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Building the future of work together

How to balance worker entitlements and employer interests to ensure decent platform work

by Denis Pennel

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Online talent platforms leverage the advantages of new technology and are a regular feature of today's labour markets. They offer significant potential to bring more people into labour markets and boost employment levels.

Platform work has seen rapid growth in recent years and presents a particularly attractive prospect as economies seek to recover from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Social partners and governments must now work together to ensure that online talent platforms also contribute to decent work and economic growth. But how?

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) recent [World Employment and Social Outlook report](#) provides some useful insights. It focuses on the status of digital labour platforms around the world and the way in which they are redefining working relationships. While the report recognises the potential that platform work offers to both workers and businesses, it also flags serious concerns regarding: worker income – which varies widely across countries and types of platform; working conditions – including working hours and OHS; and social protection coverage.

We share many of these concerns along with the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Together we are united in our objective of ensuring that online talent platforms provide *decent* work - but regulation covering them needs to balance the entitlements of workers with the interests of employers.

ILO's report finds the regulation governing digital labour platforms around the world to be as diverse as the platforms themselves and recommends international policy dialogue and coordination to find common solutions. Certainly, we need regulation that fosters and leverages new technologies and labour market innovations. If labour market institutions fail to accommodate such digital advances, workers and businesses will opt out of such new employment pathways in a move that can be detrimental to both them and society.

So what should effective and appropriate regulation look like? The IOE believes that there is **no one-size-fits-all** due to the diversity of platform work, and we agree. We also see the **classification of both workers and services** as key and think that services should be subject to the same regulation irrespective of the technology involved. Not all online platforms deliver the same output and as for online talent platforms, they often provide services that have existed for decades ‘in real life’. We need to **ensure that similar services are governed by the same regulation conditions and standards**.

Adequate regulation does not necessarily mean *more* regulation. In many instances it may just mean **better enforcement of existing regulations in order to create a level playing field**. The ITUC has called for the framework of rights agreed in the 2019 ILO Centenary declaration to underpin all forms of work – including digital platforms.

Finally, we believe that **agency work should be promoted as a decent way to organise platform work**. Our private employment services sector has broad experience of social innovation gained through agency work and is deploying online platform technology to enhance our added value to jobseekers, workers and businesses.

Looking to the future, it will be vital to ensure that everyone has the chance to access the opportunities that platform work affords. This means addressing the growing digital divide between geographic regions – something the ILO also highlights in its report. Most investments are in Asia, Europe and the US, while 60% of people in developing countries have no access to technology. We need an increased the focus on infrastructures and skills so that all countries and labour markets can enjoy the fruits of digitalisation.

All parties acknowledge the clear potential of digital platforms in reducing informality in our labour markets and promoting a host of different contractual work arrangements across all sectors and occupations. Markets such as India are engaged in tackling this issue and embracing platform work as an opportunity to offer formal decent work.

With seemingly broad agreement on the need for regulation the prospects look encouraging. Already in Europe the European Commission has announced that it will be proposing a legislative initiative on improving working via online talent platforms this year. To date it has launched an EU Social Partners consultation and we are proud to be involved through our European arm, WEC-Europe.

We must all support social innovation in deploying digital technology. By taking a human-centred approach to labour markets and creating new solutions for working, learning and social protection we can ensure that fundamental rights and benefits are appropriately secured across diverse forms of work. This way platform work can be leveraged for the benefit of workers, business and our society as a whole.

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