

The Danger of Job Insecurity in the Platform Economy

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the platform economy has generated concerns about its economic and social consequences (Lei, 2021; Vallas, 2019). As independent contractors provided with little or no employee rights and managed by algorithms, the job insecurity of platform workers is significant. This damages employment relations, complicates the function of HR departments, and as a result is driving governments and relevant organisations to regulate the platform economy more heavily. This can provide platform workers with more benefits but can also result in gender discrimination and hinder the achievement of gender equality by increasing the gender pay gap.

This report discusses three possible solutions to job insecurity among platform workers. Firstly, governments could provide them with similar rights to employees by creating a new category besides employees and independent contractors within existing law, although this would worsen labour market segmentation and social inequality. Secondly, alternative unions which are more flexible could effectively help platform workers to fight for their legal rights, but limited resources would reduce their ability to deal with the problems of every worker. Finally, platform workers could devote themselves to improve their bargaining power to strive for higher income to reduce insecurity, however, it would be hindered by many factors like oversupply of labour force.

After analysing and comparing these three solutions, it is recommended that the job security of platform workers could be increased by incorporating them in a special labour law protecting non-standard workers. However, the effectiveness of this could vary from depending on country.

Keywords: platform economy, job insecurity, platform worker

1. Introduction

The increase in emerging and diverse digital platforms has been one of the main recent economic developments (Healy, et al., 2020), but the rapid expansion of the platform economy has generated concerns about its economic and social consequences, especially the increased job insecurity of workers (Lei, 2021; Vallas, 2019). The negative impact of job insecurity on employment relations, HRM functions, and the future of work, has caused some scholars to point out that productive solutions are required to reduce job insecurity and regulate the labour market (Alberti, 2016; Bertolini & Dukes, 2021; Graham, et al., 2017; Koutsimpogiorgos, et al., 2020). While limited research has compared various solutions to develop a more suitable and practical approach to this issue (Stewart & Stanford, 2022), this report aims to present an effective solution to the job insecurity of platform workers by emphasising its impact and evaluating existing solutions.

2. Background

2.1 Emergence of the Problem

The growth of the platform economy is encouraging more people to work via platforms to boost their income (Hoang, et al., 2019). Gig work is a kind of temporary work operated via platforms, like food delivery and taxi

services (Huws, et al., 2016; Tran & Sokas, 2017), but it has extended to other industries including construction and agriculture where work is frequently project-based and seasonal (Robertson, 2017). Workers are typically defined as independent contractors who are paid per job they accomplish, and this price-rate system determines that workers cannot gain more income from time-effort bargaining. This problem is highlighted by food delivery couriers who are often required to wait for twenty or even forty minutes until the food is available (Veen, et al., 2020) and do not receive payment for the waiting time (Goods, et al., 2019).

Furthermore, obligations like retirement pensions and risks are transferred from organisations to platform workers, who are classified as independent contractors, which increases their job insecurity (Schor, et al., 2020). In addition, Veen et al. (2020) show that algorithmic management extensively adopted by platforms to distribute tasks to workers via smartphone applications reduces workers' control of the labour process by obscuring rates of pay and how tasks are distributed (Gregory & Maldonado, 2020). Several scholars illustrate that both the job and life precarity of platform workers is exacerbated because their salary and working time are mainly controlled by algorithms in accordance with supply and demand (Azzellini, et al., 2022; Robertson, 2017).

2.2 *The Impact of the Problem*

While gig work allows individuals to work flexibly (Lehdonvirta, 2018), the potential dangers should be highlighted, like the risks in health and safety, reduced wellbeing, and increased job insecurity (Hoang, et al., 2019; Kowalski & Loretto, 2017).

The challenges resulting from the platform economy could disrupt employment relations. A number of scholars have found that employment relations are negatively impacted by business and labour regulation of platform firms (Azzellini, et al., 2022; Healy, et al., 2017; Sundararajan, 2017). For example, these platform enterprises transfer the risk of work to platform workers and classify them as independent contractors to decrease labour costs by ignoring their lawful rights like retirement pensions and minimum salary (Bornstein, 2015; Veen, et al., 2020). Also, workers often accomplish missions for various employers, and this unusual employment relationship decreases the responsibility and commitment usually required of an employer through deconstructing the original connection between employer and worker (Hoang, et al., 2019; Kuhn, 2016). However, in some areas like Nordic countries, platform workers are not treated as independent contractors because unions, strict welfare policies, and regulated labour markets effectively protect them from exploitation (Azzellini, et al., 2022; Ilsøe & Larsen, 2021).

Human resources management is experiencing a time of rapid change with organisational procedures and the nature of work constantly evolving due to the growth of digital technologies and especially the emergence of the platform economy (Ashford, et al., 2018). In the platform economy, the functions of HR in productively managing workers are more complex because they tend to work remotely from their clients and platform companies which means that they are geographically dispersed (Connelly, et al., 2021; Gross, 2019). Due to increased job insecurity and this work situation, traditional methods of improving employer engagement and retention like department activities and cultivating high-quality colleague relationships is more difficult to execute (Connelly, et al., 2021; Guest, 2017). In addition, the growth of the platform economy has expanded the use of algorithms in different industries (Duggan, et al., 2020). As such, the work of HRM in performance management has been simplified whereby HRM only needs to supervise employee's performance, because algorithms replace HR to set performance goals and evaluate the performance of workers (Kellogg, et al., 2020; Phillips, 2019).

In the future, job insecurity and other risks to platform workers could be addressed because the negative impact could drive relevant parties to establish new regulations or improve current policies to monitor platforms businesses (Healy, et al., 2017). There is evidence to illustrate movement in this direction in the European Commission's proposal to ensure that platform workers could attain equal rights to traditional employees even if they are independent contractors (European Commission, 2022; Shepherd, 2022). Additionally, as these platforms can be easily copied (Zhao, et al., 2020), the cooperative model led by workers could replace the current ownership models of the platform economy in the future which would be more beneficial for workers (Healy, et al., 2017). To support this, Healy et al. (2017) explain that in the US, taxi drivers have established a ridesharing application which provides healthcare, pensions, and features to improve wellbeing to drivers.

2.3 *A Wider Issue Relating to the Problem*

The job insecurity brought by platforms exacerbates existing gender inequality. Although the platform economy allows women to transfer from unemployment to employment without damaging family obligations (Pric, 2006), and platforms provide chances for achieving gender equality through economic empowerment and emancipation of women (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016; Vyas, 2020), some scholars argue that the reality is that women suffer discrimination because of gender, race, and their insecure work (Churchill, et al., 2019; Webster, 2016). For example, Vyas (2020) explains that some women of colour who are educated and skilled can still only find work

in low-wage professions. The platform economy can enable women to be included in the labour market, but the double burden for women of work and family remains and they are more likely to experience discrimination in the gig economy (Churchill, et al., 2019; Milkman, et al., 2021; Vyas, 2020). Moreover, in research on customer reviews on platforms, Cahn et al. (2019) found the existence of gender and race bias, and Vyas (2020) states that these biased reviews would decrease the income of females, which would further increase the gender pay gap.

3. Evaluating Existing Solutions to the Problem

3.1 New Legal Category to Define Platform Workers

Governments could supervise platform enterprises to reduce job insecurity of workers by developing new or extending existing regulations. The challenge to correctly classify platform workers is significant because of the emerging business models of platform organisations and more complicated work arrangements (Healy, et al., 2017). As mentioned, job insecurity is exacerbated by platform workers' classification as independent workers who should self-fund benefits which are usually the obligation of organisations, like pensions (Schor, et al., 2020).

Aiming to address this, some scholars recommend that governments develop new legal approaches to define platform workers. According to Koutsimpogiorgos et al. (2020), the unclear classification of platform workers means that national courts can determine whether platform workers are employees or independent contractors, while this should be defined in law so that different courts cannot present converse conclusions on different but relevant cases. For example, the same subdistrict court of Amsterdam firstly gave a judgment for Deliveroo, while in the second indictment which is quite relevant to the first case, the court ruled in favour of the worker and labour union (Zekić, 2019).

Therefore, platform workers could be defined in a third category besides employees and independent contractors, and they could attain a set of rights that is not available while they are considered independent contractors (Healy, et al., 2017; Prassl & Risak., 2017). Both in UK and France, a new category of platform "worker" has been created to include them in employment law which provides them with employee rights, like protection from work accidents (Donini, et al., 2017; Koutsimpogiorgos, et al., 2020; UK Government, 2022). However, it is a politically risky to create a new category for platform workers because it may aggravate labour market segmentation and social inequality (Florisson & Mandl, 2018). Koutsimpogiorgos et al. (2020) point out that employees could lose some rights because they would gradually have the same legal status as platform workers. In sum, governments could protect platform workers by clearly defining them in legislation, but specific measures need to be considered carefully to avoid further negative effects.

3.2 The Assistance of Alternative Unions

Non-traditional or alternative unions could better organise and mobilise platform workers to operate protests and campaigns. As the leadership of traditional labour unions mainly concentrates on securing benefits for their standard members, this implies that they are less likely to respond to requests by non-standard workers, like platform workers (Alberti, 2016; Keune, 2013). Moreover, Woodcock (2018) and Milkman (2013) explain that the rigid and hierarchical structure of traditional labour unions makes it difficult for them to adjust their strategies to protect non-standard workers, although these unions have extensive membership and abundant financial resources.

Therefore, compared with traditional unions, non-traditional or alternative unions like the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) in the UK, could better protect these non-standard workers, because the organisational structure of alternative unions is more flexible and agile (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021). Furthermore, alternative unions are generally developed from communities with a narrower procedure, and their activities usually focus on specific problems (Alberti, 2016). Their success is illustrated in the example highlighted by Tassinari and Maccarrone (2020) who explain how the IWGB successfully organised long-term protests and effectively protect the benefits of non-standard workers, even winning a lawsuit in 2020 in which the High Court issued a judgment that the UK government should provide platform workers with equal health and safety rights which is required in EU protection (Eurofound, 2021).

However, the financial resources and influence of alternative unions are limited, which indicates that unions could not address the problems of every individual worker (Kirk, 2020; Vandaele, 2018). In particular, alternative unions prefer to use strategic litigation to reach their goals which would increase the economic burden (Bertolini & Dukes, 2021). To further explain this, an officer of IWGB states that many cases solved by IWGB could be easily settled by traditional unions because they have abundant resources in terms of money to hire lawyers (Industrial Workers of the World, 2019). All in all, the flexibility in organisational structure and procedure places alternative unions in a position to respond more effectively to the difficulties of platform workers, but their limited resources would prevent them from supporting individual workers.

3.3 Improving Individual Bargaining Power

Although the labour unions play an important role in protecting workers (Rogaly, 2009), the individual actions of workers are also significant, especially in the platform economy where institutionalised labour unions are lacking (Anwar & Graham, 2019). Some studies have found that platform workers could decrease their sense of insecurity through enhancing their bargaining power to increase their income (Anwar & Graham, 2019; Webster, et al., 2009; Mashayamombe, 2020). For example, a female transcriber from Uganda utilised bargaining power to negotiate with a platform and successfully achieved an increase of five US dollars in her hourly wage (Anwar & Graham, 2019).

However, the oversupply of the labour force in the platform economy could result in a fear among workers of being replaced, and this would further reduce their bargaining power (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Graham, et al., 2017). The evidence is that in Africa, platform work is attractive because individuals can work at home and gain a higher salary than for local work, but most of these workers have experienced undercutting by low paid offers from Indian and Filipino workers (Anwar & Graham, 2021). In the long term, this is likely to exacerbate the existing risks to these platform workers and gradually diminish their voice in the platform economy (Stewart & Stanford, 2022). Many would not threaten resignation to obtain benefits in view of the shortage of local work and labour force oversupply (Anwar & Graham, 2019). However, Anwar and Graham (2019) argue that if platform workers could recognise their bargaining power and their capabilities, they could decrease the chance of being exploited by platforms or even avoid it.

Additionally, when bargaining power is limited by many factors, workers could come together and use collective bargaining to protect their rights in the changeable world of work (Donini, et al., 2017; Stewart & Stanford, 2022). Joyce et al. (2022) illustrates this with the example of the Couriers and Logistic Branch in UK which has successfully helped workers in three different companies receive a rise in their salary via collective bargaining. To conclude, by highlighting the self-role in enhancing bargaining power, platform workers could protect themselves and increase their income, and come together collectively to achieve their purposes if they are restricted by many factors.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The rapid development of the platform economy has created many benefits but also poses some potential threats for workers. Precarious work, lack of legal rights, and algorithmic management by platforms exacerbates the job insecurity of platform workers. These further damage traditional employment relations through classifying platform workers as independent contractors and replacing some functions of HRM, like setting performance goals and examining worker's performance with algorithmics. In the long term, job insecurity could result in wider issues like discrimination and gender inequality in the platform economy.

Existing solutions to this problem have been critically evaluated in this report. Firstly, governments could protect platform workers from job insecurity by establishing new regulations or extending existing regulations to cover these workers, although regulations should be carefully evaluated to avoid worsening social inequality and labour market segmentation. Secondly, non-traditional or alternative labour unions could better help non-standard workers like platform workers to defend their rights, but in view of the limitation in resources, these unions could not respond to every individual worker's need. Finally, platform workers could improve their bargaining power to increase their income and reduce job insecurity, but some specific situations would restrict their bargaining powers.

4.2 Recommendations

This report recommends addressing the problem of the job insecurity of platform workers by including them in some existing laws to protect them without bringing additional problems and risks. In Spain and Italy, a special labour law which represents the setting of various regulations for special professions like domestic worker and salespeople, has been used to apply employment regulations to the special demand of different professions (Donini, et al., 2017). Todolí-Signes (2017) advocates that governments should include platform workers within the scope of a 'special labour law' which could suit the features and special arrangement of platform work to protect them, rather than separating them into a new category. For example, a special labour law allows workers to arrange their time and working hours which are features of platform work, and additionally, the law regulates that employers should determine a maximum number of weekly working hour for workers, which could be attractive to people who are unable or do not prefer to work in a conventional employee-employer role (Todolí-Signes, 2017). Additionally, a special labour law could provide platform workers with minimum wage rights as is the case in Spain where the special labour law regulates enterprises to pay for the unproductive time that employees provide in their service to firms (The local, 2021), such as food couriers waiting for their deliveries. Todolí-Signes (2017) states that a special labour should require platforms to execute this obligation, which should be further managed by collective bargaining to protect workers.

To conclude, incorporating platform workers into a special labour law could protect them from job insecurity, but this would not be effective in countries which do not have this already established, like Iraq and Syria (Todoli-Signes, 2017). In the long term, it should be simpler to include platform workers within the scope of employment law by using a special labour law, provided that regulations are compatible with this new business model and take account of the platform economy circumstances (Donini, et al., 2017).

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