**Cambridge English B for the IB Diploma: Teacher resource**

**Audio scripts**

**Audio track 12**

Thank you for that introduction. It’s an honour for me to speak at this Human Resources conference of the American Management Association. Recently, someone reminded me that it was twenty years ago that I wrote the book *Free Agent Nation*. She said: “Do you know why we’ve invited you to speak? You predicted the future in that book and you got it right. Could you please do it again?”

Now, I’m not sure if I’m in a position to predict the future of human resources and jobs. But one thing any good futurist does is to look to the trends of the past and the present to predict the future. So I’ll try to do this for you today.

When I wrote *Free Agent Nation*, freelancing and self-employment were on the fringe but also on the rise. Some people were striking out on their own as independent contractors, offering their services to bigger organisations. But for the most part, most people used to apply for jobs and worked for an employer for an average of eleven years. Many of you will remember the days when job satisfaction was determined by job security. Do you remember those days? It wasn’t so long ago. You got a concrete job description, a steady salary, healthcare, a pension plan and the reassurance that the next month would be like the last. You could sleep at night. What more could you ask for, right? So... what happened?

Well, back then, a few things were happening. First of all, big companies were re-organising. We all know what that word means: re-organisation means making businesses lean and mean. It other words, people were being laid off. Corporations were downsizing overheads and staff to maximise profits for shareholders. And even if you were loyal to the business, it wasn’t always loyal to you. Big companies started to outsource production to low-wage countries and move jobs overseas. They found loopholes to evade taxes. They only seemed to care about the bottom line and not their people. So job security, which the baby-boomer generation once knew and loved, was eroding quickly. And it’s still eroding to this day in many countries around the world.

What changed everything at the beginning of thetwenty-first century was technology. My book, ‘Free Agent Nation’, appeared just before broadband and social media, but I could see that technology was going to disrupt the work force. Personal computing was radically changing the power equation. And here’s a bit of Marxist revenge for you: with the dawn of personal computing, workers started to own their own means of production.

Talented people woke up. They realised that large corporations needed them more than they needed large corporations. In fact, they could make an even better living by selling their services to all of the big organisations on a project-by-project basis, rather than slaving away for one corporation for the rest of their life. All they needed was a laptop and a wireless connection.

So fast forward to today, and we see the emergence of what we call ‘the gig economy’. For those of you who don’t know the term, it’s like *Free Agent Nation* powered by mobile apps. If you would like me to predict the future, then lets connect the dots between *Free Agent Nation* from twenty years ago and ‘the gig economy’ of today. They’re a pretty natural progression.

So we have to step into the shoes of the modern-day free agent and ask ourselves: Why are people driving for Uber these days? Why are people putting their property on Air BnB? Why are artists selling their work on Etsy? Answers to these questions will help us understand the future of jobs, and maybe help you understand your workforce better.

I know what you are thinking: People drive for Uber to earn a quick buck. They let out their home on Air BnB because they need the cash. They sell art on Etsy because they’re not getting noticed by the galleries.

If you’re thinking this way, then I hate to say it, but you’re stuck in the twentieth century. You still think that carrots and sticks motivate people. Here’s what we learned from the Free Agent revolution: Money doesn’t motivate. Bonuses do not equate to better job performance. The looming threat of losing your job doesn’t make you work harder.

So what *does* motivate anyone to do a job better? First of all: a greater degree of autonomy and freedom. In other words: let me decide my targets. Let me decide when and where I will drive my car. Let me own my car and let me compete against other drivers. Then I will drive for Uber instead of a traditional taxi agency. Flexibility is a great part of this. Offer someone flexible hours over a pay raise, and you’d be surprised what they choose.

Secondly: there needs to be an opportunity for a challenge. Turning a single-room apartment into a top-rated property on Air BnB creates all kinds of fun challenges: You have to communicate with strangers. But you get to do a little restyling of your place. You have to sort out the cleaning, and all that household stuff. But it’s exciting to be able to jump right into the hotel industry without a degree from a hospitality school. Right? And the coolest part is that you get to start at management level. Or you could even call yourself a ‘business owner’ or an entrepreneur! Now that’s the kind of thing that motivates people.

And finally, the best motivator is a sense of purpose. Etsy is great at that. Artists feel it is their platform. It does not belong to a gallery. They can manage what they sell and for what price. So they feel a sense of ownership, like they are cutting out a middleman. This is also a key motivator.

Now, I know that these platforms are far from perfect. Uber has legal problems in many countries for sidestepping workers’ rights. Hotel industries are pressuring governments to restrict AirBnB. And some artists *would* rather sell through top-name galleries. These platforms, in short, are problematic. In fact I think the future of the ‘platform’ economy, as it is called, is also limited, because they are all about the ‘race to the bottom’ which so many people worry about. In other words they aim to provide the most service for the least amount of money, which is just as cutthroat as those big corporations that I was talking about earlier. The only difference is that we willingly signed up for this business.

But in the end, no one really wants to be the bottom part of the ‘race to the bottom’. Many Uber drivers say they’re only driving for Uber because they’re ‘between jobs’. Many handymen only do gigs for Handy when they’re between contracts for larger firms. We know that these platforms have a darker side. Sure it’s a democracy, but competition is stiff. Sure it’s a meritocracy, but what if you get a bad rating from a crazy customer who’s been unfair? You’re at their mercy. You’re still an independent contractor, and it can very feel lonely when you’re not protected and you don’t have any worker’s rights, benefits, insurance or a pension.

So what is the future of jobs? Imagine a ‘fair-trade’ Uber. Imagine any competition with Uber for that matter. Imagine a world where you can build your own Uber-style app, managing your own network of colleagues, where you’ve written the terms and conditions of your business with your colleagues, and you have collectively bargained for insurance and a proper pension. We would love to have the independence of a free agent on the one hand and the benefits of a big corporation on the other hand. But can we have it both ways? Can we have our cake and eat it too? This is the question that we have to answer in the next ten years. Currently the age of disruptive technology seems to know no boundaries, but perhaps it needs curtailing. Perhaps we need governance that stimulates *and* protects the free agent nation.

Perhaps we need to think differently about the future of jobs and instead think about the future of agents...