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More women turn to self-employment as experts call freelancing a ‘feminist issue’

20 Mar 2019 By Annie Makoff-Clark

Latest ONS statistics show overall employment is still on the rise, though Brexit may undermine progress



Record numbers of women are favouring self-employment over full-time employment, official data has revealed, as experts urge the government to do more to protect such workers from economic uncertainty.

Figures released this week by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) found that the number of women in self-employment rose by 31,000 in the last quarter of 2018. A separate analysis published earlier this month by the Association of Independent Professionals and the Self-Employed (IPSE) revealed a 57 per cent increase in the number of women turning to self-employment since 2008.

Self-employed mothers in particular now account for around one in eight of the self-employed population.

The rise in self-employed women is more than double the increase in self-employed men over the same period, the IPSE report found.

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Jon Boys, CIPD labour market economist, pointed to the [increase in the state pension age](#) (<https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/increase-state-pension-age-far-reaching-consequences-morale>), which has seen fewer women between the ages of 60 and 65 retiring, as a possible factor in stronger employment growth.

“For younger age groups, it may also be due to the relatively recent introduction of childcare reforms, such as free childcare for three-year-olds. Organisations are also having to be more flexible in their approach to recruitment given the tight labour market,” he added.

Other commentators suggested the disproportionate number of women entering self-employment could present a cause for concern given the precarious nature of such roles and the potential for ‘false self-employment’ where individuals are denied employment rights due to their status.

Corinne Stuart, head of commercial development at IPSE, said its figures showed “freelancing was a feminist issue” and called on the government to increase protections for this group of workers and ensure women have access to the freedom and flexibility of self-employment.

“As more and more women move into self-employment, the government must recognise how important this way of working is,” she said. “It should make a particular effort to make ensure self-employed mothers have all the assistance and support they need – for example, by making them eligible for statutory maternity pay, like employees.”

This viewpoint was echoed by Albert Azis-Clauson, CEO of freelance platform UnderPinned. “As we see a rise in people becoming self-employed across the board, it has become particularly attractive to groups that have historically struggled with bias in traditional employment,” he said.

However, Dr Charlotte Carey, senior lecturer at Birmingham City University’s Business School, told People Management there were greater numbers of

people working within the gig economy or on zero-hour contracts in female-dominated sectors, some of whom were only offered a few hours a week.

“Greater rights, understanding and support for nascent entrepreneurs, freelancers and fledgling businesses, particularly those moving from zero-hour contracts or others reliant on benefits, is essential,” she said.

This week’s ONS data also showed the UK’s employment rate at its highest level since 1971, with 32.6 million people in work between October and December 2018. Weekly average earnings have also reached their highest level since 2011, rising by 3.4 per cent to £494.50.

Ben Frost, solution architect for EMEA at Korn Ferry, welcomed the latest employment figures, but warned that the challenges of competing for the right staff with the right skills remained. “Companies need to look at benefits beyond financial incentives in order to attract the best talent,” he said.

“From flexible working schemes for a better work-life balance, to robust career development programmes and creative working environments, employers need to communicate the benefits associated with their brand.”

Boys also urged caution over the employment data, speculating that Brexit uncertainty was pushing businesses to employ more people to respond to demand instead of investing in plants and machinery. The latter, he said, was needed for long-term productivity growth.

“As ever, the official figures lag behind and as we get closer to Brexit, the date of departure will soon fall within businesses’ recruitment planning horizon. At this point, many may hold steady, so we might expect less rosy results in the coming months.”

Last week (March 12), ManpowerGroup’s latest *Employment Outlook Survey* suggested UK firms are [preparing to make Brexit-related job cuts](https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/research-heralds-end-good-times-as-firms-prepare-job-cuts) (<https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/news/articles/research-heralds-end-good-times-as-firms-prepare-job-cuts>).



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