers worldwide to do jobs such as translation, graphics design and managing social media. Bangladeshi freelancers charge competitive rates which encourage clients to hire them. In the 2016 A.T. Kearney Global Services Location index, Bangladesh has the

London news site.

Joyeeta became top rated less than a year-and-a-half into freelancing online. "To be top rated on Upwork, freelancers have to have a job success score of 90 percent or higher for at least 13 weeks," she says. This is difficult, she says, meeting client expectations in almost all your jobs. She however persevered, dedicating most of her time to working online.

In the online marketplace, freelancers are defined by their user rating with top rated freelancers being the most sought-after. Clients' reviews can make or break online freelancers' careers. In this, Joyeeta saw tremendous success. "After the first three months, I no longer needed to bid for new jobs. Clients began to present job offers to me themselves," says Joyeeta. But there are downsides to this success. Joyeeta pulls frequent all-nighters as her clients are in other time zones. She has had to attend meetings at 3:30 am and then show up for university classes at 8 am the next morning. Money channels are no longer as



for which she received good reviews on her profile, Farzana soon had no problem in getting clients. She started taking up more and more online freelance jobs but had also returned to her workplace by then. Initially, the work pressure was overwhelming and she had to pull frequent all-nighters. So, she decided to give up her 9-to-5 job.

Farzana, however, had to contend with family disapproval. Her parents were disappointed that she was leaving an established job, one she'd had for 13 years, for a job with no permanence or tangible benefits and unsteady money. She was soon able to convince her family members that online freelancing was a better fit for her and provided well. "This month, I earned six times my previous monthly salary," says Farzana proudly.

"Now, my parents are quite happy that I work from home and earn more money than my peers in traditional jobs," says Farzana. She is able to work efficiently from her home while attending to her family, but admits that it is lonely and that she misses the lively office environment. For freelancers, the home and the workplace are often one and the same.

Shakil Mahamud, 28, a Dhaka-based freelance email marketer at Upwork, started actively working in the online marketplace six years ago while he was a student. "I had done some website development work locally but these were not good experiences. Foreign clients are more flexible regarding payment and

have greater technical know-how so I prefer working with them," says Shakil.

On being asked whether Bangladesh's recent placement as second in the online labour market validated the success of him and other freelancers, Shakil says that the numbers are not as encouraging as they seem. "We may be second in quantity but only around five percent of Bangladeshis in the online marketplace are quality freelancers," says Shakil.

The government's race for numbers in the name of development is nothing new. In this case, short training programmes are not enough to create skilled freelancers.

Quantity not quality?

A closer look at the Online Labour Index reveals that the ratio of successful bids for projects by Bangladeshi freelancers is low. In the period covered (mid-June to end-July), isolated data shows that Bangladeshi freelancers do not compete at all in certain categories of work such as writing and translation. In these 41 days, only 14 writing and translation projects were completed by Bangladeshi freelancers. India, the top supplier of online labour, also has a far higher success rate in project bids than Bangladesh. Since 2014, the Tk. 180.40 crore



E. RAJA RONNY

Learning and Earning Development Project (LEDP) of the ICT Ministry has been churning out thousands of 'skilled' freelancers in the ICT sector to compete in the global marketplace. The programme is intended to provide training in freelancing skills such as search engine optimisation and graphics design for free to unemployed fresh graduates countrywide.

Sultan Mahmud, 23, participated in a LEDP training in Rajbari district earlier this year. The 50-day /200-hour training programme in graphics design, he says, was badly managed and had poor quality trainers. "The trainers were incompetent and kept changing. They told us that they were not being paid on time, so they were leaving their posts. In such an environment, we hardly learned any graphics design, let alone being equipped with soft skills such as working in English and how to navigate the online platforms," said an aggrieved Sultan. Since the project ended, Sultan

globally. Shakil fears that all Bangladeshi freelancers may soon be brandished as incompetent in the online marketplace.

Though freelancers such as Farzana, Joyeeta and Shakil may start out of financial insecurity, they are increasingly working online by choice. "I have no set time to be at the office, for which I would have also had to battle through Dhaka's traffic daily, and have more time for my family," says Farzana.

The freedom to choose the work they do and the clients they work for is increasingly a choice desired by today's workers. Equipped with a laptop, a Wi-Fi connection and a skillset in demand, tech-savvy Bangladeshi freelancers have been working for foreign clients and competing with workers worldwide in the online marketplace. However, an increasing focus on quantity, not quality, means that where the share of the online labour market is being lauded as a success, Bangladeshi freelancers fall short in terms of quality of work. ■