

## **FREELANCERS IN RUSSIA: INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO TIME MANAGEMENT**

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### **Abstract**

Twenty-first century Russia relies heavily on new professional communities in order to struggle with social and economic challenges. Freelancers as one such community represent a comparatively underexplored field for Russian social studies. The basic characteristic of this community is its special attitude to time as the main resource of life. On the one hand, freelancers seek to realize innovative temporal strategies to the full, but on the other hand, there is a range of objective and subjective factors preventing them from doing so. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the features of the temporal behaviour strategies of Russian freelancers and the way these strategies shape their professional activities. The research tasks pursued in this study classify Russian freelancers' temporal strategies: they reveal the distinguishing features of time management in freelancing; consider different approaches to the regulation and use of time; and analyse freelancers' emotional perception of various temporal properties and qualities, including nonlinear time. The research participants are freelancers from Ekaterinburg, one of the largest cities in Russia. The main method of research was in-depth semi-formalized interview.

**Key words:** freelancers, temporal behaviour strategies, time-management, innovative models of temporal behaviour

**JEL Code:** JEL A14, JEL J22

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### **Introduction**

The evolution of the information society and innovative economy in Russia is characterized by the quantitative growth and the development in the quality of freelancers as a vanguard professional community. Belonging to this professional community, or joining it, requires human and social capital which comprises not only specific professional knowledge and skills, communicative competence, social bonds, the ability to take risks and responsibility, the skills of self-management and self-education but also time resources and the ability to build adequate temporal behaviour strategies.

The following definition of a freelancer contains multiple references to the time factor: a freelancer is a worker who performs a range of tasks without entering into a long-term contract and who is able to provide services to several customers simultaneously. Further detailed analysis of the temporal organization of freelancers' daily and professional life will prove the correctness of this definition.

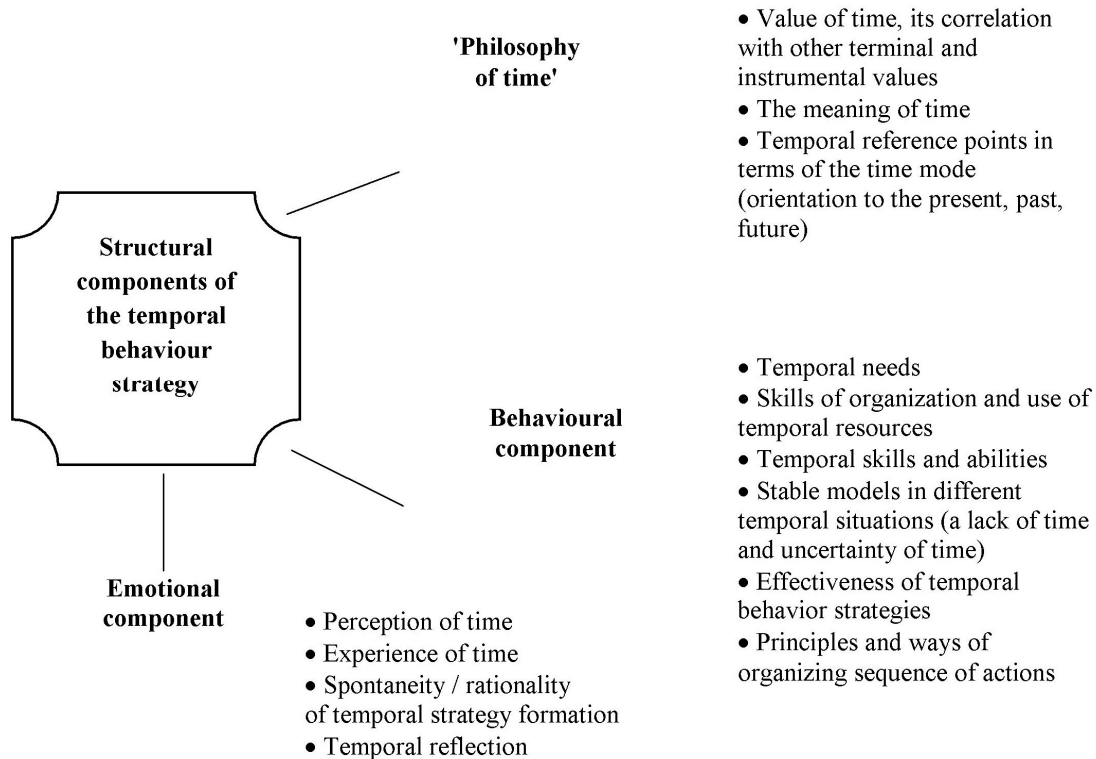
The phenomenon of freelancing has been analysed by many European researchers both from an economic and social perspective: freelancing in the context of flexibilisation of an economy (Malone, 2004); in terms of labour relations (Felfe, Schmook, Schyns, Six, 2008); related to the use of information technologies (Fish, Srinivasan, 2012); and with regard to remote work (Kushner, 2013). Some researchers consider freelancers as a specific professional community (Tempest, 2009; Van den Born, Van Witteloostuijn, 2013; Grugulis, Stoyanova, 2011). In Russia the area of studies devoted to freelancing has just begun to emerge (Strebkov, Shevchuk, 2010; Ambarova, 2014; Harchenko, 2014).

## **1 Research Methodology**

The concept of temporal behaviour strategies was developed on the basis of activity-related, community-related, and temporal approaches. Freelancers' temporal behaviour strategies form a system which is centred around the specific qualities and properties of social time and is aimed at achieving certain life goals. The temporal behaviour strategies of freelancers characterize their working style and way of life, and their level of adaptability and efficiency in the modern world. They set freelancers' direction and speed of development, emphasize their specific characteristics, and serve as a mechanism of formation and internal integration.

The structure of temporal behaviour strategies comprises cognitive, emotional and behavioural elements, which are highlighted in the theoretical analysis and observed in the real behaviour of freelancers (see Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1: Structural components of freelancers' temporal behaviour strategies**



Source: author's own work

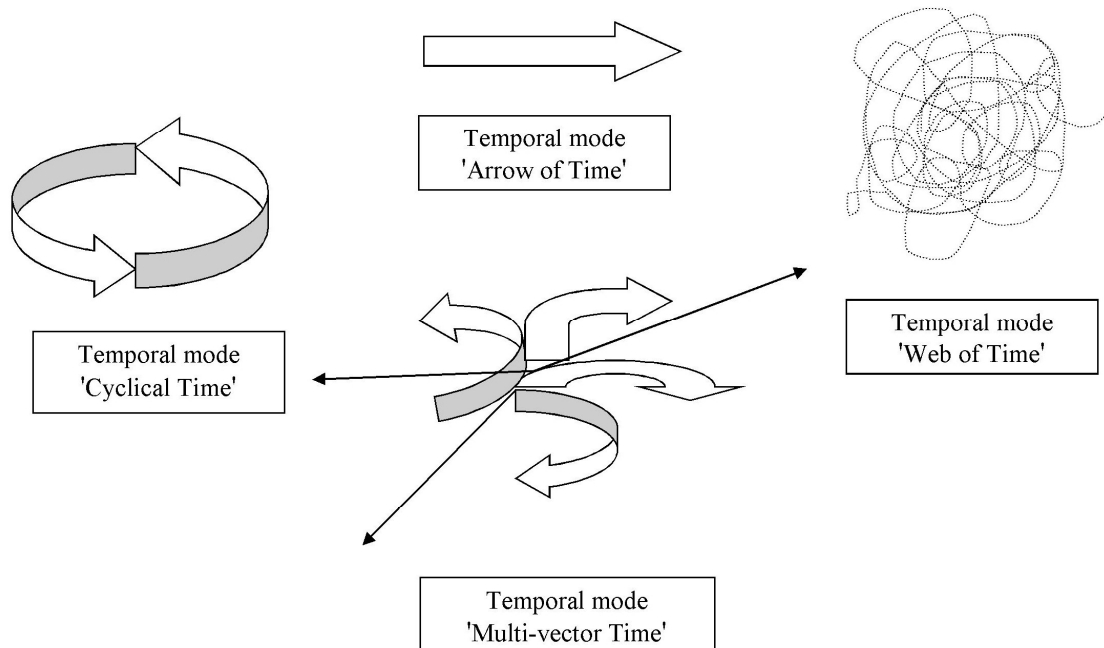
The cognitive block includes their 'philosophy of time', which is shared by the freelancing community. The behavioural block includes not only time-management skills, but also the ability to create life plans and prospects, set goals, synchronize behaviour in accordance with the temporal organization of the social environment, and arrange the optimal sequence of events on the level of biographical time. The emotional block reflects the perception and experience of time, reaction of the temporal behaviour. Freelancers are not just aware of time, they understand and evaluate it; they experience it. What is more, such perception and experience of time is associated with a wide range of social emotions.

This qualitative study of freelancers uses the method of in-depth semi-formalized interview. The objects of the study were freelancers in Ekaterinburg, one of the largest Russian cities. The study involved direct personal interviews and interviews conducted through e-mail correspondence. The respondents were selected on the basis of the 'snowball' principle, according to which they recommended their colleagues for an interview. 20 freelancers were interviewed, among which there were 13 men and 7 women. All

interviews were recorded and transcribed. Some quotes from the transcripts are provided below.

The interview guide consisted of six blocks. The first and second blocks were devoted to identification of the meaning and value of social time and its role in the life of the freelance professional community. Some questions were constructed by using time-related metaphors, catch phrases and aphorisms. The third block included questions concerning the behavioural aspects of temporal strategies (abilities, skills, methods of use, time-management, and others). The fourth block dealt with the nonlinear perception of time, with peculiarities of the temporal regimes which organize freelancers' life, and the assessment of the opportunities and risks which these temporal regimes present. This part involved such tool of sociological research as the visualization of the temporal modes of freelancers' activities (see Fig. 2). The fifth structural block of the interview form was devoted to social emotions: the hopes and fears associated with the perception and experience of time. Finally, the sixth block contained questions concerning of freelancers' temporal communication.

**Fig. 2: Temporal modes of freelancers' activities**



Source: author's own work

The interview guide was supplemented with 15 cards containing drawings, diagrams and formalized answers to some questions. The semi-formalized interview format allowed to form flexible strategy of conversation, to discuss more in detail the interesting biographical subjects and situations, to formulate additional questions.

These structural blocks in the interview guide are linked with each other. They were focused on the following: 1) the definition of interconnection between the different elements of temporal behaviour strategies; 2) the increased attention paid to nonlinear social time and a comparison of its effect on the life of a freelancer with that of a linear temporal regime; 3) verification of the factors determining the choice of specific strategic line of temporal behaviour.

## **2 Research Results and Discussion**

Freelancers' 'philosophy of time' is characterized by the high value attached to time resources for work and implementation of personal plans. A.A., 51 years old, said: *'Time is a resource for my professional and personal development. For me time means prioritizing. I think about time when I meet people who I call 'time-eaters'. As soon as I feel that communication with them stops paying off, I get a strong feeling of time being wasted. Time is a great benefit: for example, we know the average life expectancy of a person, it gives us an idea how much you can actually get done in this life'*.

A specific schedule and mode of life is one of the most distinctive features of the freelance community. A convenient schedule is one of the most attractive aspects of freelance work. It ranks third after an interesting job and a good salary (Strebkov, 2010). Many freelancers say they prefer self-employment to 'being stuck' in an office, where people are paid for wasting their time.

This professional community uses all the positive temporal aspects of homeworking and working as a 'free artist': flexible working hours (which can be adjusted to one's personal tastes or according to the client's wishes and which can be as long or short as one wants); the possibility of maintaining an optimal balance between working time and 'family time'; no need to spend time on commuting; and quick 'one-off' jobs based on the principle 'do the job in the morning, get paid in the evening'. All this allows us to define a freelancer as *an effective manager of his/her own time*.

Freelancers are better than office workers at organizing and planning their work, which becomes more regular with the accumulation of experience and a customer base. V.P.,

25 years old: *'Perhaps, many factors play a major role in achieving success. What is important for me is time and perseverance. This list can be supplemented by the following: having some modern aids or equipment at hand; a clearly defined aim and a well-structured plan of achieving it; and persistence'*.

Beginner freelancers have problems with temporal organization of their work. They don't know the optimal number of hours for which their work is most efficient; how to balance the daily schedule of work and rest; or the schedule and degree of intensity for projects running simultaneously. P.O., 28 years old: *'I constantly face the situation of time shortage... Sometimes I feel desperate; I need support and some reserves, but there are none. I have this feeling of desperation and helplessness, of my lack of talent even, when I can't finish something or have no time to do it; when I can't make myself do the job on time'*.

Experienced freelancers do not experience such problems. They develop their temporal strategies according to individual conditions and the characteristics of their labour, which are formed gradually, in the process of 'entering' this type of employment. Therefore, temporal strategies become a resource which provides them with high productivity and efficiency and helps them preserve their social, professional, psychological and physiological health.

Temporal behaviour strategies of specific freelance groups are to a great extent determined by the temporal characteristics of the subject of their work. On the one hand, it may be more or less regular work which can be planned by using traditional methods (copywriters, accountants, sales managers, translators). On the other hand, it can be a project that requires inspiration, or new ideas that cannot be scheduled for a specific time (designers, musicians, journalists). In any case, the work of freelancers is associated with projects with definite time limits (within a day, a month, or a year): this imparts cyclicity to freelancers' lives.

Studies of working conditions in Silicon Valley showed approximately the same results as this study: project teams consisting of young programmers do not share a common calendar time. Rather, they live according to project cycles which last from three months to one year and which are determined by the demands of the high tech market. All their private lives comply with these cycles: they sleep, relax, and eat without almost leaving their work (Sokolova, 2006:72). For obvious reasons, the 'Silicon career' of IT-professionals develops until they are about 40, and then they start looking for a quieter job.

Freelancers are not a part of organized structures, their labour activities are essentially individualized (although sometimes they can be included in temporary network structures

created by themselves or by the customer). However, their time is nonlinear, as for the project participants of Silicon Valley. The usual temporal living conditions of a freelancer are characterized by an uneven, 'nervous' temporal mode; by the simultaneous implementation of several orders; by the need to 'switch' from one project to another; and by high levels of tension, usually associated with working non-stop (freelancers accept such conditions because when they fulfil orders quickly, it increases their income or they keep their customer 'on-side'). In such circumstances, experienced freelancers develop and implement one of the types of temporal behaviour strategies which may be called active temporal optimism (Ambarova, 2014).

A.P., 28 years old: *'I'm doing my best to meet my deadlines. Of course, something has to be sacrificed. If you work long hours, you won't be able to meet your friends in the evening. I can't say I feel dissatisfied when this happens. Surely, you won't give up orders because of this? You just need to find the right balance. It's also good to combine some things: for instance, my leisure is directly connected with my professional and personal development and I can combine taking meals with communicating with my relatives. It is a nice option'*.

This type of strategy is characterized by the active use of temporal resources as a tool for coping with professional and personal life tasks (success; achievement; self-realization; earning a living; raising one's status; and so on). Freelancers, like other participants in this strategy, seek to find the optimal organization of their own and other people's time by means of the strategic, tactical, and current planning of work, and of life in general. M.K., 25 years old: *'Subconsciously I always feel the presence of time. I like to have modern appliances at hand. I try to do everything on time, so that it doesn't take me days or even weeks'*. Freelancers are ready to manage their lives, to organize its temporality (from daily life to biographical time) in conditions of high uncertainty and instability.

Successful freelancers are equally efficient when being pressed for time or when they have sufficient time to do the job. They can regulate the speed and the rhythm of the time they have and they can also synchronize time in accordance with external conditions. N.D., 25 years old: *'I have been working as a reporter for one of the local TV companies for three years. This work taught me to value not only minutes but split seconds, because it is so important to deliver your story on time. You should plan everything: how much time you need to make a feature, to write the text, to edit it, to do the voiceover. Of course, it inevitably affected my attitude to personal time. I almost always think about time: I keep track of the time, and develop schedules in order to meet my deadlines'*.

Dynamic, dense, and multi-structured temporal reality is perceived by freelancers as a positive phenomenon, corresponding to the challenges of modernity. Z.E., 34 years old: *'What am I afraid of? It's hard to say ... I hope for peace in the world and for a better future (laughs)'*. Adapting their behaviour to the new temporal conditions, freelancers as 'active optimists' consider themselves modern people keeping up with the times or even being ahead of the times, including the opportunity for constant professional and personal growth.

According to freelancers, their 'unstable' work milieu gives them more confidence in the future than being employed by an organization. Hopes for a better future, with minimum negative emotions (that is, fear, uncertainty, or confusion), characterize the social and psychological well-being of this professional community. Self-employment, working flexitime, and one-off jobs, can create a more sustainable, but at the same time a more flexible foundation for life, not to mention the freedom to be one's own master.

Our interviews and analysis of scripts show that Russian freelancers demonstrate an active temporal optimism. Time is regarded as the most important resource of 90% interviewed freelancers. The properties of nonlinear time positively perceive 85% of respondents; 80% freelancers highly appreciate their time-management skills. For 75% of respondents the freedom of time management is one of the main values.

## **Conclusion**

The theoretical model developed by authors and the empirical studies of the temporal behaviour strategies of freelancers show that their temporal behaviour strategies are innovative. It was found that their main characteristics are as follows: the ability to effectively manage time to achieve professional goals; the inclination to use the properties and qualities of nonlinear time (fluidity, diversity, immediacy, intensity, and others); a positive perception of temporal factors; being in charge of time; seeing time as a dominant factor of one's professional life; and the use of time as a primary resource.

Most importantly, this research discovered a variety of individual temporal behaviour strategies which still share a number of common features characteristic of freelancers as a professional community.

Subjective and objective factors that prevent freelancers from implementing innovative approaches to time-management were also identified. Among the subjective factors, there are a lack of planning skills; of motivational limitations to time-management; and little experience of freelance work. The objective factors comprise: socio-economic



conditions in a particular field of freelance activity; the lack of an appropriate legal and regulatory framework for freelance activities; and high risks in the situation of an economic recession impeding the development of freelancing as a socio-economic institution.

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