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What Drives Gig Worker Success? Investigating the Impact of Relevant Experience and Self-Directed Learning

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Abstract

Research aims: This study aims to explore the relationship between self-directed learning, relevant work experience, and digital freelancers' performance in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, by considering the role of intrinsic motivation as a moderating variable.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study was conducted in two countries, Indonesia and Malaysia, involving 235 freelance respondents from various digital fields. Data were analyzed using SEM-PLS.

Research findings: The results indicate that relevant experience is an important bridge between self-learning and work performance. Interestingly, intrinsic motivation does not act as a reinforcement of this relationship.

Theoretical Contribution/Originality: The present study expands theoretical understanding of how work competencies are formed in the gig economy ecosystem, as well as how internal motivation needs to be viewed more contextually through self-determination theory (SDT) framework.

Practitioners/Policy Implications: These findings reinforce the urgency of developing individual learning capacity and creating a support ecosystem, especially in a country like Indonesia that still lacks formal regulation and protection for freelancers, compared to Malaysia, which has been more progressive in recognizing and supporting the role of freelancers in the digital economy.

Research Limitations/Implications: As the approach used is quantitative and cross-sectional, the data only shows conditions at a certain point in time. Future longitudinal studies are recommended to capture changes in behavior and performance in more depth over time.

Keywords: gig worker success; intrinsic motivation; relevant experiences; self-directed learning

Introduction

The digital economy has created a new work paradigm in Southeast Asia, driving rapid growth in the gig economy, including in Indonesia and Malaysia. This phenomenon has emerged in response to the increasing need for work flexibility, both from the side of workers and employers (Khan et al., 2024; Moghavvemi et al., 2023; Wu & Huang, 2024). The gig economy offers opportunities for individuals to work independently, manage their own hours, and take on projects that suit their skills and

et al., 2024). One of the fastest growing segments is digital freelancers, who work in areas such as web development, digital marketing, graphic design, and virtual assistants. These workers complete short-term projects mediated by online platforms such as Fiverr, Upwork, and Freelancer.com (Gussek et al., 2023; Idowu & Elbanna, 2022; Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2020), challenging conventional norms about education and career paths (Barlage et al., 2019; Herrmann et al., 2023; Solanki, 2025).

However, there are differences in supporting infrastructure. Malaysia has more structured policies such as the Digital Freelancer Initiative (MDEC, 2021), while Indonesia relies more on the independent initiatives of workers without any structured government program specifically for digital freelancers (Simbolon, 2025). Nevertheless, both countries show the same pattern in the importance of the role of psychological factors. In this context, research that compares the conditions of freelancers in two Southeast Asian countries through a regional approach becomes essential, considering the limitations of previous studies that have mostly focused on developed countries or single-country contexts. By examining both Indonesia and Malaysia simultaneously, this study offers a richer cross-country perspective and provides an opportunity to understand how structural support and personal autonomy influence the performance of digital freelancers within similar ecosystems that differ in policy governance.

Amidst the high demands for adaptability and competence, several fundamental questions arise. What factors truly determine the success of digital freelancers in this highly dynamic ecosystem? Is relevant work experience more important than formal educational background? Does a high level of self-directed learning enable individuals to gain more meaningful experiences and improve their performance? In this context, workers with strong self-directed learning capacities tend to master new skills faster and adapt to industry changes (Açikgöz & Latham, 2022; Bunjak et al., 2021; Heslin et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of this work experience and independent learning is highly likely to depend on the individual's intrinsic motivation (Altinpulluk et al., 2023; Baber et al., 2023; Rosli et al., 2022). Workers with high intrinsic motivation tend to be more enthusiastic about developing themselves, pursuing challenges, and remaining productive in the face of work dynamics (Bandhu et al., 2024; Cronin-Golomb & Bauer, 2023; Kuvaas et al., 2017). They are also more likely to undergo self-learning processes consistently and effectively, thereby increasing their competitiveness in the ever-evolving digital job market (Bonk & Zhu, 2024; Curran et al., 2019; Lewis, 1998).

Despite growing attention to gig workers' development, existing literature still lacks a comprehensive understanding of the performance drivers that matter most in this sector (Alauddin et al., 2025; Guduru & Santhanam, 2024; Li et al., 2020), especially in emerging economies. Most studies have examined either skill development or motivation in isolation (Perera et al., 2024; Altinpulluk et al., 2023), without exploring how these factors act as mechanism such as mediator or moderator to influence real performance outcomes (Flatøy, 2024; Jabagi et al., 2019). The inclusion of intrinsic motivation as a moderating variable is particularly important, as it allows for a more nuanced analysis of when and how self-directed learning and experience become impactful. Yet, this relational

mechanism has rarely been tested empirically, especially within the cultural and institutional settings of Southeast Asia (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Butschek et al., 2022; Murdani & Wijayati, 2023). This study addresses this gap by integrating these constructs into a single model to examine both direct and moderated effects on gig worker performance.

This study aims to explore the relationship between self-directed learning, relevant work experience, and digital freelancers' performance in Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, by considering the role of intrinsic motivation as a moderating variable using labor process theory as the theoretical basis. This study also examines whether relevant work experience mediates the relationship between self-directed learning and freelancers' performance. By understanding the factors that influence freelancers' success, this research can provide insights for freelancers, digital platforms, and policy makers into the development of more effective strategies to improve the competitiveness and well-being of workers in this sector.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

The gig economy represents a labor model where people engage in temporary or project-based jobs, typically facilitated by online platforms that connect them directly with clients seeking specific services (Murdani & Wijayati, 2023; Roy & Shrivastava, 2020). This concept has changed the traditional employment landscape by offering flexibility to workers and cost efficiency to companies (Pal & Kumar, 2024; Warren, 2021). However, to understand this phenomenon in depth, a strong theoretical foundation is needed. One theoretical approach that can be used to analyze the gig economy is the labor process theory (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Gandini, 2018; Zhang et al., 2023). This theory, which is rooted in Marxist thought (Gandini, 2018), explores the dynamics of control and autonomy in employment relations. Spencer (2000) stated that apart from describing the dynamics of control and autonomy in the gig economy, labor process theory is also relevant in explaining how freelancers develop their skills and experience to remain competitive (Bagnardi & Maccarrone, 2023; Hasan et al., 2024; Ali & Sivasubramanian, 2024). In the context of traditional employment, skills development is often facilitated by the company through formal training or employee development systems (Al-Tit et al., 2022; Dash & Mahapatra, 2016; Hosen et al., 2024). However, in the gig economy, freelancers are fully responsible for their own skill development (self-directed learning) without any structured institutional support (Wheelahan & Moodie, 2022; Zhang, 2024; Zwettler et al., 2023).

This shift in responsibility illustrates a central tension in labor process theory, namely the reconfiguration of control and autonomy in modern work arrangements. In platform-based gig work, freelancers may appear to have autonomy, but they often operate under algorithmic management and client-driven expectations that subtly impose control (Gandini, 2018; Bagnardi & Maccarrone, 2023). This paradox challenges the assumption that autonomy inherently leads to empowerment. From this theoretical lens, self-directed learning (SDL) is not only a proactive learning behavior, but a necessary survival strategy

under conditions of precarious autonomy. Freelancers must continuously upgrade their skills not because they are empowered, but because the structure demands it. Similarly, intrinsic motivation in this context may not stem purely from inner drive but also from the internalization of platform pressures and market dependency. By applying LPT more thoroughly, this study highlights how the performance of digital freelancers is shaped by ongoing negotiations between autonomy and structural control, where learning and motivation are tools of adaptation rather than purely voluntary development.

Self-Directed Learning and Relevant Experience

The capacity for self-directed learning reflects an individual's initiative in managing their educational development autonomously this includes identifying what they need to learn, setting goals, finding appropriate resources, applying learning strategies, and assessing outcomes without depending on external guidance (Alzahrani, 2024; Bouchard, 2012; Robinson & Persky, 2020). Meanwhile, relevant experience pertains to practical work exposure that directly aligns with one's professional domain and plays a critical role in enhancing both capability and job performance. For freelancers, the ability to self-regulate learning is particularly essential, as it equips them to adapt and refine their skills in response to evolving market expectations (Thomas Howard Morris, 2023; Zwettler et al., 2023). According to Morris (2023), cultivating meta-skills such as adaptability and self-awareness is crucial for career success, and these can be nurtured through intentional, independent learning practices (Heslin et al., 2020; Marino, 2021). Complementing this view, Morris and König (2021) argue that sustained career growth is supported by a learning process characterized by proactive exploration and lifelong development, echoing the essence of self-directed learning. Therefore, freelancers who consistently engage in self-driven learning are more capable of gaining relevant experience, which in turn strengthens their performance and marketability in the competitive landscape of the gig economy.

H₁: Self-directed learning has a positive influence on relevant experience in freelancers.

Relevant Experience and Gig Worker Performance

Gig worker performance is a measure of the effectiveness and efficiency of freelance workers in completing tasks or projects based on client expectations or industry standards. Relevant experience refers to the accumulation of knowledge and skills gained through direct involvement in specific tasks or projects relevant to the field of work (Fergusson, 2022; Sharma et al., 2021; Shore & Dinning, 2023). In the context of the gig economy, relevant experience becomes an important asset for freelancers to meet client expectations and deliver quality work. Research by Koutsimpogiorgos et al. (2020) shows that freelancers with relevant experience are better able to navigate the challenges of gig work and meet expected performance standards (Guduru & Santhanam, 2024; Liu et al., 2020). In addition, a study by Guduru and Santhanam (2024) indicates that competency development through relevant work experience contributes significantly to improving individual performance. Freelancers who have a track record of relevant experience tend

to be more trusted by clients, which ultimately increases their chances of getting new projects and maintaining their career sustainability (Flatøy, 2024; Fulker & Riedl, 2024; Wood & Lehdonvirta, 2023).

H₂: Relevant experience has a positive influence on gig worker performance.

Self-Directed Learning and Gig Worker Performance

The ability to independently direct the learning process allows freelancers to continuously update and improve their skills according to market dynamics (Morris & König, 2021; Shukla & Shaheen, 2024; Stephany, 2020). A study by Shukla and Shaheen (2024) highlights that individuals with high levels of self-directed learning are better able to adapt to change and adjust to industry needs, which ultimately has a positive impact on their performance. Furthermore, research by Morris and König (2021) suggests that career learning cycles involving continuous self-directed learning contribute to the development of competencies necessary to achieve optimal performance (Baber et al., 2023; Poceviciene, 2021). In the context of freelancers, the ability to proactively identify and address their learning needs enables them to remain competitive and meet the performance standards expected by clients.

H₃: Self-directed learning has a positive influence on gig worker performance.

Relevant Experience as Mediating Variable

As a mediating variable, relevant experience bridges the relationship between self-directed learning and performance, indicating that the accumulation of appropriate experience is a key driver in transforming learning into tangible work outcomes. Independent learning allows freelancers to gain and develop relevant experience required in their field (Baber et al., 2023). This experience, in turn, improves their performance in completing tasks and projects. A study by Morris (2023) emphasizes that the development of meta-competencies through self-directed learning contributes to the accumulation of relevant experiences, which ultimately have a positive impact on individual performance. In addition, research by Açıkgöz and Latham (2022) shows that individuals who actively engage in self-directed learning tend to accumulate relevant experience more quickly, which strengthens their competencies and improves performance in the context of gig work (Doo et al., 2023; Silamut & Petsangsri, 2020). Thus, relevant experience acts as a mediator in the relationship between self-directed learning and freelancer performance, where self-directed learning drives the acquisition of experience that ultimately improves performance.

H₄: Relevant experience mediates the relationship between self-directed learning and gig worker performance.

Intrinsic Motivation as Moderating Variable

Intrinsic motivation is an internal drive that stems from an individual's personal interest or satisfaction in performing a task, independent of external rewards. Intrinsic motivation plays an important role in improving the performance of gig workers (Jabagi et al., 2019; Perera et al., 2024). A research from Kang and Hur (2018) shows that intrinsic motivation positively contributes to performance through increasing employee creativity. This study highlights that workers with high intrinsic motivation tend to be more creative, which ultimately improves their performance. This finding indicates that intrinsic motivation can strengthen the relationship between relevant experience and freelancers' performance, by encouraging them to more effectively apply the knowledge and skills they already have (Butschek et al., 2022; Min et al., 2024; Wu & Wang, 2025). Moreover, in the context of self-directed learning, intrinsic motivation acts as a key driver for freelancers to proactively develop new skills and knowledge (Avsec & Ferk Savec, 2022; Perera et al., 2024; van den Groenendaal et al., 2021). Research by Liu et al. (2020) emphasizes that psychological contract fulfillment in the gig economy, which is often driven by intrinsic motivation, has a positive effect on freelancers' task performance (Yu & Abdul Hamid, 2024). This suggests that freelancers with high intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage in self-directed learning, which in turn improves their performance in a dynamic work environment.

H_{5a}: Intrinsic motivation positively moderates the relationship between relevant experience and gig worker performance.

H_{5b}: Intrinsic Motivation positively moderates the relationship between self-directed learning and gig worker performance.

Research Methods

To investigate the moderating effect of intrinsic motivation on the associations between relevant experience and gig worker performance, as well as between self-directed learning and performance, this research employed a quantitative design utilizing a structured survey. Data were gathered via an online questionnaire based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The instrument was distributed among freelance professionals active in the digital sector across Indonesia and Malaysia. A purposive sampling method was adopted, targeting individuals with a minimum of six months of freelance experience and engagement in roles such as graphic designer, UI/UX designer, digital marketer, fullstack developer, data analyst, virtual assistant, or translator, who offer their services through online gig platforms.

This sampling strategy was chosen to ensure that respondents possessed relevant domain-specific experience and had been exposed to platform-based gig work environments, which are central to the phenomenon under investigation. Nonetheless, purposive sampling may carry a risk of selection bias, as it may over-represent certain occupational categories or platform users who are more visible or accessible through

digital networks. To mitigate this, the sample included a wide range of digital professions across multiple platforms., including Upwork, Freelancer, Sribulancer, and demographic screening questions were used to ensure minimum experience thresholds.

Of the total 357 questionnaires collected, 122 respondents were excluded because they did not meet the criteria or provided invalid answers, resulting in 235 respondents who were eligible for further analysis. The information collected included demographic data and measurements of research variables based on instruments that had been validated in previous studies. Data analysis was conducted using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with the help of SmartPLS software, to test the direct relationship, mediation, and moderation effects of intrinsic motivation in this research model. Operational definitions and measurement items can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Operational definition and measurement item

No	Variable Operational Definition	Measurement Items
1	Self-Directed Learning: The ability of freelancers to independently identify learning needs, develop skills, and adapt to industry changes without external guidance (Açıkgöz & Latham, 2022; Hamori, 2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Determination of personal learning goals b. Independent selection of learning sources and methods c. Self-evaluation of learning achievements d. Initiatives to find new learning opportunities
2	Relevant Experience: Previous work experience that is relevant to the tasks or projects the freelancer is working on, including skills and understanding in the field (Herrmann et al., 2023; Pulignano et al., 2024).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Number of years of experience in related field b. Number of similar projects completed c. Level of expertise gained from previous experience d. Frequency of application of specific skills in previous jobs
3	Gig Worker Performance: The level of effectiveness and efficiency of freelancers in completing projects, measured by the quality of work results, timeliness, and client satisfaction (Guduru & Santhanam, 2024; Shukla & Shaheen, 2024).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Quality of work results based on feedback from clients b. Compliance with project deadlines c. Retention rate or repeated contracts with the same client d. Ratings or scores given by the platform or client
4	Intrinsic Motivation: The internal drive of freelancers to work based on personal satisfaction, intellectual challenge, and enjoyment in completing tasks, rather than solely due to external factors (Ridwan & Fiodian, 2024).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I enjoy doing this activity b. I work because my job is very interesting c. I feel satisfied when I understand new materials d. The urge to achieve or create something e. The level of challenge of the activity. f. I study because I want to understand the materials in depth

Results and Discussion

Respondents' Characteristics

A total of 357 respondents filled out the questionnaire for this study, and a screening process was carried out to ensure that each participant truly met the established criteria, such as active involvement in the digital gig economy and relevant work experience. After the selection process, a final total of 235 respondents were obtained whose data was deemed worthy of further analysis. This was done to maintain the validity and relevance of the research results.

Table 2 Respondents' Profile

Respondent	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	127	54%
Female	108	46%
Age		
≤ 20 years old	17	7%
21 – 25 years old	43	18%
26 – 30 years old	81	34%
31 – 35 years old	65	28%
> 35 years old	29	12%
Length of service		
< 1 year	21	9%
1 – 3 year(s)	70	30%
4 – 6 years	84	36%
> 6 years	60	26%
Education level		
Secondary/Vocational	50	21%
School/Equivalent		
Diploma (D3)	75	32%
Bachelor's degree (S1)	77	33%
Postgraduate (S2/S3)	33	14%
Job Fields		
UI/UX Designer	37	16%
Digital Marketing	29	12%
Full-stack Developer	28	12%
Data Analyst	35	15%
Graphic Designer	43	18%
Virtual Assistant	33	14%
Translator	30	13%

Based on the demographic characteristics of the 235 respondents (Table 1), the majority were male (54%), while females accounted for 46%. Most respondents were in the productive age range of between 26 and 30 years (34%) and 31–35 years (28%), indicating the dominance of young adults in the gig economy sector. Length of service was dominated by those who had 4–6 years of experience (36%) and 1–3 years (30%), indicating that respondents were generally not beginners in the world of digital freelance work. In terms of education, respondents with a Bachelor's (S1) degree represented the

largest group (33%), followed by those with a Diploma (32%), reflecting a fairly strong level of secondary and higher education levels. Meanwhile, the most popular fields are graphic designer (18%), followed by UI/UX designer (16%) and data analyst (15%), which indicates that creativity and data-based professions are quite dominant in this research sample.

From the interpretation of respondents' characteristics, the descriptive statistical analysis (Table 2) provides an initial picture of the data trends in each research variable. The average score of the four variables was in the moderate to high range, with intrinsic motivation (mean = 3.86, SD = 0.890) and self-directed learning (mean = 3.81, SD = 0.928) having relatively higher average values compared to other variables. Meanwhile, gig worker performance (mean = 3.72, SD = 0.897) and relevant experience (mean = 3.61, SD = 0.931) showed a fairly positive tendency. The correlation between variables showed a fairly strong relationship, such as between intrinsic motivation and gig worker performance ($r = 0.832$), and between self-directed learning and relevant experience ($r = 0.726$), which indicate a relationship between these aspects in the context of digital freelance work. However, the strength of this correlation does not necessarily indicate a direct influence, so it needs to be analyzed further through hypothesis testing.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlation

Variables	Mean	SD	RE	SDL	GWP	IM
RE	3.61	0.931	1			
SDL	3.81	0.928	0.726**	1		
GWP	3.72	0.897	0.754**	0.768**	1	
IM	3.86	0.890	0.744**	0.800**	0.832**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

RE: Relevant Experience; SDL: Self-Directed Learning; GWP: Gig Worker Performance; IM: Intrinsic Motivation

Following the previous analysis, convergent validity and reliability tests (Table 3) were conducted to ensure that each construct in the model had good measurement quality. The outer loadings results of all items were above 0.70, indicating that each indicator has an adequate contribution to the construct it represents. The Cronbach's alpha value of all variables was above 0.87, indicating a strong level of internal consistency. Meanwhile, the average variance extracted (AVE) value for all constructs also exceeded the threshold of 0.50, indicating that the proportion of variance explained by the indicators to the construct is greater than the error variance. This finding confirms that the measuring instrument in this study has met the requirements of convergent validity and statistical reliability.

Table 3 Convergent validity test and reliability test

Variables	Items	Outer Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	AVE
Gig Worker Performance	GWP1	0.822	0.900	0.716
	GWP2	0.849		
	GWP3	0.897		
	GWP4	0.799		
	GWP5	0.861		
Intrinsic Motivation	IM1	0.852	0.915	0.703
	IM2	0.814		
	IM3	0.871		
	IM4	0.864		
	IM5	0.829		
	IM6	0.797		
Relevant Experience	RE1	0.797	0.872	0.661
	RE2	0.766		
	RE3	0.840		
	RE4	0.824		
	RE5	0.837		
Self-Directed Learning	SDL1	0.862	0.879	0.677
	SDL2	0.711		
	SDL3	0.829		
	SDL4	0.828		
	SDL5	0.873		

The discriminant validity test as shown in Table 4 shows that the constructs in the model have adequate differences from each other. Based on the Fornell-Larcker criteria, the AVE square root values for each construct, namely GWP (0.846), IM (0.838), RE (0.813), and SDL (0.823), were higher than their correlations with other constructs, thus meeting the requirements for discriminant validity. Furthermore, the HTMT ratio results showed that most of the values between constructs were below the cut-off of 0.85, such as GWP–IM (0.586), GWP–RE (0.777), GWP–SDL (0.809), and IM–SDL (0.421), which indicates a clear difference between the constructs. However, there were two HTMT values that were close to the limit, namely IM–RE (0.816) and RE–SDL (0.840). Although they were under the 0.85 threshold, these two values suggest a potential conceptual overlap between the constructs involved. This may be due to the naturally intertwined nature of relevant experience, self-directed learning, and intrinsic motivation in the context of freelance digital work, where skill-building, motivation, and experience often reinforce each other. Although discriminant validity was statistically accepted, future research is encouraged to refine the operational definitions of these constructs or test alternative model specifications to confirm their empirical distinctiveness. Overall, these results support the fulfillment of discriminant validity in the research model.

Table 4 Discriminant validity test using Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratio

Variables	Fornell-Larcker Criterion				HTMT Ratio			
	GWP	IM	RE	SDL	GWP	IM	RE	SDL
GWP	0.846							
IM	0.840	0.838			0.586			
RE	0.782	0.770	0.813		0.777	0.816		
SDL	0.785	0.822	0.744	0.823	0.809	0.421	0.840	

Note: The diagonal numbers in bold indicate square root of the AVE.

RE: Relevant Experience; SDL: Self-Directed Learning; GWP: Gig Worker Performance; IM: Intrinsic Motivation

Based on the results of the hypothesis test (Table 5), self-directed learning (SDL) had a significant influence on relevant experience (RE) with a coefficient of 0.744, t-value = 15.095 and p-value = 0.000 (H1 is accepted). Furthermore, RE also had a significant influence on gig worker performance (GWP) with a coefficient of 0.280, t-value = 3.620 and p-value = 0.000 (H2 is accepted). The direct relationship between SDL and GWP was also significant, with a coefficient of 0.199, t-value = 2.379 and p-value = 0.018 (H3 is accepted). In addition, the results of the mediation test showed that SDL significantly affected GWP through RE with a mediation coefficient of 0.209, t-value = 3.321 and p-value = 0.001 (H4 is accepted). However, two moderation interactions involving intrinsic motivation (IM) showed insignificant results. IM moderation on the relationship between RE and GWP produced a coefficient of -0.007, t-value = 0.104 and p-value = 0.917 (H5a is rejected), and IM moderation on the relationship between SDL and RE produced a coefficient of 0.014, t-value = 0.203 and p-value = 0.839 (H5b is rejected). Thus, all the main hypotheses are accepted, while the moderation hypothesis is rejected because it is not significant.

Table 5 Structural model path coefficient

Hypothesis	Coefficients	STDEV	t-Value	p-Value	Decision
SDL → RE (H1)	0.744	0.049	15.095	0.000	Accepted
RE → GWP (H2)	0.280	0.077	3.620	0.000	Accepted
SDL → GWP (H3)	0.199	0.084	2.379	0.018	Accepted
SDL → RE → GWP (H4)	0.209	0.063	3.321	0.001	Accepted
RE x IM → GWP (H5a)	-0.007	0.068	0.104	0.917	Rejected
SDL x IM → RE (H5b)	0.014	0.068	0.203	0.839	Rejected

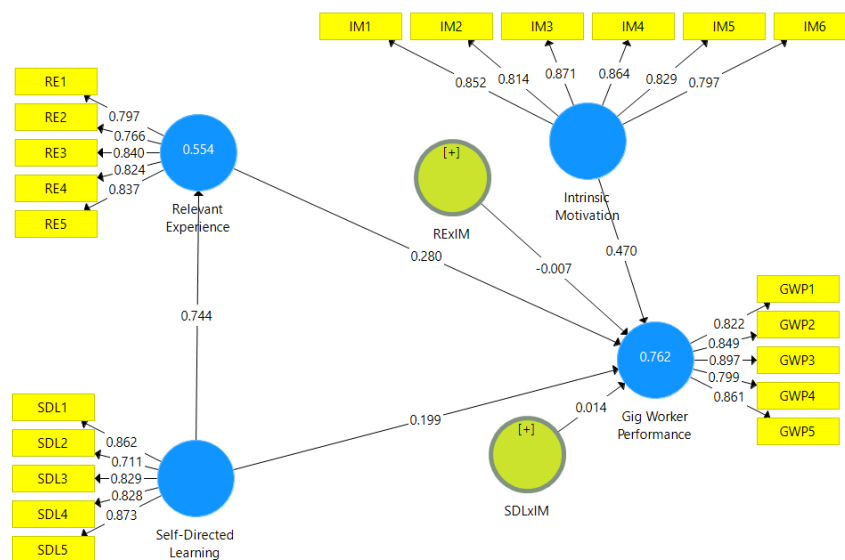


Figure 1 Structural Model

The results of the determination coefficient test (Table 6) showed that the independent variables in the model were able to explain the variation in the dependent variable quite well. In the gig worker performance variable, the R-squared value of 0.762 indicates that 76.2% of the variation in freelance worker performance can be explained by self-directed learning, relevant experience, and their interaction with intrinsic motivation. Meanwhile, the adjusted R-squared value of 0.757 showed results that remained high and stable even though they had been corrected for the number of predictors in the model. This stable value indicates that the model is rigorous or robust and is not too simplistic. It is not overfitted either, that is, it does not adjust itself too much to the data to the point of losing its generalization ability. Likewise, in the relevant experience variable, the R-squared value of 0.554 and the adjusted R-squared of 0.552 indicate that around 55.2% of the variation in relevant experience can be explained by self-directed learning and its interaction with intrinsic motivation, without any indication of excessive model deviation.

Table 6 Coefficient of determination

Variables	R-Squared	Adjusted R-Squared
Gig Worker Performance	0.762	0.757
Relevant Experience	0.554	0.552

Discussion

Based on the results of the hypothesis testing, self-directed learning (SDL) had a strong influence on relevant experience (RE), as well as directly on gig worker performance (GWP). This finding strengthens the understanding that self-directed learning is an important asset for freelancers to build competence, especially in a flexible and dynamic work environment such as the gig economy. Autonomous learning allows gig workers to

identify their own competency needs, adapt to technological developments, and continuously update their skills according to market demands. Furthermore, relevant experience has been shown to be an important link between self-learning and work performance. This shows that acquiring knowledge alone is insufficient; it needs to be applied within a concrete work context in order to truly contribute to the quality of output. It is highly likely that gig workers who successfully translate learning outcomes into real work experience have a greater chance of showing superior performance and meeting client expectations.

These findings confirm the initial expectations (H1–H4), particularly the strong, positive relationship between SDL → RE and SDL → GWP, which aligns with prior studies that emphasize the value of proactive learning and experiential application in the gig economy, such as those by Bunjak et al. (2021) and Bonk and Zhu (2024). The mediation effect of relevant experience (H4) was also significant, reinforcing that performance is not simply the result of knowledge acquisition, but of experience application in real projects.

However, one interesting finding is that intrinsic motivation did not play a significant role in strengthening the relationship between these variables (H5a and H5b). This outcome contradicts our initial expectation that IM would enhance the effects of SDL and RE on GWP, as supported by self-determination theory (SDT). This opens up the possibility that in the context of freelance work, internal motivation alone is not enough to drive performance or experience. Gig workers may be more motivated by external motivations such as project incentives, work flexibility, or economic pressures. Another possible explanation is that the baseline level of IM among freelancers in this sample is already uniformly high, leading to limited variation and weaker statistical moderation. This ‘ceiling effect’ may make IM less influential as a differentiating factor, particularly when external and structural conditions are more salient. This finding also suggests that intrinsic motivation may already be a basic prerequisite, not a differential factor that strengthens the relationship between variables in this study.

In this context, it is important to see the differences between gig workers in Indonesia and Malaysia. As explained in the introduction, freelancers in Indonesia are facing systemic challenges, including a lack of formal recognition from the government, minimal regulation of work protection, and limited access to structured professional training. As a result, gig workers in Indonesia must rely entirely on personal initiative in learning and work experience. In such conditions, the role of self-learning and work experience becomes vital, as shown in the research findings. In contrast, Malaysia has shown further progress in systematically supporting gig workers. The Malaysian government, through various policies and initiatives such as digital-based training programs, social incentives, and the legalization of freelance platforms, has provided a more conducive environment for gig workers’ competency and performance development. This structural support allows freelancers in Malaysia to access more formal learning resources, gain more consistent work experience, and even enjoy social protection. In this context, intrinsic

motivation may not be the only driver, as a strong external support system has played an active role.

This comparative dimension illustrates that contextual conditions strongly influence which factors matter most. In Indonesia, where structural support is weaker, internal competencies such as SDL and RE take center stage. In Malaysia, external facilitation may lessen the performance dependence on individual-level motivation. Therefore, the non-significant role of IM might also reflect these differing national ecosystems. This comparison reinforces the finding that in conditions without structural support such as in Indonesia, the strength of self-directed learning and work experience are the main pillars in building freelancer performance. On the contrary, in countries like Malaysia, institutional support can enrich and complement personal factors such as motivation. Therefore, this study also provides strong practical implications for the Indonesian government and other stakeholders, to start strengthening the freelance ecosystem through regulations, training, and protection that support the career growth of freelance workers.

Conclusion

This study examined how self-directed learning (SDL) and relevant experience (RE) influence gig worker performance (GWP) in Indonesia and Malaysia, with intrinsic motivation (IM) as a moderator. Results from 235 respondents show that SDL significantly improves both RE and GWP, with RE also mediating this relationship. However, IM does not significantly moderate the effects, suggesting that internal motivation alone is insufficient in enhancing performance outcomes for freelancers. The findings reinforce the relevance of autonomous and experiential learning theories in non-traditional work settings, particularly the gig economy, where self-learning and practical experience play critical roles in performance. However, the limited impact of intrinsic motivation challenges assumptions from self-determination theory and highlights the importance of external factors, especially in under-supported environments like Indonesia. This study emphasizes the need to contextualize work-performance theories based on local structural conditions.

Practically, platforms and institutions must provide more structured self-learning tools and entry-level project access to support early-stage freelancers. Governments, especially in Indonesia, should consider Malaysia's example by offering training, recognition, and social protections to strengthen freelancers' career pathways and economic stability. Future research should adopt longitudinal and qualitative methods to capture the evolving nature of gig work, explore broader contextual variables such as digital ecosystem support or income security, and integrate psychosocial factors for a more holistic understanding of freelance performance in emerging economies.

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