

ZOOM COFFEE · 01 JULY 2026

Freelancers and AI: Who Will Draw the Shortest Straw?

Serbian Freelancers on Upwork in the Age of AI

Valentina Vukmirović · valentina.vukmirovic@ien.bg.ac.rs

BACKGROUND

Why look at Serbian freelancers on Upwork?

- Serbia built one of the region's most active Upwork freelancer communities through the 2010s - strong digital and IT skills, good English, and an affordable cost base.
- For many, in IT, design, content, admin support, and data work, Upwork income became a primary livelihood or a meaningful supplement.
- Gigmetar's tracking shows the number of active Serbian freelancers on Upwork has been declining in recent years.
- This study asks: how much of that decline is about AI specifically - and what does it mean for who advances and who is left more exposed?

Five interconnected pressures behind the decline

-  Platform fee & visibility changes
-  Growing global competition
-  Market oversaturation
-  AI reshaping demand
-  Serbia's tax & regulatory setting

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method study, March–April 2026



62

online survey respondents,
recruited via Upwork & Serbian freelancer
communities



6

in-depth semi-structured interviews across
different fields and experience levels



10

thematic areas: income, fees, AI, tax, social
protection, alternatives

Who answered the survey

- Gender balanced - 56.5% men, the rest women
- Mid-career dominant: ages 25-44 are 75.8% of the sample
- Belgrade + Vojvodina account for 67.8%
- Top fields: admin support/VA & design (17.7% each), IT/programming (12.9%)



Read with caution

This is a non-probability, exploratory sample. 87.1% of respondents have a perfect Job Success Score - the survey mainly reached the platform's strongest performers. Findings likely understate the severity faced by those who've already left or are struggling to get hired at all.

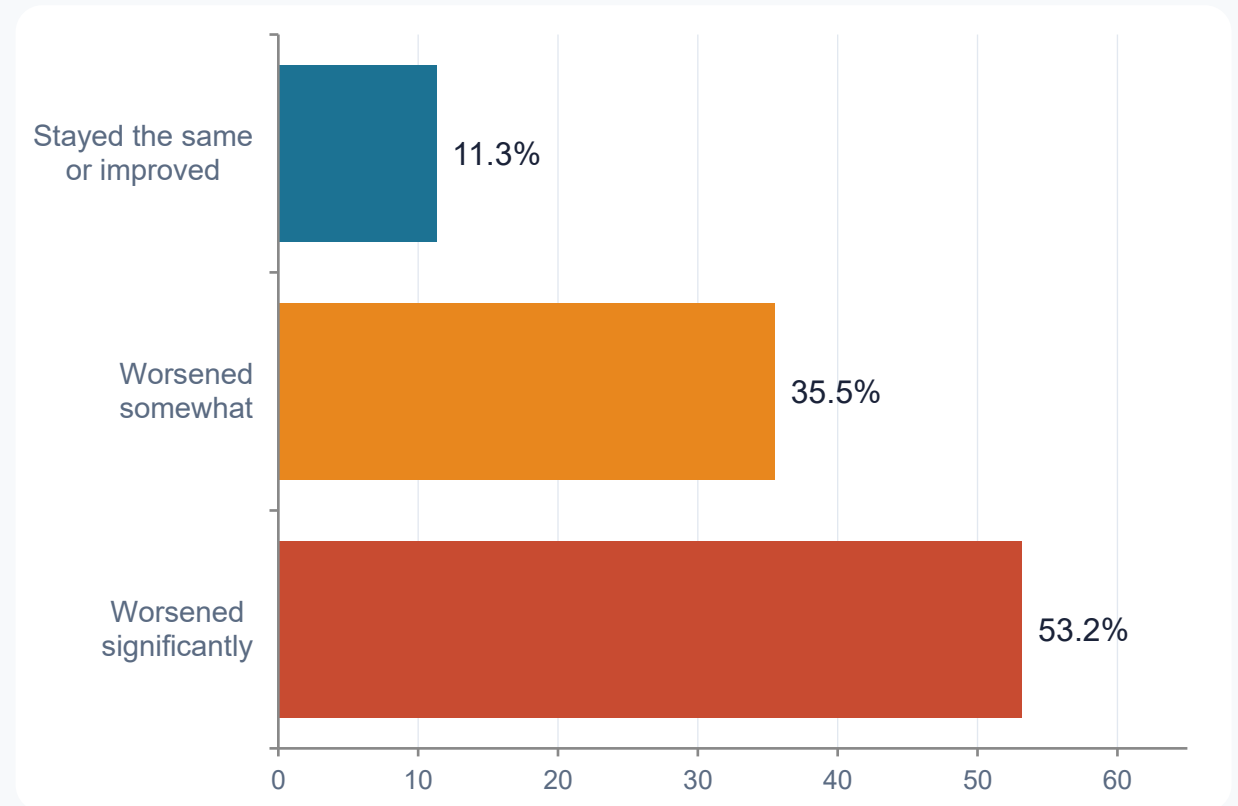
HEADLINE FINDING

Conditions have worsened - and freelancers agree almost unanimously

88.7%

of respondents say working conditions on Upwork have worsened over the past two years

Only 4.8% report any improvement.



The platform squeeze is already real



61.3%

cite connects & fees as a major problem



61.3%

cite market oversaturation



48.4%

cite price dumping by competitors



43.5%

say they are rarely contacted by clients

“ From a \$200 job - after proposal costs, Upwork fees, and transfer costs - around \$130 actually reaches me.

— UPW63, IT / Web Development

“ Wherever you turn, someone takes something - platform fees, VAT on those fees, Payoneer increases, banking costs. It all compounds.

— UPW25, Design / UI-UX / Video

For most, AI is a tool first - but it's reshaping demand and price

How freelancers use AI



Productivity enhancement

61.3% of respondents



Service-delivery tasks

41.9% of respondents

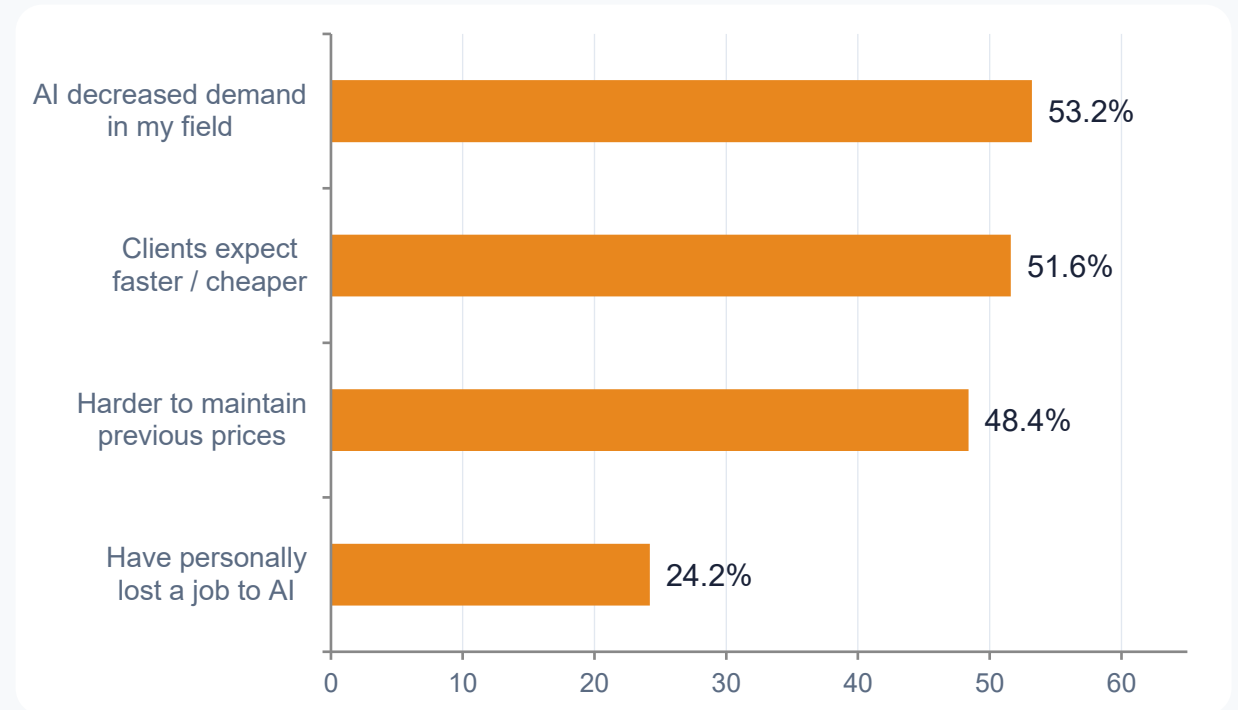


Proposals & communication

38.7% of respondents

Only 8.1% report not using AI tools at all.

Perceived impact on the market



Direct job loss is rare; the pressure runs mainly through price and client expectations.

AI is compressing the bottom of the market



53.2%

say AI has decreased demand in their primary field



30.8%

of those who scaled back on Upwork cite AI-driven market changes - nearly level with the platform's other top reasons for leaving

FROM THE INTERVIEWS

Routine, entry-level tasks are disappearing fastest. Data entry has been “completely eaten” by AI, and one freelancer watched a long-running service line, photo retouching, “disappear” almost overnight as the tool made it far less marketable.

— IT / Programming interviews (UPW14)



I was flooded with meaningless applications, probably AI-generated.

— UPW04, Data / AI / Machine Learning, hiring as a client

AI is also opening new, higher-value work



91.9%

already use AI tools in their work to some degree - only 8.1% report not using AI at all

FROM THE INTERVIEWS

New AI-specific work is emerging, including Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), improving visibility in LLMs and AI search tools, as well as higher-value tasks such as checking, validating, and improving AI-generated outputs.

— Marketing/SEO & IT interviews

“ AI will not replace everything, but people have to understand that they must know how to use it to keep their jobs, improve their work, and stay competitive.

— UPW26, Marketing / SEO / Social Media

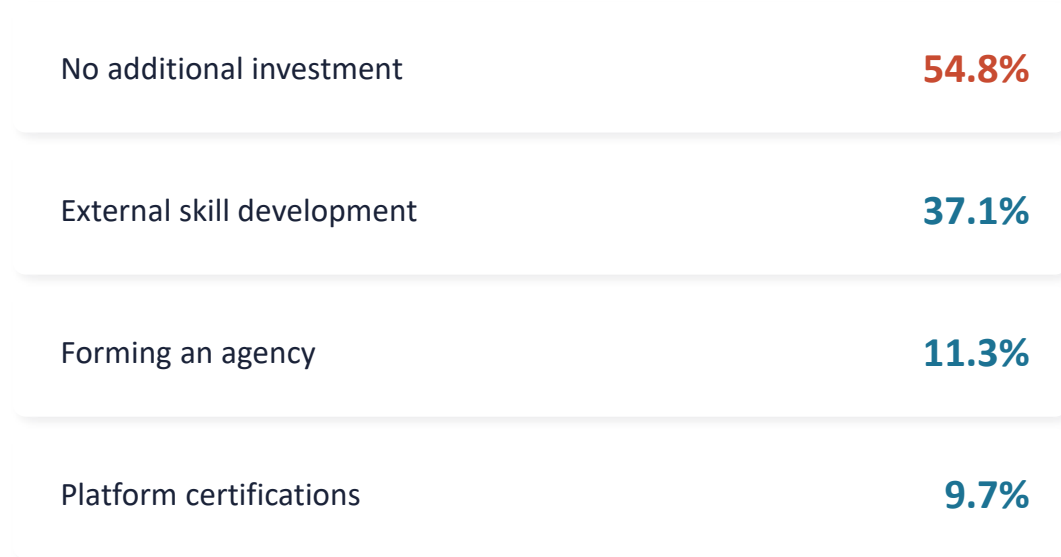
“ I feel like I have much greater knowledge and skills than I really have, because I can do much more.

— UPW63, IT / Programming / Development

ADAPTATION

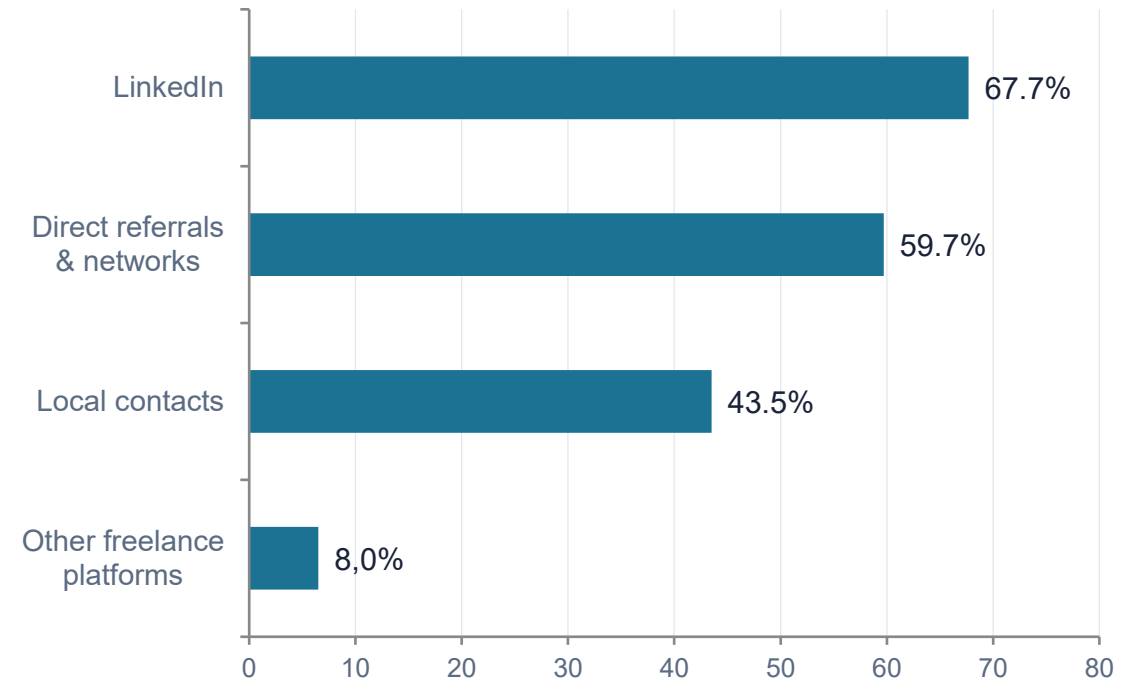
Freelancers are adapting through skills and diversification

Where freelancers invest



Among those who do invest: AI-oriented SEO/GEO skills, accessibility add-ons, AI-assisted app development.

Alternative channels for finding work



A parallel infrastructure is growing alongside Upwork - not a migration to competing platforms (Toptal, GitHub, Behance, Dribbble: 0 mentions).

What AI is already doing to this market



AI fluency is now the baseline

91.9% already use AI tools in their work - for most freelancers, the question isn't whether to use AI, but how well.



Demand and price are under real pressure

53.2% report falling demand, and roughly half feel pricing or client-expectation pressure tied to AI - even though direct job loss stays rare (6.4%).



Exposure is uneven, and time is short

Routine, language-dependent work is being hit hardest while specialised work is pulled up - and for some fields, the adjustment window is months, not years.

Thank you

Valentina Vukmirović · valentina.vukmirovic@ien.bg.ac.rs

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