

Job satisfaction of self-employed communications professionals

Summary of research and findings

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Abstract

Background:

Existing studies into job satisfaction levels of the self-employed suggest that, whilst they are generally happier than their full-time counterparts, there are factors that negatively affect that satisfaction. Currently, however, there is no research that specifically addresses the self-employed communication profession, its job satisfaction or the reasons for it.

Aim:

The aim of this study was to ascertain whether UK self-employed communications professionals are more or less satisfied with their jobs than when organisationally-employed, and what factors affect this satisfaction.

Method:

The research was conducted using a mixed-method approach positioned within a relativist paradigm. Phenomenological qualitative investigation was combined with a quantitative questionnaire that contained both closed and open-ended enquiry. Semi-structured interviews with six self-employed communications professionals were conducted, followed by an electronic survey which was sent to a wider industry sample and yielded 102 responses.

Results:

The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative phases indicate that, overall, self-employed communicators are more satisfied now than when employed. Factors such as increased autonomy, schedule flexibility, work-life balance and enhanced variety and type of work positively affect satisfaction levels. Reduced social interaction and lack of business infrastructure, among other issues, negatively affect satisfaction. Yet, even with the reported disadvantages, participants are still satisfied on the whole and the majority would not return to employment. A minority contradict this view; a small number of questionnaire participants are either slightly unhappy or completely dissatisfied now compared to employment.

Conclusions:

Whilst the large majority of participants are happier in self-employment, overall satisfaction should not be taken as absolute, due to the presence of dissatisfied respondents. As a result of this study, two recommendations have been made. The first recommends additional research into social interaction and job security issues. The second suggests that human resources professionals consider the level of autonomy and flexibility available within organisations, to aid with staff retention.

I Introduction

UK employees are working harder than ever, with a developing long-hours culture that means on average many are now working a 43.6-hour week, compared to our counterparts in the rest of Europe who do 40.3 hours (Bunting, 2005). In addition, recent years have seen a significant rise in the number of employees working in excess of 48 hours a week, rising from 10% in the late 1990s to 26% now (ibid). In light of these increasing pressures from work, 'being your own boss' seems like an attractive option, with self-employed professionals being able to work hours to suit them and commanding higher daily rates than they may receive through full-time employment.

But to what extent is freelance work a more preferred option to full-time employment? There are seemingly many benefits: not having to work for somebody else; making full use of your experience, talents and abilities; financial independence and flexible working hours (direct.gov.uk). Hence, there has been an average increase of around 32,000 people per year registering as self-employed since 1997 (Office for National Statistics, 2008). Yet working alone also means the loss of full-time employment benefits such as holiday or sick pay and a constant and pre-determined salary. Instead, the self-employed are potentially faced with inconsistent workload and general concern about future contract security. In these respects, the freelance option could be more stressful than permanent employment.

Existing literature, whilst in general agreement that self-employed are more satisfied, provides some evidence to suggest that there are negative factors that impact on satisfaction levels. A number of compromises and trade-offs are in play, indicating that often the self-employed are 'taking the rough with the smooth'. But how do these factors affect the communications profession specifically and do they have an impact on overall satisfaction levels? There is currently much literature on self-employed job satisfaction, but nothing that addresses the communication profession specifically. In particular, there is no substantial qualitative data to understand fully the reasons behind either satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Therefore it was important to carry out a study into the area described, to assist the communication profession in drawing conclusions on the satisfaction levels of its self-employed practitioners and the factors that affect this satisfaction. The research used for this study was:

Are self-employed communication professionals more or less satisfied with their jobs than when organisationally-employed, and what factors affect this satisfaction?

This study presents the findings of the research outlined above, which was carried out using a mixed-method approach combining phenomenological qualitative investigation and a quantitative questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews with six self-employed communications professionals were complemented by a survey sent to a wider industry sample (which yielded 102 respondents) containing primarily closed or multiple response questions, with some open-ended queries. In both instances and to varying degrees, participants were asked about numerous facets of their work, ultimately concentrating on their overall job satisfaction and the causes for this. Data collection and analysis was carried out between January and March 2008.

2 Findings

2.1 Interview findings

2.1.1 Participants

The six communications professionals interviewed have been self-employed for varying lengths of time, ranging from three to 24 years. Many feel the nature of their business has evolved since starting out, but the work undertaken by the group as a whole includes general public relations (PR), marketing communications, publishing, copywriting, government relations, public affairs, PR training, strategic consultancy and editorial consultancy.

Average hours worked per week varies only slightly between participants: four estimate they work the same number of hours each week now than when employed; one said they work less and one more. In terms of salary, all feel that on average they are earning more now compared to when they were employed; however within this, two said 'just slightly' more.

Client number and structure is also fairly similar, with the participant responses ranging from three to six clients per month; these are either mostly long-term retained or a mixture of long and short-term, with the exception of one participant who has 8-10 clients per month and about 65% of their work is short-term projects.

2.1.2 Combined description of participants' experiences

On the whole, the participants are more satisfied now than they were when employed full time. When asked to describe their current satisfaction levels, the responses ranged from *"I love it!"*; two counts of *"very high"*; *"very satisfied"* and *"high"* to, at the lowest end of the scale, *"six or seven out of ten."*

When citing the factors affecting their satisfaction, a number of core themes emerged that are common to most or all of the participants: autonomy, schedule flexibility, variety and type of work, social interaction and security.

Factors linked to autonomy include participants valuing the freedom to work in their own way, and having the ability to select the clients with whom they wished to work. When describing previous employment, issues were raised such as lost productivity due to external factors and having to do what they were requested, even though they may have disagreed with that approach. A reported improvement in the fundamental structure of how and on what they worked is a common satisfaction factor across all interviews.

The schedule flexibility that self-employment provides is also a highly-rated motivator. In employment, participants had to work to an employer's schedule, generally within a traditional nine to five timeframe. This would lead to pressure and stress either through commuting or having to be in a particular place at a particular time. Being able to work hours to suit them has allowed the participants to create a better work-life balance which has greatly increased satisfaction levels.

Participants' variety and type of work has been notably enhanced. Where previously workload was often limited in variety, tedious and undesirable; now there is diverse and interesting work and more of the type that the subject prefers to be doing. This is largely a result of working with multiple clients, rather than one employer, and having the ability to choose which work they undertake. This in turn links back to the issue of autonomy and being able to select preferred clients.

Whilst the overall levels of satisfaction are high, the positive statements are qualified with some negative factors, most noticeably social interaction. Where there was lots of social interaction in employment, now there is little. This was mentioned in the sense of camaraderie and also linked by some to responsibility: now the business problems and decisions cannot now be discussed as a team or, ultimately, passed on.

Interesting views were gathered on job security. All participants raised the issue of security, but not all comments were negative. The minority mentioned it when asked about the disadvantages of self-employment; the majority either reflected on it as an advantage that employment provides or, conversely, felt they were more secure now in self-employment.

A final indicator of the participants' satisfaction can be found when asked whether they would return to employment for any reason. Whilst all feel more satisfied now than previously, there is a level of pragmatism demonstrated. Career prospects motivate two, who would return for the right job under the right conditions, with one of the participants very clearly identifying only four or five positions they would consider. Three muse that they would not return out of choice, but if something went seriously wrong with self-employment and they needed to earn a living, they would have no option. The final participant replied "*absolutely not*", indicating not only a complete satisfaction with their current situation but also perhaps a firm confidence in their future financial stability.

2.1.3 Exploration of interview core themes

Some verbatim examples from the interviews, shown below, explore the core themes described above in more detail:

Autonomy

A number of experiences, feelings and motivators link back to the overall self-government that a person has over their work. Descriptions of autonomy, freedom and control were included under this heading:

Well the first one [benefit of self-employment] definitely is that you can choose your own strategy, and you can have your own philosophy of working, your own personal beliefs and put those into action.... And I just feel more...that I'm my own person really. In every sense of that, in every sense of doing it the way I want to do it, what I want to do and how I want to do it. FF2

I didn't have the freedom [in employment] to say 'no I don't fancy doing that', I had to do what was asked of me, even though it wasn't what was required, which wasn't a good thing. FF1

I suppose it's people telling you when to do things [in employment], whereas now nobody tells me to do anything, which is great! FF3

I therefore thought I could probably enjoy my job more if it was all controlled by me, you know actually focus myself much better, and do the things I enjoy, focus more on the things I enjoy. FM1

I'm kind of dictating the pace. And that's a big issue for me, I like to be in charge of whatever it is that I'm in, master of my own destiny, so that's what self-employment allows you to be. Whereas in the employed world you're not always master of your own destiny, in fact, unless you own your own company you're not master of your destiny... So all of those things have kicked in so the quality of my life, in terms of what I do and how I do it and when I do it has gone through the roof really. FM2

Choosing your own clients and type of work is also a plus point:

I can choose who I work with, so I can choose likeminded clients, and I can work with clients who are fun, who are good to be with, have good ideas, and want to do interesting things. FF2

And in fact, I pick and choose the work I do, so I don't have to do any of it, or I can do all of it. FF3

You can choose what you want to work at and what you don't want to work at, whereas in employment, the first thing I noticed when I went into an agency for example having been self-employed, was that I had to grab every piece of work because I had a payroll to feed, so I worked with a lot of clients I didn't like, I worked on a lot of projects I didn't want to work on, simply because I had the overheads. That when you're self-employed is not so much of an issue...So the whole choice of working with who you wish and on what you wish. FM2

Variety and type of work

Variety in both guises, either the lack of it in employment, or the abundance of it in self-employment is also a core theme:

Lack of variety. You can really get into a rut. FF1 on employment

There's more going on, I've got more variety in my job, I'm doing conferences, I'm doing writing, I'm doing PR, I'm having meetings with interesting people...It's much more dynamic than the last job. FF2 on self-employment

I have a huge variety of things that I do. Sometimes it's good to take on something that's a little bit mundane, to counterbalance something that's incredibly complex. FF3 on self-employment

I enjoyed talking to people in the industry I was writing about very much, and I do even more of that now, that's pretty much 90% of my time is doing that, producing copy, which is the bit I enjoyed, so basically what I've been able to do is extract the bit that I really enjoyed and turn that into a business. And I get a lot of satisfaction out of that. FM1 on self-employment

I just felt I was doing things for the umpteenth time and not really...I just wasn't enjoying it that much any more. FM3 on employment

One participant now also has a desire for new challenges linked to their variety and type of work:

Current level...I think I've hit a bit of a peak, and coming down off that peak, because I have been doing it for seven years and need to find one or two new challenges in what I do...So I suppose my satisfaction levels would be something like, six or seven out of ten at the moment. FF3

Schedule flexibility

The ability to structure their working schedule as they desired is a primary factor in the interviewees' satisfaction:

Deciding...given that you have a job of work to do for a client, but there's a certain amount of flexibility around when you decide to fit the work in, so you're not tied to a nine to five regime. If I want or need I can work weekends, which can free up a day for me to do something non-work related. So a lot more freedom and flexibility, they're the key things. FF1

Actually this is a good thing and a bad thing I guess because, I can work whenever I feel like it, you know. I can work at 10 o'clock at night if I want to, or 6 o'clock in the morning, without having to get in a car and drive to an office...When I worked for somebody else I had to get into the car and drive to work, and I had to get up at the same time every morning ...I mean I do tend to get up at the same time every morning but it's great to know that you don't have to! FF3

Definitely work-life balance is better, you can control your time better. I don't work less time, I probably even work more time, but I work it on my own terms for example, and I found it reduces the stress level...Whereas in a corporate environment it doesn't work like that, it's terribly restricting because you'll say Thursday afternoon I'm going to go off and write an article. 'No no you've got to go to this meeting.' So it's that kind of time pressure, it builds up the pressure, and that affects the job satisfaction. FM1

I think more than anything the flexibility. Both in terms of the type of projects I've worked on, the type of organisations I've worked with, the flexibility within reason for you to control your own time, plan your work around what you need to do, not just from a work point of view but from a personal point of view. FM3

Social interaction

When asked about the negative aspects of self-employment in their experience, social interaction was mentioned by all but one of the participants. The examples below demonstrate the general feeling on the subject:

It can get lonely frankly. If you're not strong-minded, I think it can be quite difficult for some people, you know I do miss the office gossip, having a chat and the Christmas parties with all the friends you work with all the time. And the other disadvantage is in terms of having other people around to bounce ideas off, that can be hard, so all the responsibilities and the big decisions – should I take that client on or not – always end up with you, and that obviously has a two-edged sword to it. FF1

I would say that the biggest negative is that feeling of being, slightly being sat in the office on your own...It's a little bit isolating. You can find you get a bit, I go a bit stir-crazy sometimes. FM1

The disadvantages are that you can be on your own, which means that you sometimes can't share a problem, that's probably one of the big things of employment, at the end of the day you can walk away. Even as managing director you've got lots of people you can share things with whereas as a self-employed person it's not so easy. FM2

It can sometimes be a little bit lonely, and isolating. Certainly miss the banter of the workplace. FM3

Two comments added a secondary perspective to the lack of social interaction. One participant, whilst thinking about the subject, recognises that not having the distraction of an office environment was a benefit to the client. A second feels that relationships with long term clients aid the interaction process:

I suppose the interaction with...the more regular interaction with people [disadvantage of self-employment]. Although sometimes it's great not to have to interact with people! In fact I think the benefits for the client is that I'm not in an office with other people that I talk to, so I can go into work and they get a good day out of me, whereas in an office it's easy to go and have a chat with somebody and make a cup of coffee. FF3

Some of the things you lose by becoming self-employed is some of the interaction with other people, whereas if you're on a long-term retained basis with a client you do get a lot of that anyway, and in a nice way because you're a bit more detached from it...without all the politics and that sort of stuff. FM1

Security

Whilst all participants mentioned security and general business/financial stability, there was a mixed response to the issue. Two participants mentioned security when asked about the disadvantages of self-employment:

Obviously a fear, it's only a spectre in the background, but if you were taken sick, then there ain't no money coming in. FM2

Theoretically being a freelancer, as far as I know when I've finished all the work that I've got on at the moment, the phone might never ring again or the emails might never come off, and I'd have to do something for somebody else. So there is a degree of uncertainty and that's your...the disadvantages of being freelance is you're not always sure of a...you haven't got a guarantee of regular income, even if it's been regular for so many years. FF2

Two mentioned security in relation to the advantages that full time employment provides:

Certainly security, a steady income – you know what your salary is going to be at the end of each month, it goes into your bank. FF1

Well obviously it's a guaranteed salary that would go up by at least the rate of inflation, erm, paid holidays etcetera etcetera. FM3

However two have more emphatic views on the issue of job security and its affect on them:

Setting up, a lot of people say 'ooh, job security', but I actually feel more secure in my job than I did employed for somebody else. Because these days, you can be made redundant...[snaps fingers] ... So I think that, in terms of being your own person, and having your own clients, you have a one-to-one relationship with these people, so they know who you are, and I think you're much less likely to lose it. And my income is spread over very different companies, so if one goes down, doesn't really matter, I can spread it around. So I actually feel, ironically, I actually feel more stable from that point of view than when I did when working... FF2

There's always that thing about 'salary I've got to have regular salary' and all that kind of thing, but I don't actually believe in the current climate that people have security of employment these days any more than I do. I could lose a client tomorrow sure, but then people could lose their job tomorrow. FM1

2.2 Questionnaire findings

2.2.1 Response numbers

The survey and accompanying request to participate was emailed to a total of 494 email addresses that were gained through listings of freelance/independent consultants listed with the Chartered Institution of Public Relations, Communicators in Business and Freelance UK. Following the initial mailing, 22 were returned as undeliverable. A total of 103 recipients entered the online survey, but only a maximum of 102 responded to the questions¹, yielding a 22% response rate from 472 that received the questionnaire.

2.2.2 Participants overview

The majority of the participants have been self-employed for four years or more (60%), with 31% in business one to three years and 9% operating less than one year.

Average hours worked per week varies. Just over half felt they work less now than when employed (55%), 23% estimated about the same time and 22% stated they work more hours now than when previously employed. When asked their average salary compared to their last full-time post; just over half earn more now than previously (51%), however 30% felt they earn less money, and 19% about the same.

A lower to mid-range number of monthly clients is the norm; 53% have one to three clients per month; 33% have four to five, and 14% have six or more. There is a fairly even split of the type of work for these clients, 36% stated that their client base consists mostly of long-term retained work, 27% work on mostly short-term projects and 37% have around a 50/50 split of both long and short term activity.

Participants were also asked if they employed people as part of their business activity. 58% work purely by themselves, 31% subcontract work but do not directly employ, 4% employ salaried staff and 7% provided 'other'² responses, including a combination of the above, sharing work with similar individuals if needed or working with a partner.

Prior to becoming self-employed, 5% classified themselves at assistant manager level, 37% as being in a managerial post and 58% were classed at senior management level or above (director, CEO/MD), indicating that a high proportion of participants held middle or senior roles before becoming self-employed.

2.2.3 Questionnaire results

2.2.3.1 Quantitative results

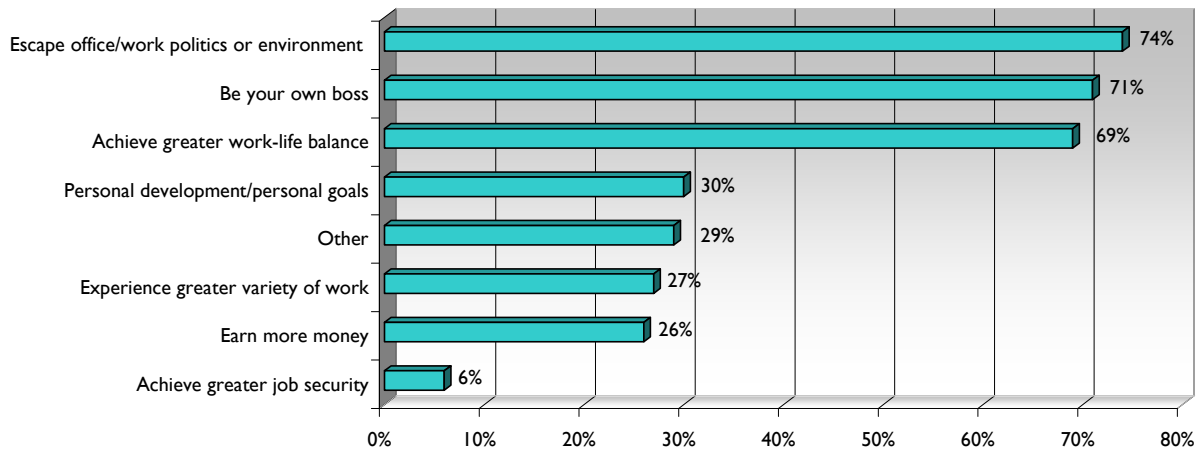
Drivers and motivators linked to job satisfaction

The participants were asked their reasons for leaving employment, if these aspirations have been realised and, if not, which factors have they been dissatisfied with. Figures 1, 2, and 3 summarise the responses:

¹ Not all participants answered every question; the total number of respondents is indicated within each table presented.

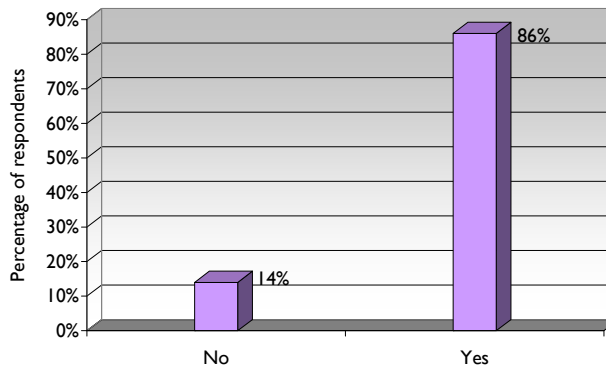
² Please see Appendix A for a list of 'other' responses where this was offered as a response option

Figure 1: What were your reasons for leaving full-time employment and becoming self-employed?



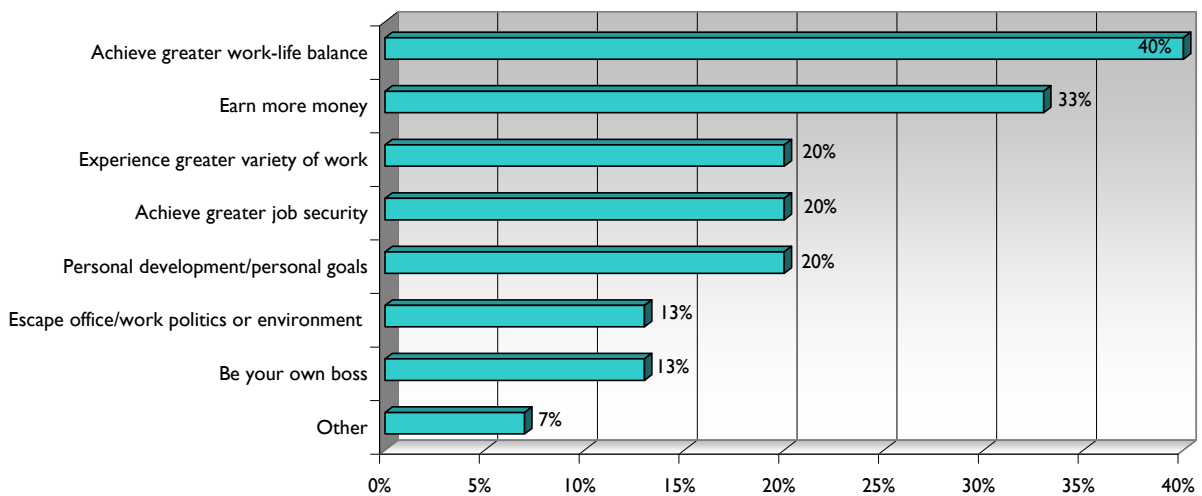
Number of respondents = 86

Figure 2: Have all of these aspirations been realised?



Number of respondents = 98

Figure 3: If no, which ones have you not been satisfied with?



Number of respondents = 14

The data in figure 1 shows that escaping the office environment and/or politics, the desire to be one's own boss, and the wish to create a better work-life balance were the key driving factors in leaving employment for self-employment. Personal development reasons, the desire to undertake a wider variety of work and earn more money then followed these primary motivators. Reasons quoted under 'other' included redundancy, to start a family and generally to have more control over how they worked.

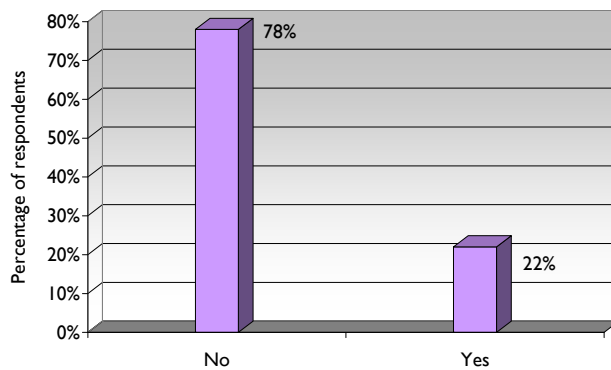
The majority have had their aspirations realised (fig. 2), which indicates that self-employment is affording these individuals the lifestyle and work structure they desire.

For the 14% that feel their reasons for going self-employed have not been completely fulfilled, a variety of reasons were cited (fig. 3). It appears primarily that the quest for greater work-life balance or higher income has not been attained, although each of the seven options received at least two responses. Overall however, each factor alone did not receive sufficient responses (e.g. the 40% assigned to greater work-life balance equates to six respondents) to indicate that it is a major source of dissatisfaction for the whole population.

There is also an unexplainable anomaly here: 86 participants answered the question about reasons for leaving (fig. 1), but 98 stated whether or not their aspirations had been realised (fig. 2). This suggests that on occasions participants were inconsistent in their response.

The next question asked if the respondents would return to full time employment at any stage. Figure 4 shows their responses:

Figure 4: Would you return to full-time employment now or in the future?



Number of respondents = 101

In this instance, the majority of the respondents would not return to employment, which again reflects a strong satisfaction with their current position.

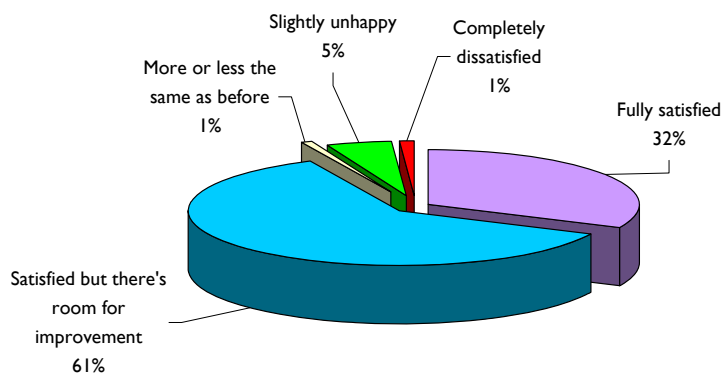
For those who would return to employment, the majority of reasons given are linked to career and personal motivations; for instance, where they would not completely refute employment if the right opportunity became available to them. The second most cited reason was despite a reluctance to return to employment, realistically it might have to be an option if financial stability and future security were needed and not available through self-employment.

The reasons described here indicate that the minority who would return would do so not through immediate dissatisfaction with self-employment, but rather through a realism related to their future stability or aspirations. This pragmatism was also present with the interviewees.

Overall satisfaction level

Participants were then asked about their overall satisfaction now compared to employment. Figure 5 summarises the responses:

Figure 5: What is your current level of satisfaction now compared to previous employment?



Number of respondents = 101

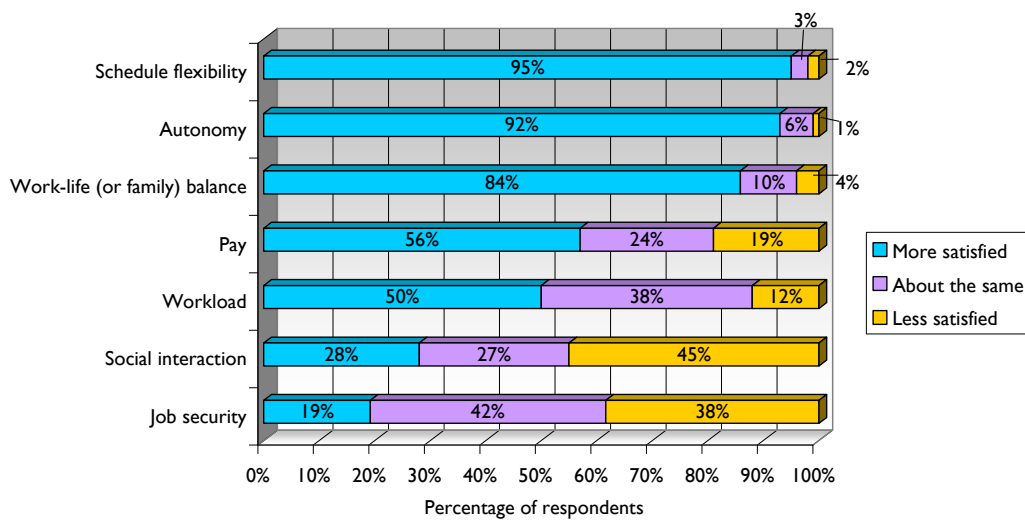
Overall, 93% of respondents are either satisfied or fully satisfied in self-employment. One feels there had been no change and six can be classed as being dissatisfied to varying degrees.

Interestingly, after filtering the responses, of the 61% that answered 'satisfied but room for improvement', 79% of that group said they would not return to employment. This suggests they are still happier in self-employment even when faced with negative factors.

A minority contradict this view; there is a small percentage (5%) of questionnaire participants that register themselves as 'slightly unhappy' now compared to employment. Their answers to other questions indicate that they are less happy with pay, interaction and security. One is completely dissatisfied with their current self-employment because of insufficient work.

When comparing satisfaction levels to the types of contract the respondent worked on; from the 36% that held mostly long-term client, 43% of those report to be fully satisfied overall. This compares to a much smaller proportion with short-term clients: of the 27% who held mostly short-term contracts, only 1% feels they are fully satisfied.

Figure 6: Compared to when you were a full-time employee, as a self-employed person are you more or less satisfied with the following factors?:



Number of respondents: = 101 for each factor except workload (100 respondents)

NB: Certain factors do not add up to 100% due to some respondents selecting 'N/A' for the answer. See table 1 below for details.

Figure 6 above looks at the factors that affect satisfaction. Participants were asked to rank their satisfaction with individual factors compared to full-time employment. The findings demonstrate that schedule flexibility and autonomy are factors that respondents are enjoying most now they are self-employed. A greater satisfaction with work-life balance is also a high-ranking factor.

Overall, job security and social interaction experienced by the respondents are either the same now or were better in employment, with these two factors rating the lowest in terms of current satisfaction. However when assessing whether satisfaction with job security would lead to the person leaving, of the 38 who say they are now less satisfied with job security, only 10 of these claim they would return to full time employment, 28 say no.

Deeper analysis of the results also presented insight into the trade-offs that occur during self-employment. Thirty-two respondents say they are fully satisfied overall (figure 5), but also claim via figure 6 to be less satisfied now with social interaction (10 respondents), job security (5) and workload (3). These findings demonstrate that an individual can be wholly content overall but still be making concessions for unsatisfactory elements of self-employment.

2.2.3.2 Qualitative analysis

In addition to the closed answers collected on job satisfaction levels, participants were also asked to describe what, in their experience, are the positive and negative sides of self-employment to investigate if, unprompted, the same themes would arise as did through the interviews. Tables 1 and 2 list the positive and negative themes raised, ranked in order of frequency.

Table 1 In your experience, what are the overall positive sides of self-employment?

Positive aspects of self-employment mentioned	No. of mentions
Autonomy	60
Schedule flexibility	48
Work-life balance	23
Variety and type of work	18
Escape from office environment/infrastructure/politics	18
Greater appreciation of work (either by themselves or clients)	14
Financial reward	14
Less/no commuting	4
Increased productivity	3
Social interaction	2
Job security	1
Fulfilling entrepreneurial desire	1

Respondent number: 99

NB: The total number of mentions exceeds 99 as generally each respondent mentioned more than one factor.

Autonomy and schedule flexibility are the two most cited beneficial elements of self-employment; this mirrors the interviews and also much of the existing literature. Mentions of autonomy encompassed a general control of all elements of their business: which work they accept, what clients they take on and an overall ‘freedom to choose’ in setting their business direction. Seven respondents describe ‘destiny’ of some sort – master of your own destiny, control of your own destiny and so on. The ability to determine on what you worked and with whom was valued by many.

Greater appreciation of work was used to classify not only the individual having a greater enjoyment and satisfaction in what they do now, but also where they now experience a greater sense of appreciation from their clients. A number of respondents elaborated on this point: “a general feeling that you are more respected and rewarded for your talents”; “you are paid for your specialist skills and are treated with more respect”; “being treated as a subject-matter expert and therefore as an equal and not as a subordinate.”

Table 2 In your experience, what are the overall downsides of self-employment?

Negative aspects of self-employment mentioned	No. of mentions
Lack of social interaction	33
Lack of business infrastructure	24
Security fears/future uncertainty	23
Time and workload management	22
Financial instability/cash flow	14
Bad clients	7
Responsibility of business ownership	4
Increasingly competitive marketplace	1
Inability to control clients’ long-term strategy	1

Respondent number: 98

NB: The total number of mentions exceeds 98 as generally each respondent mentioned more than one factor.

The findings indicate that it is not security or financial elements commonly cited in previous commentary on the subject that top the negative elements, but the lack of social interaction. Comments on this topic are described in the wider sense of interacting with colleagues, not only the camaraderie of the office but discussing projects with the team also featured considerably – decision sharing and problem solving, generally ‘bouncing ideas’ off others.

After social interaction, grouped very closely are the lack of business infrastructure, concerns about future security and the uncertain nature of self-employment, and time-workload management. Business infrastructure covers not only having to deal with tax, administration, accounts and generally services that an organisation used to provide, but also not benefiting from corporate training budgets/structures, and the fact that now they have to continually promote/market themselves, which would not have been an issue previously when a constant stream of work was provided by an employer. Issues with business infrastructure are also mentioned in the interviews in the same respect.

Time/workload management covers not just the unpredictable nature of the workload and finding it hard to switch off, but many mention taking on additional work and the inability to say no to a client ‘just in case’, because of their overall uncertainty about the future: *“difficult to plan any time off because a new project might be coming in at any moment which one cannot afford to turn down”, “a tendency to take on extra work even when busy for fear of losing a client if a down-turn occurs.”* As with business infrastructure, the difficulty in managing time and workload was also mentioned by the interviewees.

Overall, the questionnaire findings imply that self-employment is generally providing more satisfaction than dissatisfaction, even with its negative elements. When comparing tables 1 and 2, there are a total of 206 positive mentions compared to 129 negative mentions. The higher level of satisfaction is also supported by findings in figure 6 on comparison factors, figure 5 on overall satisfaction and figure 4 on returning to employment.

3 Discussion/Conclusion

3.1 Overall analysis related to research question

The findings from both the qualitative and quantitative research phases indicate that, overall, self-employed communicators are more satisfied now than when employed, even when faced with the concessions made as a result of working independently. This has been demonstrated not only through the open-ended statements made during the course of the interviews, but also the closed responses gathered from a wider audience. However, this statement cannot be generalised even within this study, as a small number of participants in the questionnaire are either slightly unhappy or completely dissatisfied compared to their previous employment.

Autonomy is a key factor that positively affects satisfaction levels: the majority of respondents see the freedom to determine their own approach to how and on what they work as a significant benefit compared to previous employment. Client choice is a clear motivator within this theme. Autonomy links closely to schedule flexibility, which in this study was classified separately but is a discrete indicator of the participants' appreciation of being able to set their own timetable for working hours, making for an enhanced work-life balance. Other interesting findings positively associated with satisfaction are the variety and type of work that the participants now experience, and a sense of a greater appreciation of their work by themselves and their clients.

Looking to factors that adversely affect satisfaction, the lack of social interaction was mentioned most often by respondents over other negative factors. This theme is apparent in both the qualitative and quantitative data: five of the six interviewees and around a third of the questionnaire respondents stated it as a negative factor, making it the highest ranked factor in detrimental mentions. Interestingly, whilst 34% mentioned lack of social interaction as a negative factor in the open-ended question (shown in table 2), a higher proportion (45%) registered less satisfaction with interaction in a closed multiple choice question (fig. 6), which increases its status based on the number of negative references it received.

However, juxtaposed to these findings is the fact that 28% of the questionnaire respondents, very close to the proportion (34%) who mentioned the theme as a negative factor, are actually more satisfied with social interaction now they are self-employed (fig 6). This demonstrates the need to consider people's individual circumstances: were they isolated before and now have more client contact, or conversely do they prefer not to work with other people and so, in this instance, lack of social interaction may actually be a positive factor? However notwithstanding these considerations, in this study social interaction was rated higher than other negative factors associated with self-employment.

Security was mentioned by all interviewees and also ranks third in the negative factors cited by questionnaire participants (table 2). However, still only under a quarter of the total questionnaire respondents mentioned security as a disadvantage of self-employment. The brief and sometimes indirect references to it in the interviews indicate that, in this profession, it may not be as big an issue as general self-employment literature may indicate. Also, in the closed question where respondents compared various factors to full-time employment, 38% are less satisfied with job security, but 42% feel it is about the same (fig 6).

The lack of business infrastructure is another area where the mixed-method research approach has been beneficial. Whilst this was mentioned in a minority of cases in the interviews, it received the second highest number of negative references in the questionnaire. In this instance,

the questionnaire has further developed a theme that was touched on briefly in the interviewees and signifies that the self-employed do value the infrastructure that was available in employment, as it now requires additional resource to implement and manage these structures working alone.

What this research has provided is an appreciation of the positive and negative factors that the self-employed experience. However, even with security, social interaction and business infrastructure registering as the three most common dissatisfaction factors, the fact remains that the qualitative group and the majority of the quantitative participants are more satisfied with their jobs than when they were employed. The majority of questionnaire respondents and all interview participants also feel that the aspirations created at the time of contemplating self-employment have now been realised, which again demonstrates the overall contentedness of the population surveyed.

The higher level of satisfaction remains true even for those who registered a noteworthy level of concern at present. For instance, a number state they are less satisfied with security but also stated they would not return to employment, which indicates a strong preference for their current job status. Similarly the interviewee who indicates mild unhappiness with current self-employment still feels they are more satisfied now than when employed.

3.2 Areas of interest and recommendations

An area of particular interest has been the issue of social interaction as the negative factor mentioned most often by participants. However, linked to this theme are the views from interviewees that a lower level of social interaction is actually beneficial at times. The quantitative phase also revealed a number that were more satisfied with social interaction now than previously, but the questionnaire did not explore why. The fact that the findings here are both intriguing and varied suggest that social interaction in self-employment is not a fixed state but subjective and would be an area that would benefit from further research. Such a study could examine self-employed perspectives on working relationships; their satisfaction levels with the amount of social interaction and the reasons for it, to investigate more fully the benefits and disadvantages of working alone. This would be of more relevance and use if the research was applied to those self-employed professions that work independently and often at home, rather than the whole self-employed population. Many self-employed people run their own business and hire staff; therefore one would assume, in this instance, the lack of social interaction is not a primary issue.

Another issue of note has been the varying views on job security from the interviewees. Where previously, literature suggested that it may be a primary dissatisfaction factor for the self-employed, this study found a lukewarm concern from the participants. Two interviewees are clearly comfortable with their level of security, and the quantitative data found the majority feel their security levels were either the same as before or better. Further research into self-employed perceptions of job security could develop current thinking on the subject and provide additional evidence to support either of the contradictory views on the issue.

In terms of recommendations for professional practice, human resources professionals may want to consider the level of autonomy and flexibility that they can reasonably offer their employees. It is clear from the research that the business infrastructure, security and social interaction that comes with employment is valued. If practitioners study the positives of self-employment that are cited here then, whilst recognising that certain issues may be beyond an employer's control, some workplace structures may be changed in order to retain staff. With a similar objective in mind, whilst it was not covered fully in this study, if the reasons for leaving

cited by participants were explored in more detail, it may also help employers to understand potential issues and take preventative action.

For freelance communicators, there is now a greater appreciation of their profession's job satisfaction and determinants of that satisfaction. In what is a primarily solo and sometimes isolated role, this study provides data on the wider community and could help individuals to compare their experiences with others, to ascertain similarities and contrasts, and in general to feel that they are part of an extended society.

In summary this research found that, overall, self-employed communicators are more satisfied now than when organisationally-employed. But because a minority is unhappy, the general satisfaction cannot be seen as unconditional. Increased autonomy, schedule flexibility, work-life balance and enhanced variety and type of work all positively affect satisfaction levels. Lack of social interaction, lack of business infrastructure and fears about job security, among other factors, negatively affect satisfaction. As a result of this study, two recommendations have been made. The first is a recommendation for additional research into the issues of social interaction and job security. The second suggests that personnel professionals consider the level of autonomy and flexibility available within organisations to aid with staff retention. In conducting this piece of work, a positive contribution has been made to both the communication and academic fields.

Appendix A 'Other' questionnaire responses

Q7: Do you employ people as part of your business set-up?

Other (please specify)
Work with a business partner
Mostly by myself but join forces with other freelance colleagues with different skills for specific projects
I share work with another woman who works in the same way that I do
I work by myself, but employ IT support. I also work as an associate for consultancies, so work as part of their teams.
I am currently recruiting for an account manager - it's a nightmare!!
Work with my partner who is also self employed
Both employ and subcontract work

Q9 What were your reasons for leaving full-time employment and becoming self-employed?

Other (please specify)
And to have children
Redundancy – rejected alternative post in Paris
Voluntary redundancy
Redundancy
Made redundant and was handed a contract to start up - it spiralled from there
Redundancy started me off, and though I've tried working for others, I'm really not suited to that. Work life balance has been achieved, my net earnings are definitely higher pro-rata, I've escaped office politics. The downside is that exposure to new work experiences is limited, as is the variety of work. Of course, there is zero job security - but few have that in reality in today's workplace.
I went freelance because the alternative at the time was redundancy.
Redundancy
Have more control over the service offered to clients
Had a baby
Children!
Previous interim work finished and the opportunity arose
Redundancy
Fed up with being taken for granted and for working incredibly hard so someone else could profit.
Redundancy - began freelancing as a stop gap and preferred it
Reduce my work level and spend more time on other activities
Fit family and work into a life that works
Company was forced into liquidation and I chose to remain freelance
Reached age of 65
Made Redundant When Share Price Collapsed
Flexibility with family
Employer went out of business, so I set up my own business to retain some of the old clients
Reduce the amount of travel
Client contract ended so did deal to handle smaller clients on freelance basis
After maternity leave, as didn't want to work full time - the only option with my employers at the time

Q11: if no, which ones have you not been satisfied with?

Other (please specify)
Children and elderly parents