

A Knowledge Worker in the Developing World by Temitayo Olofinlua

A Conversation on Writing

"Are you an engineer?" The shop attendant asked, trying to strike a conversation with a potential customer.

"No," I replied.

"A student?" She asked again, still trying to break the ice.

"Why are you asking?" I ask in response.

"Because of this." She said, pointing to the laptop bag on my back. "It's either engineers or students that carry big bags like this."

"Oh really." I nod.

"So, what do you do?" She asked me again; her eyes filled with questions, roving from my laptop bag to my face.

"I write." My response meets a puzzled look on her face. I know that look; it is the same that was on my mother's face when I told her I wanted to be a writer—a you-are-joking-aint-you kind of look. My mother's fears were in two folds: why don't you do something good, well, professional with your life? And the other one: how can you quit your 9-5 job for such uncertainty?

"I know you love to write. So, what do you *really* do?" The shop attendant asked, as if in doubt of what I told her.

"I write," I reply again, stressing "write."

"So, what do you write?" She asks grabbing a seat, more interested in this writing palaver, than in selling me jewelry.

"Anything that interests me," I reply. "Anything, from short stories, to articles, to website content; as long as it has to do with words."

"OK." She replied.

"So, how do you make money from it?"

"By adding value, but that's gist for another day." I say. How much does that brown and cream necklace cost? I ask, switching her attention to the main purpose I was in the shop.

Questions like hers are not strange. What is strange is what I do: writing. How can you say that you are a writer? Or a dancer? Or a musician? Or an IT entrepreneur? Or a blogger? Rather, just say, you love to write. You love to dance. You love to sing. You love computers. Those are things that you do for fun; work should not be fun, it should be hard. That's why it's called hard work, right?

Work Today: Tired, Worn Work

I am a doctor in my country/Everybody knows me well/If you look at me up and down/ You will know it's true¹

Many children like me sang those words in primary school. Tiny feet wearing white socks stuck in Bata shoes, marching off to class. "Doctor" was replaced with lawyer, teacher, sailor, pilot, accountant; professions like that. The words were loudest at "doctor", "accountant" and "lawyer." No one intoned writer. Writing is not work. It is a hobby, what you do for love, not to make a living.

Work in Nigeria could be professional. It is professional when it is studied as any of these courses: law, medicine, engineering or accounting at the university. Professional "Work" also loosely embraces entrepreneurs. Usually, these professional courses is what most parents want for their children. When the studying ends, "Work" wears a suit, not one of those cheap suits with puffy shoulder pads but the designer labels. "Work" wears a designer shirt, and knots a tie. "Work" wakes up when the rest in the world of work wakes up; rushes into the bath, and rushes into a car serviced by a two year loan. "Work" is stressed, its wrinkles get bolder every day. In fact, if "Work" has a family, he does not know his children well--when he starts his day, they are still in dreamland, when he gets back, they are on their way to dreamland. They do not feel his wet lips on their cheeks when he kisses them good night. "Work" hates itself but does not want to lose itself.

Work could also be informal. Informal in the term used to lump together every other kind of work that does not fall in the professional 9-5 bracket. Usually they are also called semi-skilled: the plumbers, the carpenters, the traders, the painters or paint manufacturers are informal workers. They learn their expertise through apprenticeship during which they have a cloak which they wear that shows specifically which "trade" they belong to.

The Rise of the Creative or Knowledge Worker

There is the emergence of the new worker, the knowledge worker, as Peter Drucker calls it, which does not fall within these two categories. However, unlike in the developed country, that Drucker writes about "knowledge workers have already become the center of gravity of the labor force, even in numbers."² In Nigeria, the knowledge worker is just arising, despite many challenges too.

I am a writer. I am a knowledge worker. The knowledge worker is a freelancer, a creative professional, a small business owner, a product developer, a consultant, a blogger, a manager, an innovator, a writer, a graphic designer, a coder, an actor, etc.

I wake up usually when "Work" has left. Sometimes, I am awake while work is asleep. My time schedule is flexible. But by the time I get up to resume writing, my deadlines staring me, written in yellow stick-it notes, held up by colourful pins. I stay at my computer, which I call my office, and chart ideas. I sit and type out ideas as they pass through my head before they are trapped un an unknown place and never return. Just as I do now. Each deadline fulfilled is ticked off. A mission accomplished. I did not use to be like this: this freelance writer who makes a living from her passion.

How did I end up like this?

My first jobs were volunteer writing positions--as a student journalist-- in the university. We were not paid, rather we used our pocket money to ensure that news was available for readers who trooped to our news boards every Monday Morning. News was written on white A4 sheets. This, was an extra-curricular activity, writing.

Fresh out of university in 2007, I had to get a job. That's what serious people do. I emailed application letters titled--APPLICATION FOR INTERNSHIP, in capitals---to over ten organisations. For the first time in my life, I would be exchanging my expertise in writing and editing, for value. I got a response from only one organisation: Kachifo Limited³, one of the foremost publishers in Nigeria. The interview went smoothly but not as I'd expected.

"So, what have you done?" The dreadlocked man casually dressed asked me. He seemed relaxed; I'd expected to see someone dressed in a suit, with a booming voice that would make my heart race faster. I told him about my volunteer experience as a campus journalist. After about ten minutes of a chat; I got the job. He did not check my certificates. My experience reminds me of Drucker's words⁴:

We know that the knowledge people have to be managed as if they were volunteers. They have expectations, self-confidence, and above all, a network. And that gives them mobility, which is probably the greatest change in human condition...Now, every one of the young people I know has his or her resume in the bottom drawer, which no blue collar worker ever did...They carry their tools in their heads and can go anywhere. And we know what attracts and holds volunteers. The first thing is a clear mission. People need to know what their organisation stands for and is trying to accomplish. The second thing is responsibility for results, which means appraisal and review. And the third thing is continuous learning.

I started work as editorial intern; this continued for months. In five more months, I became an editorial assistant. My work had been tested. July 2009, I quit. In that time, I'd been writer, editor, blogger, events planner for the organisation. I'd taken up a freelance writing position with a new newspaper, Next Newspapers. My employer did not mind, as much as I was at my best at the work.

Then, I became restless. Got tired of the routine; of getting on the bus, my eyes still heavy with sleep. I got tired of spending not less than four hours in traffic daily. You know I once calculated it that if I continued that way, I'd end up spending one sixth of my life in Lagos traffic⁵. Working in a publishing house, I was privy to the challenges that the publishing sector faced; I'd worked as part of the solution, so why not start something on my own? I thought.

One day, I decided to take the plunge, to quit. I was worn and tired of work. So, I ended up "unemployed" to many people. To me, I became a freelance writer, a free agent, available to do any and every writing job.

A Knowledge Worker in the Developing World

My days at Kachifo, laid the foundation for me to eventually start my own business. Wordsmithy Media⁶ merges all my interests: writing, editing and publicity.

So, what do you really do? Today, it is hard for people to take writers seriously. Maybe it's because of their opinion of work—work is rising as early as 4:30am to beat the Lagos traffic⁷; wearing that power suit; getting to the office as early as 6am to catch up on sleep. It's 5pm, work is over. Rather than leave, they wait till the 'traffic devil' is placated. There are over 9million people in Lagos, according to the 2006 census,⁸ many of them get on the roads at the same time. That's work, serious work or better still, an illusion of work. This is not absolute, there are people who love their jobs and work hard.

But why do people literally sneer when you tell them you work as a writer? This is changing, albeit gradually.

Truth be told, between writing, editing, social media publicity and publicity for writers; what I really do is: hustling. Really that's what it is sometimes. In a society where your work is underappreciated, where most editors want you to write for free, most of what I do is hustle. As good old dramatist Moliere said *"Writing is like prostitution. First you do it for love, and then for a few close friends, and then for money."*⁹ Today, many freelance writers write for free. I used to write for free, anxious to see my name in print—little bouts of excitement but happiness won't put food on the table. Then I started asking: *What value do I place on myself? What value do I place on my work?* My knowledge is my value.

How does it work? When you find a magazine that you love; you send pitch emails to the editor, few may hit an acceptance. Most editors do not reply. What do you do when the magazine that you have written for has refused to send you pay for work done? You send reminder email after reminder email; what is that, if not hustling? That's what happens when there is no structure in an industry.

What does it mean to be a freelance writer in Lagos? Work. Any kind of work, in Lagos is stressful.¹⁰ The power is not constant.¹¹ Yet, the computer with which I work has to be powered. Sometimes, the internet does not work, when it does, at times it is too slow, even though it is so expensive.¹² This lack of infrastructure affects the output of a knowledge worker. So, as a writer, as one tries to create the best words, that suit the best articles, one learns to create a working environment. Also, as a freelance writer in Nigeria, you are on your own, as there are no freelancers organisations, or any other such bodies, there are no laws specifically protecting the work of freelancers. None that I know of.

What does management mean to a freelance writer? The freelance writer is a self taught self starter, a go-getter, who despises all the challenges and gets the job done. No Nigerian University has a course in Creative Writing. Nobody taught me in school; I learnt it through my volunteer writing experiences. I attended writing classes outside school. I attend conferences. I complete personal projects. I have a writing mentor to whom I report my writing progress. This learning, is first for myself and for the organisation, to create opportunities where there are none. When the generator at home is too tired and isn't working, I find an organisation where I can use their power and internet at a charge. Management becomes not only the management of oneself, but the effective management of

resources. Every day when I work, I take responsibility for almost everything. When there is no cutlass to cut the vines; I borrow one or I improvise. There are no ladders to climb on; as a freelance writer here, you create your ladders, you position them well to work for your organisation, as Drucker¹³ says:

The stepladder is gone, and there's not even the implied structure of an industry's rope ladder. It's more like vines, and you bring your own machete. You don't know what you'll be doing next, or whether you'll work in a private office or one big amphitheater or even out of your home. You have to take responsibility for knowing yourself, so you can find the right jobs as you develop and as your family becomes a factor in your values and choices.

What really is writing? Seriously, writing is hard work. That you face a blank piece of paper and have to transfer the thoughts in your head into words is hard enough, let alone thinking of your 'target' audience which influences your style, and not forgetting drafting and re-drafting. Writing, like every other business, has to meet a need: either for the writer, the editor or the reader. There's a value chain. The writer is the producer/manufacturer/MD CEO (*just may not be as rich*); the editor is the primary market/consumer and the readers, the secondary market. And if the editor does not like your story, there's no money! Drucker's words also explain it¹⁴:

Knowledge workers cannot be supervised closely or in detail. They can only be helped. But they must direct themselves, and they must do so toward performance and contribution, that is, toward effectiveness. ...The motivation of the knowledge worker depends on his being effective, on being able to achieve.

Is anything changing? Yes, albeit slowly. Ten years ago, the term "freelance writer" in the Nigerian context was strange. There was the journalist, the novelist, the playwright but nothing like the freelance writer. That is changing.

What has changed?

The rise of Information Communication Technologies, have changed things to an extent. There are job roles emerging daily: social networker, social media manager, online publicist, among others.

What is lacking though is the synthesis between the society and schools that are producing these students that would become employees. Many universities are still stuck in the past of black boards, and old dusty notebooks passed down the generation. There is hardly anything there for the emerging knowledge worker. Opeyemi Awoyemi calls it "Rethinking Education."¹⁵ There needs to be an interaction with the gown and the town, between the academia and the work industry.

However, there has been increasing interest in the creative sector. Organisations seem to be paying more attention to the knowledge worker. The British Council organises the yearly Creative Lives¹⁶, a programme aimed at teaching creative entrepreneurs management skills on how to fuse their passion with enterprise. I was part of this in 2008. There have been events about the creative sector, like the one organised by BOBTV¹⁷ and the Creative Expo organised by the British Council¹⁸.

Truth be told: there are no jobs. According to the National Bureau Statistics, the total number of unemployed Nigerians rose to more than 14 million in 2011¹⁹. The population keeps rising, the jobs

keep shrinking²⁰. People are losing their jobs every day, more banks are sacking their workers daily. The white collar job is no longer secure. The sooner Nigerians begin to look inward, to the untapped resources of the creative sector, the sooner things may change. Even the Governor of the Central Bank, Lamido Sanusi²¹ thinks so:

The economic problem of Nigeria can only be reduced to one word-value chain. In every sector of the economy, the value chain is broken...I have never understood what the government meant when they talk about job creation as a policy. The only way you (government) can create jobs is by removing all the impediments and just focus on building the enabling infrastructures like power...

There is a tide of change. Linda Ikeji studied Mass Communication at the university but she caught the blogging bug in 2006. Blogging is now one of the many things, she does²²:

I'm getting 50,000 visits a day²³ from up to 180 countries...Blogging got me a visa to America, I just showed them my blog and they looked at it and gave me a visa. Blogging has given me more money than I thought I could ever make. Blogging has given me friends, most of my friends I met through blogging, people I've met from far and wide... It has opened so many doors, I can't even explain it.

There are other examples of young Nigerians who are in jobs that are not the ideal "professional work" yet they are making a living through knowledge work. These young people hold the key to the future of knowledge work.

I hope that someday soon--as a result of these changes that are being experienced in the creative sector--the creative writer will be respected as a creative entrepreneurs. That the future of work in Nigeria would not only be variegated, and more embracing of creative work but will also add value to the society. And the value that it adds will be appreciated by all. For the future creative knowledge worker in Nigeria, borders are so yesterday because ideas will travel through our brains.

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