The Fairwork Foundation: Strategies for improving platform work

When we use a product, a service, or even an algorithm that was brought into being with digital labour, there is no way to know whether an exhausted worker is behind it; whether they get laid off if they become sick or get pregnant; whether they are spending twenty hours a week just searching for work; how precarious their source of income is; or whether they are being paid an unfairly low wage.

Many of these services require work done by platform workers. There are now over seven million digital platform workers that live all over the world, doing work that is outsourced via platforms or apps in the gig economy. Lacking the ability to collectively bargain, platform workers have little ability to negotiate wages and working conditions with their employers who are often on the other side of the world.

The Fairwork project is undertaking innovative research that focuses on these workers, their experiences, labour processes, and the organisation of their work. To understand this, the project has held stakeholder meetings and conducting in-country fieldwork. The platform economy is rapidly expanding, particularly in developing and emerging economies. With this, the future of work is becoming the present and there is an urgent need to engage with its consequences. The Fairwork Foundation aims to improve platform work by ranking and rating platforms for fairness, seeking to drive up standards of platform work.

This project draws on the expertise and experience of Oxford Internet Institute staff on work practices and working conditions in digital labour platforms.

LOCATION SPECIFIC PLATFORMS: workers are required to be in a specific location; e.g. Deliveroo, Uber, or TaskRabbit

CLOUD WORK: platforms that host work that can be done from anywhere. This can involve ‘microwork’ e.g. Amazon Mechanical Turk, or online freelancing e.g. Upwork

https://fair.work
The Fairwork Principles

THE STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS were held in Geneva at UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development) and the ILO (International Labor Organization). In-country meetings were also hosted in Johannesburg, South Africa, and Bangalore, India. The meetings were attended by platform representatives, academics, trade unionists, policy, and non-governmental organisations. The outcome of the meetings were establishing five core principles for work that can be regarded as fair:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>1.1 Pays the minimum wage</th>
<th>1.2 Pays the minimum wage including costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pay</td>
<td>2.1 Meets comparative health and safety regulation</td>
<td>2.2 Actively protects health and safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>3.1 Complies with national law</td>
<td>3.2 Offers contracts that reflect the employment relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contracts</td>
<td>4.1 Provides a clear channel of communication to workers</td>
<td>4.2 Can evidence equality in the management process</td>
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<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>5.1 Includes freedom of association and worker voice</td>
<td>5.2 Recognises collective body that can undertake representation and bargaining</td>
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<tr>
<td>Representation</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Research case studies

**SOUTH AFRICA**

SOUTH AFRICA is an important example for platform work, with developing digital infrastructure and relatively high levels of unemployment. There are large numbers of South African workers using platforms to find work. In addition to the international platforms like Uber, Taxify, and Upwork, there are also home-grown platforms like SweepSouth, Domestly, and Picup.

There are comparatively strong employment protections in South Africa. However, people choosing to work on platforms are not considered employees under the Labour Relations Act and so are not covered by existing protections. This means that there are large numbers of workers lacking social protections and methods to improve their conditions.

**INDIA**

IN INDIA there has been a rapid growth of platform work across the three different types of platforms. Alongside the international platforms like Uber, Upwork, Amazon Mechanical Turk, there are also home-grown platforms like Ola and Babajob.

It is estimated that there are around 15 million freelancers in India, completing around 40% of all freelance work. Like South Africa, workers who are categorised as independent contractors are not covered by existing employment protections.
THE INITIAL PLAN is to draw up an annual ranking of platform types, alongside certifying platforms that achieve minimum ratings. The certification scheme translates the five principles into five categories. Each category has two parts, the second can only be achieved if the first is met. This allows for a total score out of ten possible points.

For each of the five categories, the Fairwork Foundation will score platforms one point for meeting a minimum requirement, with another point awarded for better practices. These standards are contextually developed for platform time and location, as what is fair for Uber drivers in Johannesburg is not the same for Amazon Mechanical Turk workers in Bangalore. The result is a score out of ten.

THIS PROGRAMME OF WORK AIMS AT:

- uncovering where fair and unfair work takes place
- codifying that into both a Fairwork certification scheme and an annual ranking of platforms
- developing an international standard for good-quality digital working conditions

The high levels of unemployment, informal employment, and poor working conditions in the Global South play a key role in limiting economic growth and equitable outcomes. While the digital economy initially offered new possibilities for work, the evidence is showing that this is falling far short of its potential. This project provides an important way that international development cooperation can create new initiatives, regulation, and policies to deliver on the promises of fair work in the digital economy. The Fairwork Foundation intends to raise consumer awareness for the working conditions behind online services and products.

The Fairwork Foundation is now being put into practice in South Africa and India, following successful in-country stakeholder meetings.

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