Workforce diversity and digital platform work: Implications for OSH risk prevention

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Workforce diversity in digital platform work
Focus: women, persons with a disability, chronic illness or condition, migrants and ethnic minorities

- **Workforce diversity**
  = heterogeneous composition of the workforce of digital platform workers in terms of their individual characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, disability)

- **Worker profiles across different types of digital platform work**
  - Very diverse profiles of digital platform workers are found in both online and on-location and in lower- and higher-skilled digital platform work:
    - **Share of women platform workers** is rising over time, yet women are still underrepresented, but it appears that digital platform work is becoming less gender-segregated
    - **Share of migrants and ethnic minorities workers** is very high; especially in some types of digital platform work, they are clearly overrepresented (lower-skilled work) and thus existing trends in the labour market are being replicated
    - Data on **workers with a disability, chronic illness or conditions** are very scarce; involvement depends on nature of the disability, illness or conditions and nature of the task
Is digital platform work a stepping stone or a dead end?

- Digital platform work lowers the barriers to labour market (re)entry and labour market participation for all workers, including for vulnerable and marginalised groups
  - **Opportunities related to job content, skills, knowledge and qualifications**
    - Easy to register as a worker (set up an account), without any proof of qualifications, knowledge, skills and without being subjected to a formal recruitment process
      - No need to disclose sensitive information, which can be a basis for discrimination
      - Opportunities for low-educated, migrants waiting for skills, qualification or diploma recognition
    - **Workers are free to decide what tasks to accept and what is feasible for them**
      - Opportunities for workers who do not speak the local language, need accommodations, etc.
    - **High reliance on digital technologies and tools**, which facilitates communication and supports workers in task execution; training (if available) typically is done also online
  - **Opportunities related to working times and work pace**
    - Workers can determine if, when and how long to work and at what pace
      - Helps reduce anxiety and stress and improves the work-life balance
      - May decrease the need for formal accommodations and disclosure of sensitive information (e.g., in case of disability, illness or condition, family context, ethnic background)
Is digital platform work a stepping stone or a dead end?

- Digital platform work lowers the barriers to labour market (re)entry and labour market participation for all workers, including for vulnerable and marginalised groups
  - **Opportunities related to the workplace and physical work environment**
    - Only select work opportunities in work environment that meets their needs (e.g., in terms of their accessibility for workers with a disability, proximity to home, reachability public transport)
    - Many tasks can be executed from home (even in the case of on-location platform work, such as setting up appointments with clients in case of handiwork, managing the account, etc.)
  - **Opportunities related to the social work environment**
    - Interpersonal relations are more restricted, limited contact with platform, colleagues, clients
    - Can help overcome negative perceptions or prejudice and be beneficial for individuals who struggle with social interactions
  - **Opportunities related to the employment conditions and remuneration**
    - Easy to combine with other forms of work and income (e.g., government benefits)
    - Important features for workers who are overrepresented in grey economy, have care and other responsibilities, etc.
Is digital platform work a stepping stone or a dead end?

- Digital platform work, however, also presents barriers that affect some workers more than others and comes with mid- and long-term consequences
  - **Barriers related to getting work assigned (strong competition)**
    - For most types of digital platform work, workers depend on the platform or the client to get work assigned, and therefore in reality have little control over if/when/how much to work
      - Having a good reputation and being on top of the ranking of available workers is key
      - Irrespective of how tasks are assigned, in some cases there may simply not be enough work for all
      - Increased use of ‘supply chains’ of workers
      - This likely is a disadvantage particularly for groups of workers who are already facing constraints, e.g., women with care responsibilities who are less flexible and available, poorer workers
  - **Barriers related to skills, knowledge and qualifications (valorisation)**
    - Also in platform work, those with less knowledge, skills or experience are disadvantaged
    - Competition between workers is especially high for lower-skilled work
    - Difficult to provide proof of skills, knowledge and experience gained through digital platform work as workers’ portfolios cannot easily be transferred between platforms or included in a CV
  - **Barriers related to the high reliance on digital technologies**
    - Digital divide
OSH challenges in digital platform work

- Are the jobs available as digital platform work good quality jobs that are healthy, safe and sustainable in the longer run?
  - Digital platform workers encounter a range of psychological and physical safety and health risks that directly relate to the activities performed
  - These risks are exacerbated due to the working and employment conditions of digital platform work, and complicate risk prevention and management
  - Some groups of workers may already be exposed to higher OSH risks than others (e.g. due to language issues, disability or condition, etc.) and these risks may again be higher in the context of digital platform work
OSH challenges in digital platform work

- **Issues related to the employment conditions**
  - Platform workers are commonly classified as self-employed, which has consequences for their rights and obligations in several domains, including OSH
  - OSH implications of employment status:
    - EU OSH Framework Directive and its daughter directives and national OSH legislation only applies in the context of dependent employment relationships (most digital platform workers not covered)
    - Digital platform workers are themselves responsible for OSH risk prevention and management:
      - However, nature and conditions of digital platform work complicate risk prevention and management
      - Some groups are overrepresented in more dangerous and unhealthy digital platform work, such as migrants and ethnic minorities, women (often in jobs that are wrongfully considered safe and healthy)
  - Growing concerns about **undocumented migrants** in digital platform work: risk of exploitation

- **Challenges related to low remuneration, working times and work-life balance**
  - Pay per task rather than by hour, unpaid time, pay sometimes very low
  - Working hours very long/short, fragmented, asocial working times
  - **Migrants and ethnic minorities workers**: overrepresented in low-paid work, asocial hours
  - **Women**: low-paid work, focus on flexible, home-based digital platform work
  - **Persons with a disability, chronic illness or condition**: limitations to possibility to combine digital platform work with various types of government benefits
OSH challenges in digital platform work

- **Issues related to the working conditions**
  - **Algorithmic management and digital surveillance**
    - Use of algorithms to allocate, monitor and evaluate work and workers’ behaviour in real time has a significant impact on workers’ health and wellbeing
      - Algorithmic management puts limitations on workers’ autonomy and flexibility
      - Workers need to maintain a good reputation (rating/rank) to be able to work
      - Power balance between digital labour platforms and digital platform workers is affected

    - **Workers with weaker labour market profiles and different types of constraints experience more difficulties in dealing with algorithmic management**
      - Overrepresented in digital platform work types where use of algorithmic management is more extensive
      - Women with care tasks are interrupted more often and thus less available
      - Workers with a disability or health issue may need longer or more frequent breaks or more time to execute a task, which could result in a lower rating
OSH challenges in digital platform work

- **Issues related to the working conditions**
  - **Work environment and equipment, tools and materials**
    - Digital platform work is executed outside of the context of a ‘conventional workplace’
    - Digital platform workers bring the materials, tools and (protective) equipment themselves
    - Some groups of workers may not have the means to set up their work environment so that it is adjusted to their needs
    - **Migrants and ethnic minorities** may have different cultural values and perceptions on safe and healthy work environments
  
  - **Labour relations and social support**
    - Digital platform work tends to be carried out by a single worker in isolation, without social support
    - Some workers *may get or feel disconnected* from the platform, clients and colleagues, and *become invisible and forgotten* (e.g., workers with a disability)

https://osha.europa.eu
Discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment in digital platform work

- **Discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment is a key issue from a workforce diversity perspective**
  - Some groups are more likely to face such issues in the traditional labour market: women, migrants and ethnic minorities, workers with a disability, chronic illness or conditions, etc.
  - These issues, however, can be more or less severe in digital platform work: no conclusive data on this in the academic and grey literature

- **Digital platform work can be a lever to escape from discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment**
  - Set up an anonymous profile, leave out sensitive information, little interaction
  - No need to disclose information that can trigger discrimination, unfair treatment, …

- **Discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment can be more widespread in digital platform work**
  - Existing inequalities and biases can be reinforced
  - Use of algorithmic management (based on biased data, only consider ‘raw’ data)
  - Underreporting of these issues due to dependency on digital platform work
Conclusions and takeaways

- **Make entry and intermediation in digital platform work inclusive**
  - Digital platform work can lower the barriers to labour market entry, but also poses barriers that seem to affect some groups more (e.g., due to discrimination, digital divide)
  - Digital platform work could be a jumping board to a sustainable career, but several key conditions are not always fulfilled (e.g., lack of training, few options for career development, lack of a supporting ecosystem or network especially for more vulnerable groups)
  - **It is important to ensure that both the entry and intermediation in digital platform work are inclusive by:**
    - Establishing accessibility requirements for digital labour platforms
    - Encouraging platforms to adopt broad gender and diversity policies
  - **For digital platform work to serve as a jumping board, it is important to:**
    - Explore measures and initiatives regarding the validation of skills and experience
    - Encourage data collection and knowledge exchange on digital platform work
Conclusions and takeaways

- **Ensuring safe and healthy work in the digital platform economy**
  - Many of the so-called strong points of digital platform work turn out to be disadvantageous or downright pitfalls for persons with weaker labour market profiles.
  - Although ensuring fair working and employment conditions in digital platform work will benefit all workers concerned, it is critical for groups with weaker labour market profiles:
    - such workers are at high risk of ending up in precarious situations, as they are more likely to accept poor conditions (including in relation to OSH) due to a lack of alternatives.
    - the correct classification of the legal employment status can make a big difference, including for OSH (application of OSH framework, inclusion in prevention campaigns, etc.).
    - policy-makers should also look beyond the question of legal employment status and aim to improve the working and employment conditions and OSH overall (e.g., raising awareness, sharing knowledge and data, ensuring monitoring and enforcement, etc.).

- **Prioritising the fight against discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment**
  - Any case of discrimination, harassment and unfair treatment is one too many.
  - Raising awareness and increasing transparency is key (e.g., foreseeing options to report).
Conclusions and takeaways

- Ensuring that the voices of vulnerable digital platform workers are heard
  - Workforce diversity is somewhat less addressed in policy, notably from an OSH perspective
  - Data collected should be done so that it allows for **disaggregation of findings by category**, such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, family situation, education level, etc.
  - Platform workers should be **informed and involved in the prevention and management** of OSH risks in digital platform work in any initiatives by platforms and policy-makers
  - **Important to involve key organisations and actors that are already working with vulnerable groups**