

OSH and the 'gig economy'

Platform work: short-term panacea or long-standing illusion?

As Europe was being hit by the first wave of Covid-19 social distancing and lockdown measures, with millions of workers retreating from their habitual workplaces and into their homes, many may have expected digitally mediated work to emerge as the panacea that would provide the solution to all of the continent's labour market plights (see also Chapter 2 in this volume). In reality, the pandemic only revealed the many limitations of platform work, in terms of both its interdependence with the physical world of work and the weaknesses of the regulatory framework shaping it.

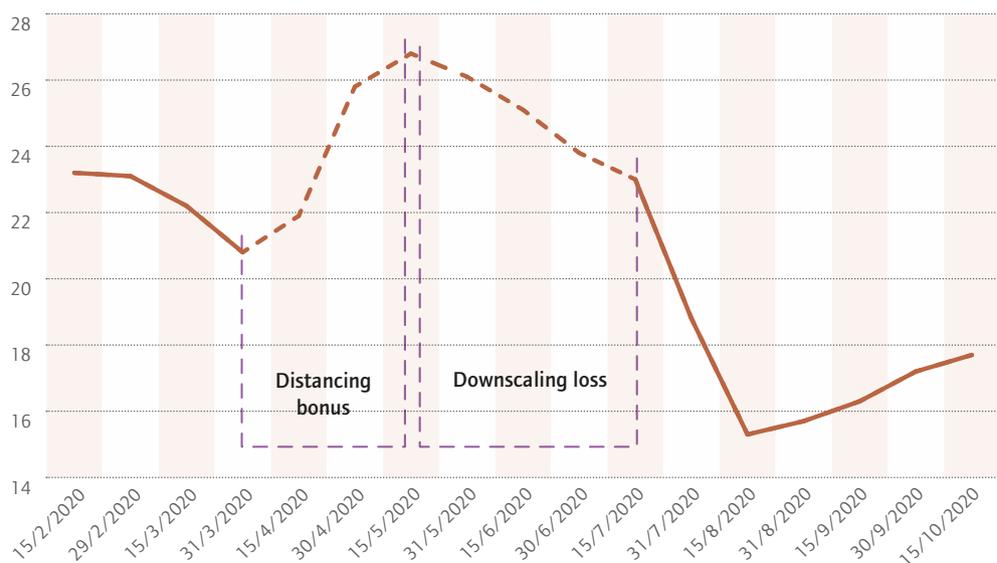
At the best of times, quantifying the scale of the gig economy is a fundamentally arduous task. Part of the challenge arises from the fact that gig workers have an unclear and often transient employment status that does not quite fit into the typical definitions of 'employed' or 'self-employed'. The closest one can get to closely monitoring developments in the gig economy is through the Online Labour Index (OLI), developed by the Oxford Internet Institute. This economic indicator measures the supply and demand of online gig labour by tracking the number of assignments posted on major digital platforms (Stephany et al. 2020). The coverage of the OLI is estimated to account for at least 60% of all traffic to English-language online labour platforms, and therefore provides an acceptable estimate of the size of the gig economy, excluding platforms for local services such as Uber.

Figure 5.3 shows the longitudinal follow-up of the OLI since the Covid-19 outbreak, from early January to late October 2020 for the EU27. Findings show a significant drop in demand in the early stages of the pandemic (approximately 10%), followed by a significant rise in April/May (approximately 29%) and

an even more massive slump from June to September (approximately 43%). These figures clearly confirm that platform workers have not been spared by the Covid-19 pandemic as it had a significant impact on the amount of available platform work. Even more striking is the peculiar pattern of the trend, which some have interpreted as the result of a two-step process (Stephany et al. 2020). First, switching to remote operations might have triggered an increase in the demand for specific types of online labour, especially IT services. This demand-increasing phenomenon is referred to as the 'distancing bonus'. Subsequently, companies facing declining revenues may have reduced non essential spending, including external online contractors. This has been termed the 'downscaling loss' mechanism.

From an OSH perspective, this two-step process demonstrates the inherent precariousness of platform work, as well as the lack of predictability and control regarding future professional prospects. As self-employed individuals, platform workers are solely responsible for their own economic upkeep in the face of the devastating economic impact of the pandemic. Unlike regular workers who are covered by relevant employment laws, they have no guaranteed hours or sick pay and entirely assume the costs of inactivity periods or lack of demand (Fabrellas 2019). Recent data from an interview study confirms that gig jobs are increasingly scarce, just as more people are creating profiles and seeking online work (Stephany et al. 2020). This, in turn, suggests that long-tenured platform workers are more likely to see a tighter market and larger variations in their income during the crisis. Although most of them work in the gig economy on top of a traditional job (Lepanjuuri et al. 2018; McDonald et al. 2019), platform work nonetheless represents a significant source of income for them. It has been demonstrated that platform work constitutes more than half the income for around a third of crowdworkers in Italy, Sweden and

Figure 5.3. Online labour demand on major digital platforms from late February to mid-September 2020



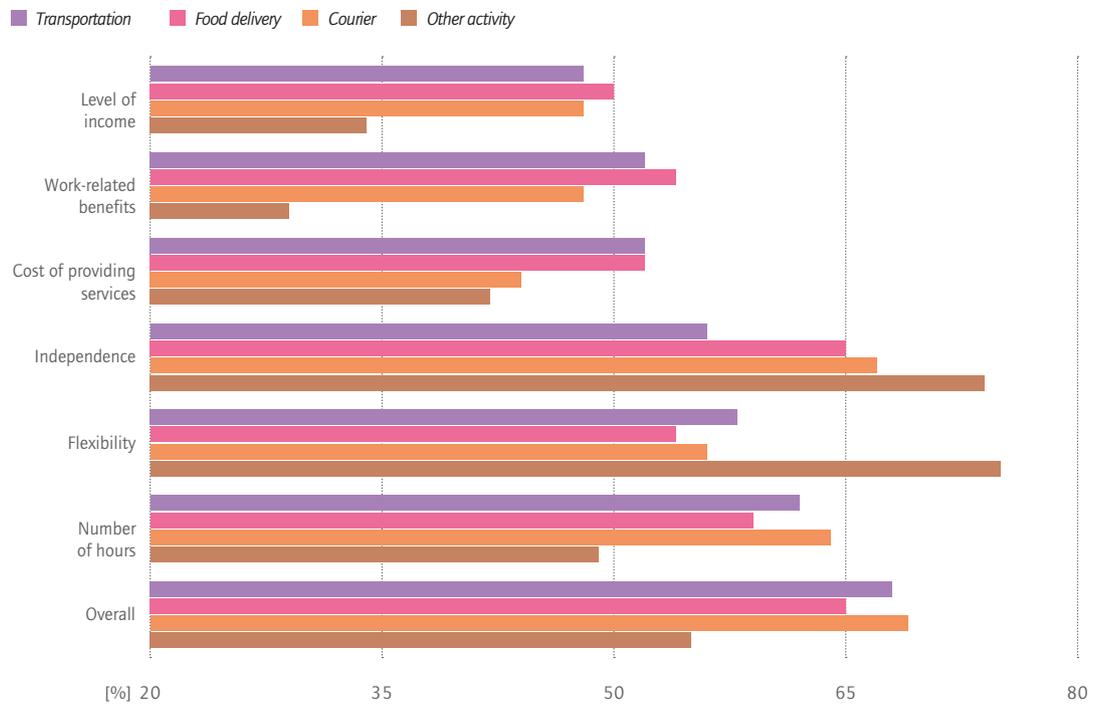
Source: <http://labour.oii.ox.ac.uk/online-labour-index>.

Note: The index is normalized so that 100 index points on the y-axis represents the daily average number of new gigs in May 2016 worldwide.



Platform workers have not been spared by the Covid-19 pandemic."

Figure 5.4. Proportion of platform workers satisfied with different aspects of their work, sorted by type of activity



Source: YouGov Omnibus Survey (Lepanjuuri et al. 2018).
Note: 'Don't know' responses are excluded from the proportions.



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the UK (31%, 36% and 34% respectively), 24% in Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands, and 15% in Austria (Huws et al. 2017). Moreover, there is a small minority for whom platform work provides the only source of income (ranging from 3% in Austria and Germany to 12% in Switzerland). For these workers, the Covid-19 pandemic likely resulted in a much more precarious situation than ever before.

The aforementioned changes in demand have not only impacted gig workers' income but also their working conditions. Indeed, several platforms reacted to the pandemic by readapting their business models and work organisation. For instance, HOPIN, a platform mediating transportation services, has temporarily turned its drivers into express city couriers delivering food, medicine, and parcels. Moreover, platforms workers providing local services are particularly exposed to the virus while working. In a recent survey, the OECD highlighted that only 35% of platform workers reported that their platform had taken measures to assist them during the pandemic while many asked for a better treatment from platforms (OECD 2020). At the time of writing, we are still lacking data on the implications of such arrangements and, more generally, on the detrimental effect of the pandemic on platform workers' OSH. However, currently available evidence can inform us about the challenges platform workers are facing and provide insights on potential developments. As in many sectors, it is likely that these challenges have been compounded by the pandemic.

Covid-19 is exacerbating an already fragile situation for platform workers

Even before the lockdown period, evidence already suggested that a significant proportion of platform workers were not satisfied with their experience of

providing services on online labour platforms (Figure 5.4). Overall, the highest rate of satisfied platforms workers was found in courier services (69%), followed by transportation (68%), food delivery (65%) and other activities (55%). As a comparison, in 2015, 86% of European workers reported being satisfied or very satisfied with working conditions in their main paid job (Eurofound 2016).

The aspects of work recording the lowest satisfaction rates for platform workers are work-related benefits, the level of income and the cost of providing services. The number of hours worked and the flexibility to determine where or when to work come, respectively, fourth and fifth place, while the ability to decide what type of work to accomplish have the highest satisfaction rate.

Satisfaction with different aspects of work varies noticeably by the type of activity platform workers are involved in. Platform workers performing 'other activities' are more likely to be satisfied with flexibility (75%) than those involved in 'transportation' (58%), 'courier services' (56%) and 'food delivery' (54%). A similar, but less clear, pattern is found for independence, with the highest satisfaction rate for other activities (74%), moderate rates for courier services (67%) and food delivery (65%), and the lowest satisfaction rate for transportation (56%). Platform workers providing transport and food delivery services are slightly more satisfied with the cost of providing services (52%) than those involved in courier services (44%) or other activities (42%). Finally, platforms workers performing other activities record the lowest rates of satisfaction for work-related benefits (29%), level of income (34%), and the number of hours worked (49%). There are no noteworthy differences between the three remaining categories of platform workers regarding these aspects of work.

This low level of satisfaction is inherently linked to a broad range of regulatory deficiencies whose effects are only likely to have been magnified by the ongoing pandemic. Workers engaged in location-based platforms such as those providing delivery or taxi services have been particularly at risk due to the nature of their work, as they cannot always ensure social distancing. Many workers depend entirely on task-based work for their earnings, without paid sick leave, and they cannot afford to self-quarantine even if Covid-19 symptoms were to appear, posing risks to both themselves and others. At the same time, with the lack of health insurance coverage for platform workers in many countries, even getting tested for Covid-19 may be challenging. This could lead to a scenario wherein not only is the platform worker engaged in work while being sick, but (s)he also risks spreading the virus to the customers or businesses involved. The lack of labour and social protections are thus exposing workers to additional risks in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic: workers are also often not provided with personal protective equipment, sick pay or hazard pay for performing

tasks. Some digital app-based companies have set up emergency funds and other forms of sick pay to assist workers infected with the virus or who have been medically ordered to self-isolate (Uber 2020). However, these sick pay schemes are considered to be insufficient to cover the loss of income and even far below minimum wage levels in various countries (Fairwork 2020).

In sum, the Covid-19 pandemic has accentuated the precarious situation of platform workers. The contingent nature of their work coupled with the lack of social protection they currently enjoy make them extremely exposed to the economic implications of the crisis. Data currently available is insufficient for a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the size of the gig economy, and thus of the severity of this issue. It is nevertheless safe to conclude that platform work merits much more attention since it presently forms, in all likelihood, a small but significant part of overall employment. The lack of adequate social and labour protection for gig workers poses a genuine risk to their health and safety, but in times of a global pandemic it also poses a risk to public health.