



Healthy Workplaces **SAFE AND HEALTHY WORK IN THE DIGITAL AGE**



Safety and health insights for digital platform work

Key points

- Digital platform work is increasingly common across Europe and beyond.
- This type of work can represent an opportunity for some groups of workers to enter employment or to have increased flexibility.
- Occupational safety and health (OSH) risks associated with tasks carried out by digital platform workers are largely similar to those associated with the same tasks performed outside the platform economy.
- Digital platform workers are nonetheless exposed to a range of additional risks directly associated with the nature and working conditions of platform work.
- A range of initiatives to improve the OSH of digital platform workers have been introduced by governments, digital labour platforms, social partners and platform workers themselves.

Safe and healthy work in the digital age

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) is running the 2023–2025 Europe-wide Healthy Workplaces Campaign (HWC) to raise awareness of the implications of the use of digital technologies for safety and health at work. If designed, implemented, managed and used in line with a human-centred approach, digital technologies can be safe and productive. The aim of the 2023–2025 HWC is to stimulate collaboration for a safe and productive digital transformation of work.

The growing trend of digital platform work

Digital platform work is a relatively new way of working made possible by digital technologies, such as personal computers, smartphones, applications and an internet connection. Digital platform work is defined as all paid work provided through or on an online platform – a digital marketplace that allows the demand and supply of work to be matched to carry out specific tasks. Within this concept, the work can be performed completely online or on-location.

Online versus on-location digital platform work

Online digital platform work: tasks are matched with workers online and performed only or mostly virtually with the help of an electronic device at any location (mostly the workers' home). Examples of online platform workers comprise content moderators, software programmers, clerical workers and graphic designers.

On-location digital platform work: tasks are matched with workers online but performed only or mostly in the physical world, such as in public areas, on the road or at the client's premises. On-location platform workers include riders, drivers, handyworkers, domestic workers, nurses and carers.

According to data from the EU-OSHA OSH Pulse survey (2022), about 6 % of workers in the EU27, Iceland and Norway were earning part of their income (3 % of workers) or most of their income (3.1 % of workers) working through digital platforms. Platform workers are more frequently involved in a diverse range of sectors, such as information and communication technology, technical and professional services, commerce, transport, accommodation, food and administrative support services. Although the share of women among platform workers is on the rise, they are under-represented in the category. Platform labour is more common among migrants and younger workers, especially in the types of work that are most dangerous.

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How digital platform work offers opportunities

Digital platform work lowers the barriers to labour market entry and re-entry, and can increase labour market participation for all, including vulnerable and marginalised people. Some groups are over-represented among inactive and unemployed workers, such as migrants, persons with disabilities or chronic conditions, and women. When employed, they often find themselves in poor-quality jobs.

So, digital platform work can be an attractive additional or alternative source of income, as it can be combined with other forms of work or with caring duties of family members. Also, digital labour platforms tend not to place restrictions on the number of workers that can sign up, nor on the worker profiles, except on the skills necessary to do the job. Additionally, this type of work allows people to develop skills and gain experience, which can potentially lead to jobs with better conditions.

Uncovering the risks of digital platform work

The OSH risks that platform workers face are very similar to those linked to the same tasks performed outside the platform economy. For example, online platform workers are exposed to risks related to prolonged static postures, use of inadequate equipment and use of digital devices.

Nevertheless, platform labour involves additional work, like spending time searching for tasks to work on, and additional abilities, such as being familiar with the technologies needed to access the platforms. It is also common in occupations that are generally more risky, such as transport and delivery. There are a number of factors and conditions of digital platform work that result in additional OSH risks, making it more complex to prevent and manage them within the platform economy.

Specific risks of digital platform work

- **Ambiguous employment status and contractual arrangements**

Digital labour platforms tend to classify workers as self-employed freelancers, which may not match their actual employment and working conditions. Being self-employed makes platform workers responsible for their own OSH, as in most EU Member States the relevant OSH legislation applies only to employees. Also, these workers are not normally targeted by prevention, monitoring and enforcement services, are excluded from social dialogue initiatives and are not covered by collective bargaining.

- **Algorithmic management**

Platforms use algorithmic management, that is, algorithms to allocate tasks, monitor and evaluate workers' performance and behaviour. This can undermine workers' autonomy, job control and flexibility, and can result in heavier workload, exhaustion, anxiety and stress, negatively impacting health and wellbeing. The algorithm ranks and provides rewards or penalties to workers based on their performance or behaviour, which may be emotionally demanding. It is also worth mentioning that there is often an overall lack of transparency on the way the algorithm works, which can contribute to insecurity and stress, and prove a barrier to worker participation and consultation.

- **Social isolation, unconventional workplaces and work–life conflict**

Digital platform work is carried out mostly in isolation by an anonymous and dispersed workforce, with a high labour turnover, in ill-adapted workplaces, frequently with inadequate equipment and with blurred work–life boundaries. This can have a range of implications for the OSH of platform workers. Sleeping problems, exhaustion, stress, depression, burnout, loneliness, musculoskeletal disorders, accidents and an overall dissatisfaction with one's job and personal life are frequently reported issues. The social isolation of platform workers limits their organisation, and consequently social dialogue, collective bargaining and participation in the development of an OSH management system. With a disperse workforce and a lack of organised representative bodies, it is difficult to promote training, access to OSH services and initiatives such as awareness and prevention campaigns.

- **Job and income insecurity**

Digital platform work comes with significant job and income insecurity, as workers often have little or no control, nor negotiation power, over how much they can work and earn per task. Job and income insecurity are recognised psychosocial risk factors related to work.



Effective practices for safe and healthy digital platform work

To prevent the risks associated with digital platform work, several initiatives have been introduced by public decision-makers, digital labour platforms, platform associations, social partners and platform workers themselves.

Policy-level initiatives

Spanish ‘Riders’ Law’: introduced a right to algorithmic transparency and the presumption of a dependent employment relationship.

Italian legislative framework and Bologna charter: the Bologna Charter of Fundamental Rights of Digital Labour in the Urban Context introduced OSH protection conditions for platform work and inspired similar initiatives in the Lazio region and in Milan, as well as changes to the national legislation.

French legislative framework: a set of laws, such as the El Khomri Law on the fight against fraud and the Mobility Orientation Law, grants a range of rights and protection to platform workers, like the right to form and join a trade union, right to disconnect and insurance against work-related accidents.

Initiatives by platforms and platform associations

Glovo, Lyft, DoorDash, Uber, Waymo, Amazon Flex and other platforms have introduced a number of initiatives to integrate OSH aspects into the functioning of their apps and technologies. This shows that platforms can actively promote safe and healthy platform work. Examples of initiatives are hotlines, helpdesks, automated support systems, OSH messaging, tips and advice through app-based notifications and automated OSH-related cues, corporate group forums and interpersonal safety measures (e.g. emergency assistance or panic buttons). Other examples include the provision of safety nets in the form of sickness, accident and compensation insurance, healthcare and disability insurance, maternity and paternity leave, along with tailored OSH training and awareness resources.

Practices by trade unions and platform workers

Trade unions have been active across Europe, carrying out activities to promote the prevention of OSH risks in platform work. Examples of that are registers and observatories on key labour law, social dialogue and voluntary schemes related to the conditions of digital platform work, training tools for trade unions and collections of good practices for the prevention of OSH risks. Platform workers have also been implementing initiatives, such as informal exchanges of information on work-related issues between peers. Chat forums, social media and face-to-face interactions are the most frequently used channels. Other initiatives include informal safety measures and precautions to protect themselves from task-specific risks.

Initiatives based on social dialogue

Social partners have negotiated and agreed on several initiatives. Collective agreements have proven to be an effective tool to secure personal protective equipment for riders in accordance with national jurisdictions and to improve working conditions for platform workers. For instance, Hilfr, a cleaning service platform from Denmark, and the Danish trade union 3F negotiated a pioneering collective agreement promoting decent work and sickness benefits, including an economic welfare supplement, which is an additional compensation somewhat equivalent to hazard pay.

Resources

Check out all related content under the priority area ‘Digital platform work’:

<https://healthy-workplaces.osha.europa.eu/en/about-topic/priority-area/digital-platform-work>.

Consult all publications on the topic:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications-priority-area/digital-labour-platforms>.

EU-OSHA’s thematic section on digitalisation of work and its implications for OSH:

<https://osha.europa.eu/en/themes/digitalisation-work>.

Psychosocial issues and the changing world of work:

<https://oshwiki.osha.europa.eu/en/themes/psychosocial-issues-changing-world-work>.