2026

What is the future of freelancing?

ipse

malt

Executive Summary

No plans to leave

Two-thirds (66%) expect to remain self-employed over the next five years

Positive reasons for staying

Enjoyment of work (63%), flexibility (57%) and control 51%) are the primary reasons for staying self-employed.

Income a key consideration

75% of those earning over £60,000 a year expect to remain self-employed, compared with 65% earning under £60,000.

Not everyone wants to grow

Just one in ten (10%) of solo businesses want to scale in the next five years.

Foreword

Vicks Rodwell,
Managing Director, IPSE

Freelancing plays a central role in today's labour market. Millions of people choose this way of working because it offers autonomy, flexibility and the chance to build a career on their own terms.

That choice reflects how work itself is changing. Skills, expertise and value are increasingly delivered in more flexible ways across the economy. The question now is this: are the systems that sit around work evolving quickly enough?

From policy and regulation to financial services, there is often a default assumption of permanent employment. Self-employment is often treated as an afterthought. That needs to change, because the evidence points to a future of work that will treat autonomy and independence as the norm, not the exception.

Freelancers operate in fast-moving markets, respond directly to demand and allow businesses to access specialist skills when and where they are needed. That responsiveness helps businesses to adapt, particularly during periods of economic change. A forward-looking approach to self-employment would build on those strengths.

That means designing systems that reflect how freelance careers develop over time, support long-term financial security, and enable people to sustain independent working across decades rather than short bursts of activity. It also means moving away from frameworks borrowed from permanent employment.

This report, produced in partnership with Malt, looks ahead to what freelancing can and should become in the UK.

About this report

Research into self-employment typically focuses on the situations facing today's freelancers. But we know less about their future intentions; how many of them plan to stay, and for how long? How many are planning to leave? And which factors are shaping these decisions?

To build a better understanding of the future of freelancing, IPSE and Malt have undertaken new research to explore freelancers' expectations for the next five years.

About IPSE

IPSE is the UK's only not-for-profit membership association dedicated exclusively to the self-employed. From sole traders and freelancers to contractors and fractional workers, we speak up for everyone in the self-employed sector.

We support our members with expert advice and events, provide essential protection for their businesses and campaign for better treatment in policymaking.

About Malt

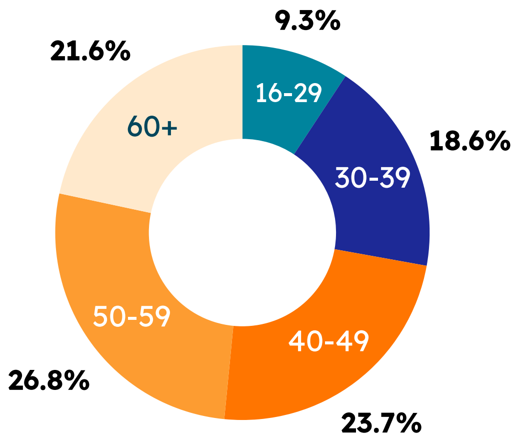
Founded in 2013 by CEO Vincent Huguet, Malt is Europe's leading freelance management platform. More than 90,000 companies use Malt to source, contract, and manage over 900,000 independent experts across tech, data, marketing, communications, and consulting.

With AI-powered search, seamless contracting and payments, plus built-in reporting and compliance, Malt provides an end-to-end solution for freelance management.

Who are the self-employed?

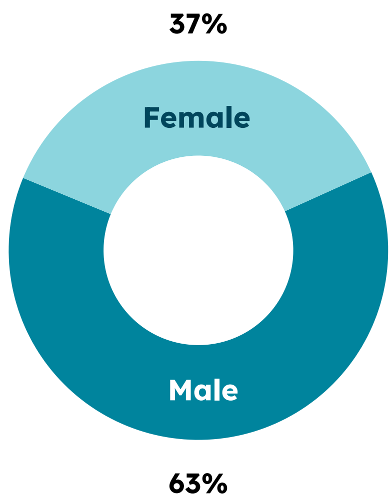
4.4 million

the overall **solo self-employed** sector



48 years old

average age of the solo self-employed



2 in 3 are male

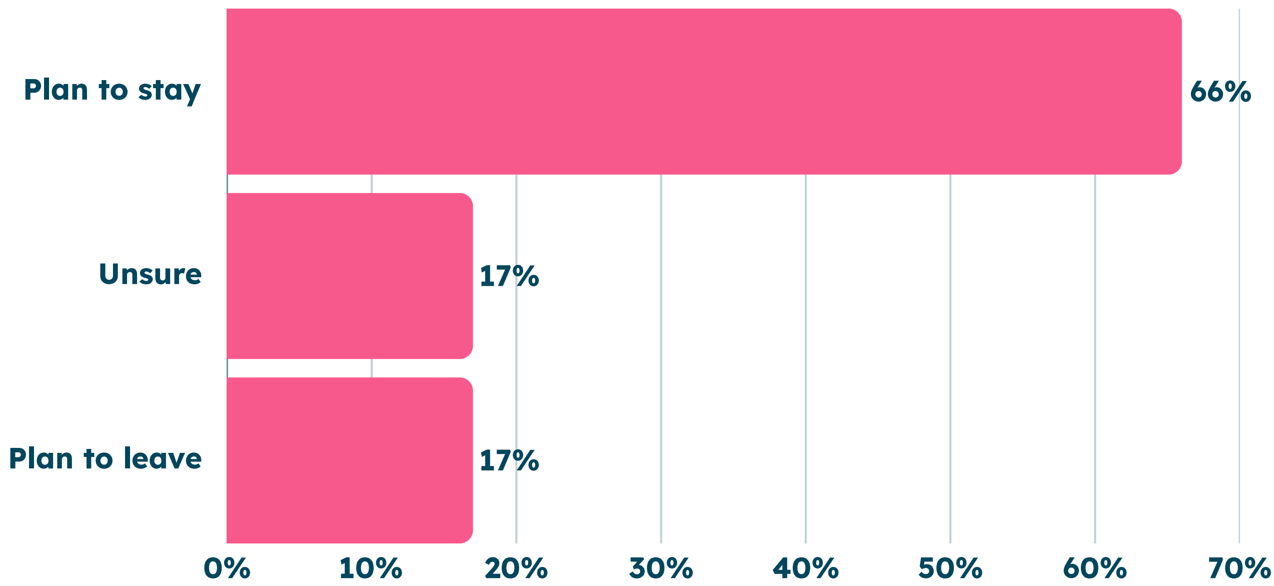
and there are **55% more women** than in 2008

Who sees themselves in self-employment in five years?

Encouragingly, most freelancers expect to remain self-employed over the next five years, with 66% saying they could see themselves being in self-employment in five years.

However, almost one in five (17%) are unsure about their future in self-employment, while a further 17% expect to leave within the next five years.

Table 1: Freelancers' five-year outlook



Respondents under 50 are more likely to expect to remain in self-employment over the next five years (73%) than those aged 50 and over (50%).

Differences are also evident by working model, with sole traders slightly more likely to see themselves remaining self-employed (68%) than limited company directors (64%).

Income is another important factor: three-quarters of those earning £60,000 or more a year (75%) expect to remain self-employed, compared with 65% of those earning under £60,000.

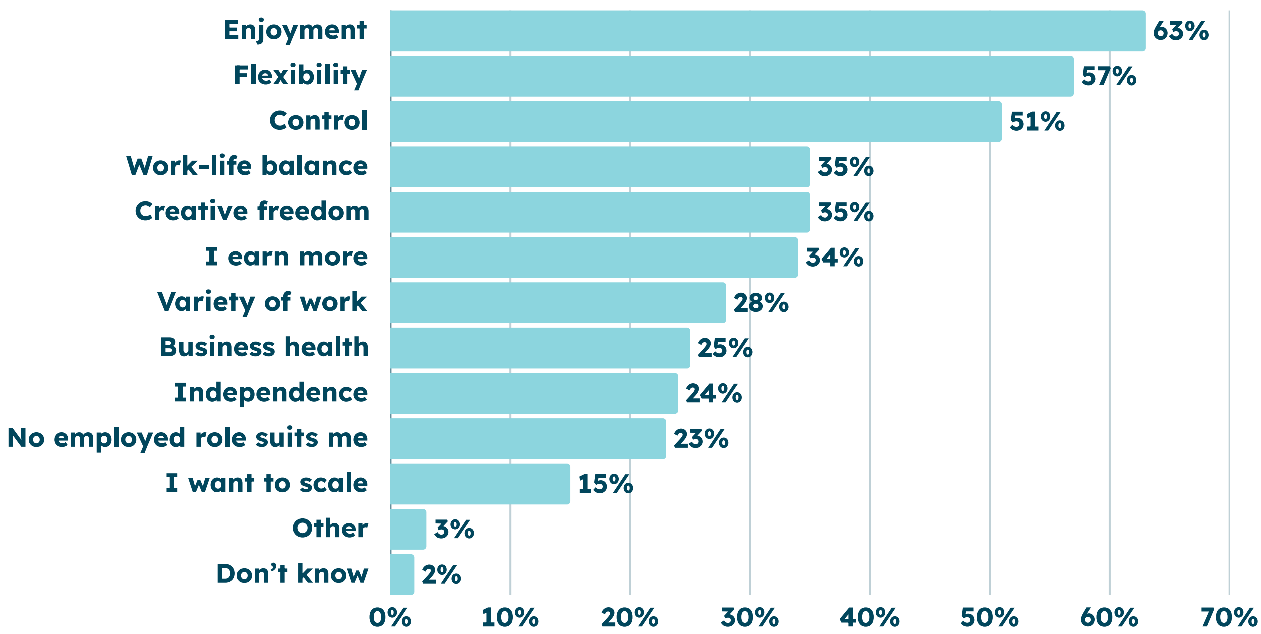
Reasons for staying in self-employment

Nearly two-thirds (63%) say they plan to remain self-employed because they enjoy what they do, while flexibility (57%) and greater control over decision-making (51%) are also central motivations.

Many also point to creative freedom (35%), better work-life balance (35%), opportunities to earn more (34%) and the variety of work available (28%).

Practical considerations also play a role: a quarter say their business is healthy or improving (25%), and almost one in four (23%) remain self-employed because they cannot find an employed role that suits them.

Table 2: Reasons for staying in self-employment



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as respondents could select multiple answers

Women are more likely than men to say they expect to remain self-employed because they enjoy what they do (70% vs 59%), value flexibility (62% vs 54%) and want greater autonomy (54% vs 49%).

Creative freedom is also a stronger driver for women, cited by 41% compared with 30% of men.

Age also influences motivations. Those under 50 are more likely to cite flexibility (60% vs 52%) and autonomy (55% vs 46%) as reasons for remaining self-employed than those aged 50 and over. Younger respondents are also more likely to want to scale their business (20% vs 8%), pointing to a stronger growth orientation.

Those earning £60,000 or more are also significantly more likely to say they will remain self-employed because they enjoy what they do (77% vs 63%) and because they continue to earn more in self-employment (63% vs 25%) compared to those earning under £60,000 annually.

77%

of those earning over £60,000+ report they will remain self-employed because they enjoy what they do

Higher earners are also more likely to value flexibility (64% vs 54%) and the variety of work available (43% vs 24%). By contrast, lower earners are more likely to remain self-employed because they cannot find an employed role that suits them (27% vs 17%).

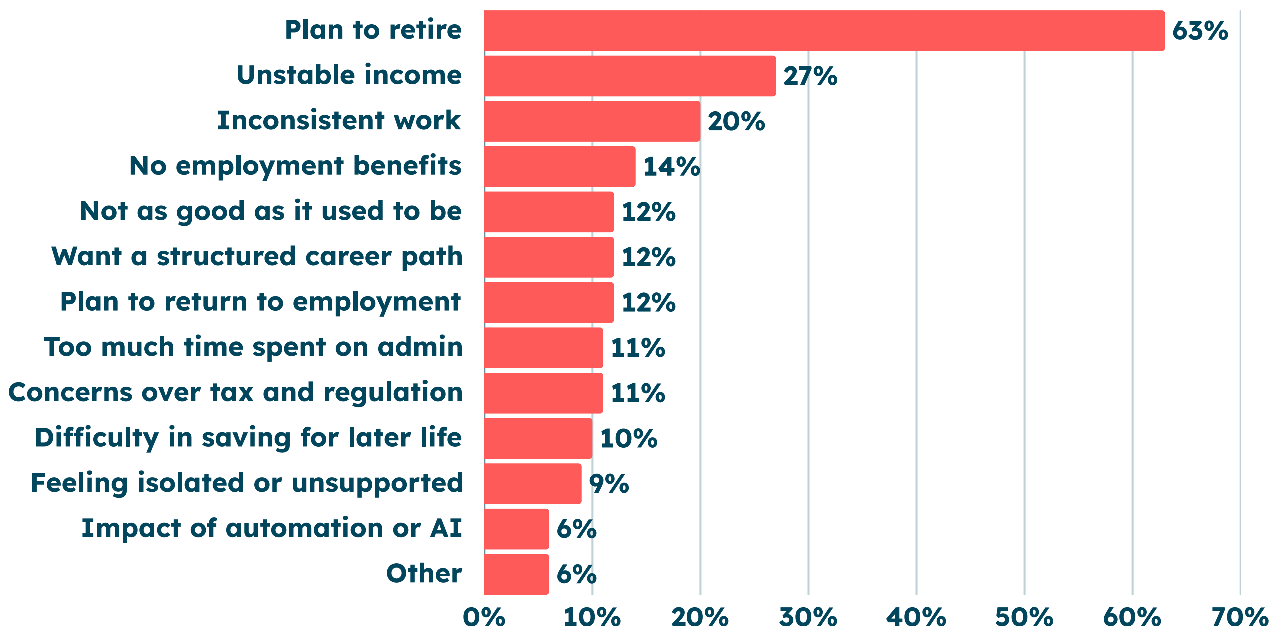
Reasons for leaving self-employment

For those planning to leave self-employment, retirement is by far the dominant driver. Nearly two-thirds (63%) say they expect to exit because they are planning to retire.

Beyond this, financial insecurity is the most prominent concern: more than a quarter cite a lack of income stability (27%), while one in five point to difficulty finding consistent work or clients (20%).

Similarly, around one in seven highlight the lack of access to employment benefits such as pensions or sick pay (14%), while others point to the administrative burden of self-employment (11%), concerns about future tax or regulatory changes (11%), and difficulty saving for later life (10%).

Table 3: Reasons for leaving self-employment



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as respondents could select multiple answers

Men planning to leave are far more likely to say this is driven by retirement, with more than two-thirds (69%) citing this reason compared with just over half of women (54%). Women, by contrast, are significantly more likely to point to financial insecurity: over a third cite lack of income stability (35% vs 22% of men), and almost a third highlight difficulty finding consistent work or clients (31% vs 13%).

Among those aged 50 and over, leaving self-employment is overwhelmingly driven by retirement, cited by four in five respondents (80%), compared with just over a quarter of those under 50 (26%).

Younger respondents instead are far more likely to cite economic pressures: over half of under-50s point to lack of income stability (53% vs 16% of over-50s), while two in five cite difficulty finding consistent work (40% vs 11%). Under-50s are also much more likely to report lack of access to benefits (41% vs 2%) and a desire for a more structured career path (35% vs 1%).

35%

of women cite financial insecurity as a reason for leaving self-employment in the next five years

Higher earners (£60,000+) are significantly more concerned about finding consistent work or clients (42% vs 19%) and future regulation or tax changes (28% vs 8%) compared to lower earners.

Biggest financial concerns

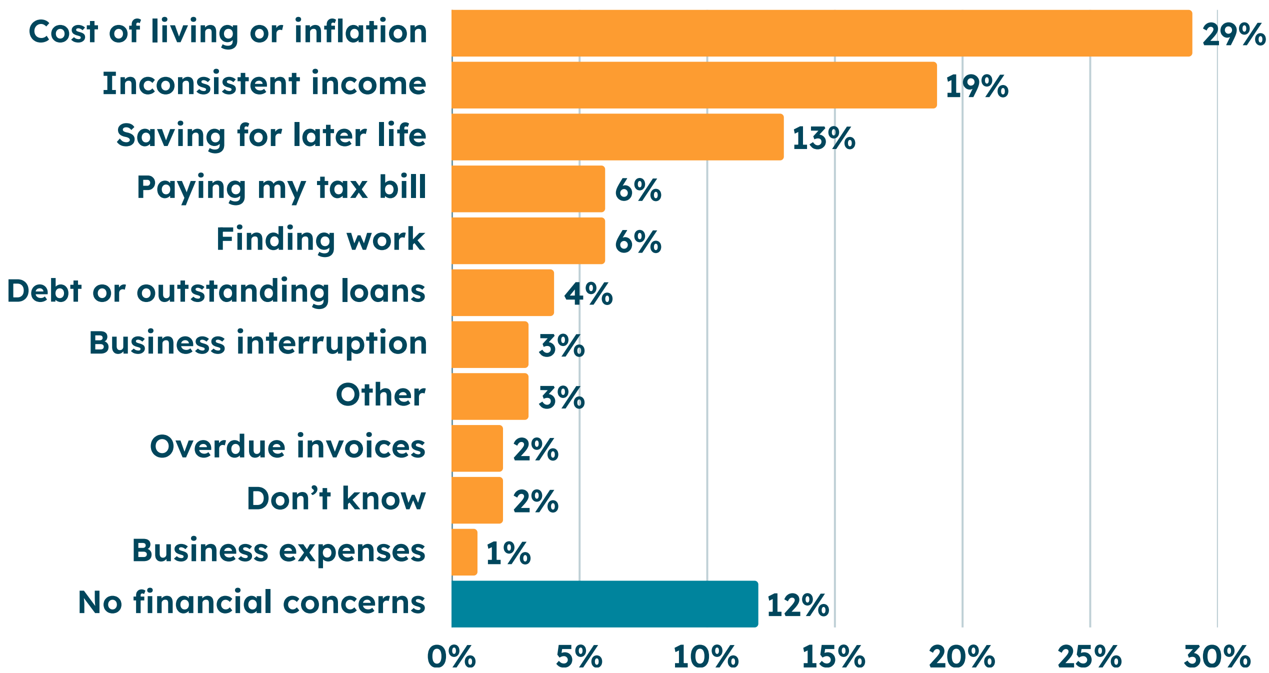
Understanding the financial pressures facing the self-employed is critical to assessing the long-term sustainability of freelancing. Day-to-day financial strain shapes not only whether people remain self-employed, but also their ability to plan ahead, invest in their business and build long-term security. To capture this, we asked respondents to identify their single biggest financial concern, giving a clear picture of where pressure is most acutely felt.

The cost of living is the main concern, cited by nearly three in ten self-employed respondents (29%).

This is followed by inconsistent income (19%), underlining the ongoing volatility many freelancers face. Longer-term financial security also features prominently, with 13% saying saving for later life is their biggest worry. Smaller but notable proportions cite paying their tax bill (6%) or finding work (6%) as their main concern, while relatively few identify overdue invoices (2%) or business interruption (3%) as their primary issue.

Notably, just over one in ten (12%) say they do not currently have any financial concerns.

Table 4: Biggest financial concerns



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as respondents could select multiple answers

Men are more likely than women to say they have no current financial concerns (15% vs 8%), while women are more likely to report inconsistent income as their greatest financial concern (27% vs 14%).

Respondents under 50 are more likely to identify the cost of living as their biggest financial concern (34%) than those aged 50 and over (23%). Consistent with this, those aged 50 and over are more likely to say they have no financial concerns at all (17% compared with 8%), reflecting greater financial stability later in working life.

Among those earning under £60,000, the cost of living is the dominant concern, cited by nearly a third (32%), compared with just 15% of those earning over £60,000. Higher earners, by contrast, are more likely to say they have no financial concerns (22% vs 10%) and are significantly more likely to cite paying their tax bill as their biggest concern (13% vs 4%).

What would make self-employment more sustainable?

Respondents were asked what, if anything, would change their mind about staying in self-employment.

More than a third of freelancers (36%) say they would reconsider staying self-employed if they couldn't retire.

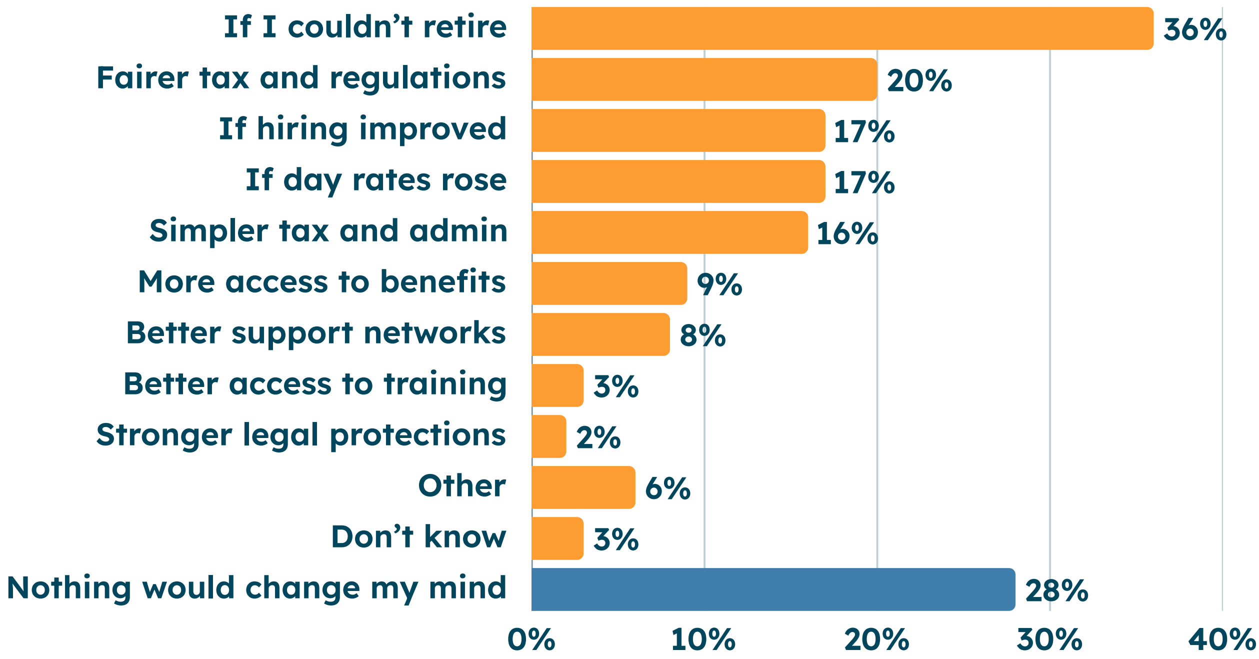
Beyond this, one in five (20%) say fairer and more stable tax and regulation for the self-employed would influence their decision to stay, while 17% cite higher day rates that better reflect skills and the cost of living, and a further 17% point to greater use of independent talent by organisations.

Around one in six (16%) say simpler and faster admin, tax and payment processes would make a difference. Smaller proportions point to improved access to benefits such as pensions and parental leave (9%), stronger professional networks (8%), access to training and upskilling (3%), or stronger legal protections (2%).

And very few (1%) say advances in technology such as AI tools would influence their decision.

Notably, more than a quarter of respondents (28%) say that nothing would change their mind about staying self-employed.

Table 5: What would change your mind about staying self-employed?



Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as respondents could select multiple answers

Unsurprisingly, among freelancers aged 50 and over, almost half (47%) say they would reconsider staying self-employed if they couldn't retire, compared with 11% of those under 50.

By contrast, freelancers under 50 are more likely to focus on market conditions: 34% say greater use of independent talent by organisations would influence their decision to stay, compared with 17% of those aged 50 and over, while 32% cite simpler admin, tax and payment processes, compared with 16% of older freelancers.

Income-related differences are more moderate but still evident. Freelancers earning under £60,000 are more likely to say that simpler admin and payment processes would make a difference (16%, compared with 11% of those earning £60,000 or more), and to cite professional support (9%, compared with 5% of higher earners).

Higher earners, by contrast, are more likely to say that nothing would change their mind about staying self-employed (35%, compared with 24% of those earning under £60,000)

Conclusion

This report shows that freelancing has a strong and enduring future, but one that depends on the choices made now. Most freelancers see self-employment as a long-term career and intend to remain so, drawn by the flexibility, autonomy and sense of purpose that this way of working provides.

That commitment is a powerful signal of the value freelancers place on self-employment and the role it plays in the modern labour market.

However, the findings also highlight a clear point of fragility. A significant minority of freelancers are uncertain about their future or are considering leaving self-employment altogether. This is not because freelancing has lost its appeal, but because financial pressures and a lack of support make it harder for some to see this way of working as sustainable in the long term.

It is evident from the research that where people feel confident in their ability to manage finances, plan ahead and endure lean periods, they are far more likely to remain self-employed.

The research also makes clear that immediate financial pressures continue to shape long-term decisions. Issues such as the cost of living, late payments and access to appropriate financial products do not just affect day-to-day cash flow; they influence whether freelancers feel able to commit to self-employment as a lasting career. Left unaddressed, these pressures risk gradually eroding a sector that is otherwise resilient and highly valued by those within it.

With the right approach, freelancing can continue to strengthen the UK economy and wider society. This report sets out the evidence needed to ensure that future is shaped deliberately, positively and with freelancers at its centre.

Methodology

The research was conducted by YouGov on behalf of IPSE and Malt. A total of 1,043 self-employed individuals participated in the study. Fieldwork was carried out online between 19 September and 13 October 2025. The results have been weighted by age, location, gender, operating status and industry to ensure they are nationally representative of the UK's self-employed population aged 16 and over.

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Where self-employment works for you