



# ► World Employment and Social Outlook

The role of digital labour  
platforms in transforming  
the world of work

# 2021



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# Preface

Technological innovation is transforming every part of our lives. The ability to quickly and cheaply exchange large amounts of data and information has laid the foundations for the rise of the digital economy and digital labour platforms. In both developed and developing countries businesses and consumers have embraced this transformation, as services and goods are delivered in ways that are cheaper and more convenient. Digital labour platforms are now part of our everyday lives.

This transformation extends to the world of work. Digital labour platforms offer new markets for businesses and more income-generating opportunities for workers, including those who were previously outside the labour market. Such platforms are leading to changes not just to the organization of enterprises and work processes but in many cases to the relationship between workers and businesses as well.

It is widely considered that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated changes that were already under way, both in society and at work. These include the expanded use of digital platforms and related technological innovations like cloud computing and the use of big data and algorithms. The result has been innovative ways of working, and flexibility for both workers and businesses. The remote working arrangements adopted by many during the past year have brought a rise in e-commerce, e-services and online freelance work. For many who lost their jobs, in both developing and developed countries, digital labour platforms have offered opportunities to earn some income. Many businesses have relied on digital labour platforms to keep operating, reach new markets and reduce costs.

But there are challenges. This new business model allows platforms to organize work without having to invest in capital assets or to hire employees. Instead, they mediate between the workers who perform the tasks and clients, and manage the entire work process with algorithms. Workers on digital labour platforms often struggle to find sufficient well-paid work to earn a decent income, creating a danger of working poverty. Many do not have access to social protection, which is particularly concerning during a pandemic. They are frequently unable to engage in the collective bargaining that would allow them to have these and other issues addressed.

This report is the first major attempt by the ILO to capture the experiences of workers and businesses with digital labour platforms. It is based on surveys and interviews with 12,000 workers in 100 countries, and with 70 businesses, 16 platform companies and 14 platform worker associations operating in multiple sectors and countries.

To address the challenges raised by this new way of working, many governments have taken regulatory steps to tackle issues such as the employment relationship, health and safety standards and inadequate social protection. Private, non-state actors and employers' and workers' organizations have also taken initiatives. However, variations in these regulatory responses have created further challenges. The matter is made more complex because many digital labour platforms operate across multiple borders and jurisdictions. The result is regulatory uncertainty for workers, businesses and governments alike.


Digital labour platforms have the potential to benefit both workers and businesses – and through them, society more generally. But they will only fulfil this positive potential, and help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, if the work opportunities they provide are decent. Ensuring that all workers, irrespective of their contractual status, are covered by key labour standards will be critical, as will social dialogue.


A clearer understanding of the operation of digital labour platforms, and a more effective and consistent approach to them, are therefore essential. There is a need for international policy discussions and coordination, which could lead over time to that clearer understanding and a more effective and consistent approach to digital labour platforms worldwide.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Guy Ryder". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'G' and 'R'.

Guy Ryder  
ILO Director-General

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