

POLICY BRIEF

SEAD PLATFORM WORK



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PLATFORM WORK IN BELGIUM



Introduction

This is the first policy brief originating from the Belspo-funded SEAD research project on the opportunities for sustainable employment in the age of digitalisation. This paper presents initial findings and preliminary conclusions on the platform economy in Belgium.

1. Platform work in Belgium

1.1 Overview of types of platforms and activities

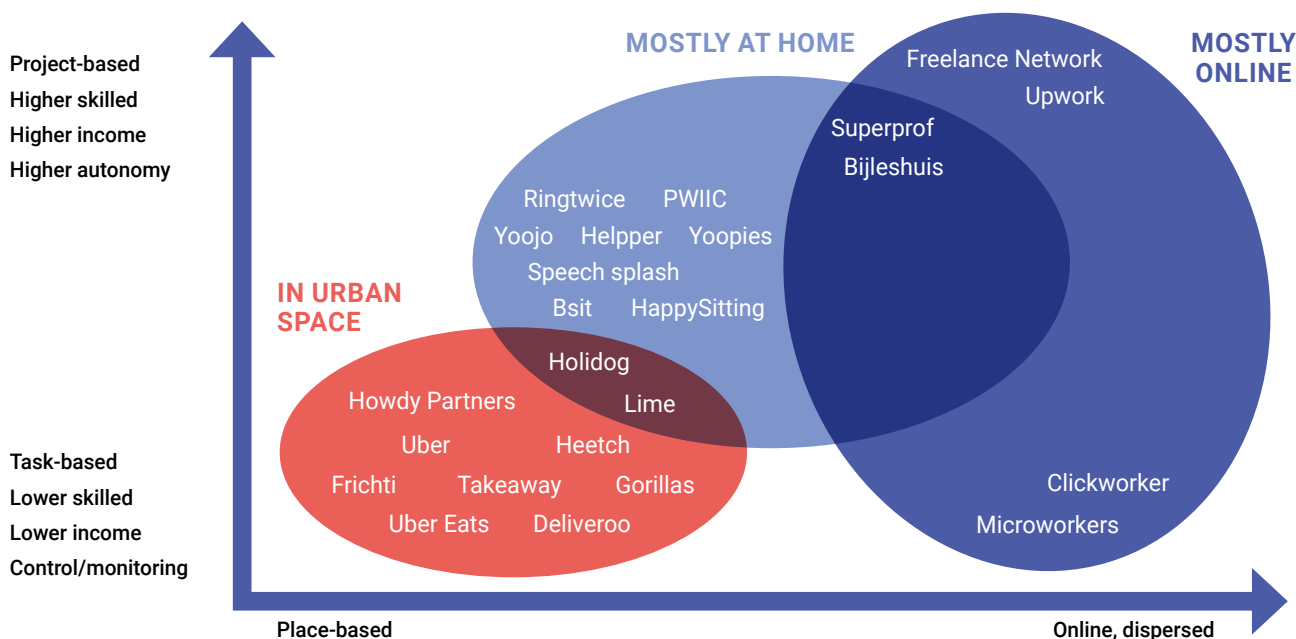
The platform economy is particularly difficult to characterise, mainly due to the wide variety of organisations and activities that comprise it. Providing a clear definition of a digital platform therefore proves challenging. Moreover, several (types of) organisations find themselves in the grey zone between the platform economy and more traditional sectors. In general, we can say that the following characteristics distinguish a digital platform from other enterprises: (1) a strong dependence on a digital infrastructure and digital means of production, (2) the use of algorithms to create and coordinate economic transactions

between different actors as a mediator, (3) extracting value from these economic transactions, and (4) exercising a certain degree of control over the organisation and execution of the production process¹.

Within this very broad and general definition of digital platforms, there are obviously various shades. A distinction between types of platforms can be made based on the type of activity, the profile of the actors involved or the earnings model and organisational model. Platform activities can be either locally bound or geographically dispersed, take place online or offline, be person-based (as in the case of freelancers) or public (as in crowd work), and the content of work tasks may vary according to the level of competence required. Moreover, platforms have varying degrees of authority and control over work organisation, work content, user interaction and pricing².

Based on an extensive literature review and an exploratory empirical study of the sector in our country, we thus arrived at a schematic representation of these factors for the Belgian platform economy (see Figure 1³). This analysis highlights the importance of considering the full complexity of the phenomenon and thus avoiding a one-sided focus of the scientific and public debate on transport-oriented platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the Belgian platform economy by spatial demarcation of platforms and income/qualification level/autonomy of platform workers



¹ Casilli, A. A. (2019). *En attendant les robots—Enquête sur le travail du clic*. Le Seuil.
 Srnicek, N. (2017). *Platform Capitalism*. John Wiley & Sons.

² Schmidt, F. A. (2017). *Digital Labour Markets in the Platform Economy*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Kilhoffer, Z., De Groen, W. P., Lenaerts, K., Smits, I., Hauben, H., Waeyaert, W., Giacumacatos, E., Lhernould, J.-P., & Robin-Olivier, S. (2020). *Study to gather evidence on the working conditions of platform workers VT/2018/032 Final Report 13 December 2019 (VT/2018/032)*. European Commission Directorate-General for Employment Social Affairs and Inclusion.

³ It is clear that the criteria of diversification used only provide a preliminary insight into the Belgian platform economy. Further research and in-depth analysis of empirical data will allow this overview to be refined and revised where necessary.

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1.2 The statute of platform workers

The business model adopted within the platform economy is often presented as 'disruptive', although it often concerns a continuation of processes that predate digitalised platforms and have been affecting the economy for quite some time: the fragmentation of organisational structures or the externalisation of labour and production resources, among others. However, digital platforms are increasingly blurring the line between business and market. Platforms also tend to define themselves as intermediaries rather than employers, with automated management further obscuring relationships of subordination.

The ambiguity about the existence of a subordination relationship also poses a significant challenge for regulation and worker representation. The organisational configuration adopted by platforms undermines the established framework for collective bargaining and solidarity. With the positioning of platforms as "neutral" intermediaries and the confusion between self-employment and de facto dependency, the qualification of the employment statute is a central challenge in the context of the platform economy. Questioning and critically analysing the "neutrality" of the role that platforms assume is important when examining labour relations and related labour rights.

Considering the collective advocacy for platform workers, an important role might be played by workers' collectives, although mobilising platform workers remains difficult even for them. Spatial dispersion, individualisation of work and competition among platform workers are among the factors that make collective action less likely. For individual platform workers, the fragmentation of employment and temporary nature of work make their wage demands both less compelling and more difficult to achieve. Trade union activity is further complicated by the legalisation of conflicts, as is the case in other sectors.

1.3 The quality of platform work

The fact that the main characteristics of platform work vary so widely within the sector also produces very different results in terms of working conditions and job sustainability. For instance, work intensity, the degree of employee autonomy and working hours can vary greatly depending on the type of platform work. For task-oriented work such as microtasking, extreme fragmentation and standardisation of work potentially leads to an alienating and precarious situation where the performer no longer understands how their own task relates to the final product⁴. Algorithmic management (e.g. in delivery services) potentially leads to far-reaching control, making the independence of de jure self-employed workers seem rather fictitious. The triangular

relationship between platform worker, platform and client may also give rise to situations where evaluation of work by clients has an excessive impact on the work situation of platform workers.

While platform work, due to its accessibility and flexibility in terms of time and place, may provide access to the labour market for individuals who would normally be excluded from it, this also carries a risk⁵. It might open the door to the potential exploitation of vulnerable individuals who depend entirely on platform work to earn a living.



2. The sociodemographic and professional profile of Belgian platform workers

Despite the great interest in the platform economy, little is known so far about the profile of Belgian platform workers. Here, we aim to outline the sociodemographic and professional profile of Belgian platform workers, based on two data sources: (1) data originating from public profiles on some well-known Belgian platforms and (2) back-end data obtained via the platforms themselves (these are data originating from the part of the website you cannot see publicly, such as the number of jobs completed, etc.).

Table 1 shows an overview of some key sociodemographic and professional characteristics of the platform workers of 8 platforms operating in Belgium, as well as an overview of the same data collected through a survey distributed among food couriers in Brussels (N=123). It is remarkable how much the characteristics of platform workers differ between platforms. In other words, there appears to be no such thing as 'the platform worker' in Belgium. The characteristics in the table clearly show

⁴ Huws, U. (2014). *Labor in the global digital economy: The cyberariat comes of age*. NYU Press.

⁵ De Groen, W. P., Kilhoffer, Z., Lenaerts, K., & Mandl, I. (2018). *Employment and working conditions of selected types of platform work*. Eurofound.

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that the heterogeneity within the group of platform workers is strongly related to the type of services/activities performed through the platforms. Moreover, this overview seems to indicate that most platform workers use the platform only sporadically.

However, our data do not allow us to take into account 1) users who are active on multiple platforms at the same time and 2) users who were linked through the platform, after which tasks were completed in an informal way (outside the platform).

Table 1. Sociodemographic and professional characteristics of workers from 8 Belgian platforms and a sample of Brussels food couriers

	Education/ tutoring	Professional (freelance) services	Baby- sitting	Platform for interim jobs (platform 1)	Platform for interim jobs (platform 2)	Handyman service	Taxi service	Meal delivery	Sample Brussels food couriers
Registered	8,767	38,526	1,266	No information	277,430	38,534	No information	No information	Not applicable
Active (%)	1,633 (19%) Completed at least 1 job	17,446 (45%) Member for at least 1 year, logged in >12 times	579 (45%) Trained by the platform	9,262 (in 2020) Hired by the platform	45,393 (20%) Completed at least 1 job	12,064 (31%) Completed at least 1 job	Sample: 219 respon- dents from Brussels	± 12,000 Completed at least 1 job	
Sociodemographic characteristics of (active) platform workers									
Gender	Male: 46% Female: 54%	Male: 55% Female: 45%	Male: 6% Female: 94%	Male: 60% Female: 40%	Male: 40% Female: 60%	Male: 68% Female: 32%	Male: 98% Female: 2%	Male: 94% Female: 4%	Male: 74% Female: 7%
Mean age	33 years old	No information	25 years old	30 years old	29 years old	38 years old	30-39 years old: 38%	21-30 years old: 36% 31-40 years old: 25%	27 years old
Education level	Master or higher: 65%	No information	Still a student: 79%	Still a student: 44%	Master: 6%	No information	Higher education: 43%	No information	Low educated: 2% Upper secondary: 27% Higher education: 36%
Professional characteristics of (active) platform workers									
Top 3 occupations	Education experts	Intellectual and artistic professions; Technicians; Administrative staff	Service providers (babysitting)	Elementary occupations; Service providers and salespersons; Administrative staff	Service providers and salespersons	Elementary occupations (e.g., do-it-yourself, domestic help and care, garden help)	Car and taxi drivers	Food couriers	Food couriers
Employment statute	Sharing economy: 85% Self-employed: 14%	All self- employed	No information	Mainly workers	Student: 68% Flexi-job: 22% Employee: 9%	Self-employed: 15% Other: 85%	No information	Sharing economy: 97% Self-employed: 3%	Multiple jobs: 17% Student: 34% Jobseeker: 16% Only courier: 10%
Average fees	€19,5/hour (earned)	€15,7/hour (advertised)	€7/hour (earned)	€12,42/hour (earned)	€11,71/hour (earned)	€46/job (earned)	Only source of income: 64%	>2,500€ (in 2020): 82%	Median gross monthly income: €603
Working volume	Average hours worked since registration: 62	Available for 5 days of work: 35%	Number of hours per job: 4h10min	No information	Average hours worked since registration: 116	Average number of jobs since registration: 24	No information	Hours/week: <10 hours: 35% 10-20 hours: 31% 20-30 hours: 18% >30 hours: 17%	Median number of working hours/ week: 28

3. Precarity and the well-being of food couriers in Brussels

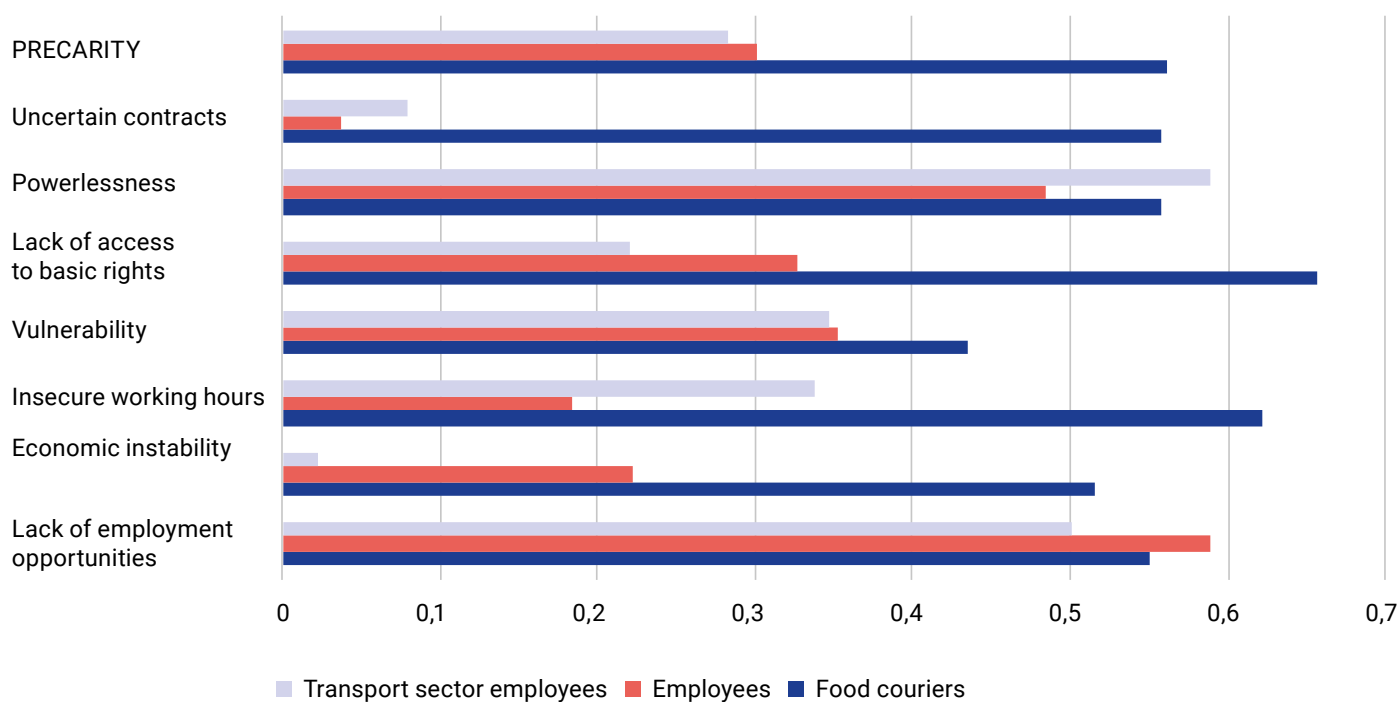
Through qualitative fieldwork and a survey on job quality (N=123), we gained some insights into the presence of precarious elements in the job as a food courier through digital platforms in Brussels.

Using a scientifically developed method to measure precarity, we observe that the food couriers in our study are confronted with higher average scores on this scale when compared to other types of employees (see Figure 2). That is, their work situation - more so than is the case for other groups of workers - is characterised by insecurity regarding many aspects. Also, compared to employees working in the transport sector who do similar work in terms of content, couriers working through a digital platform score higher on the precarity scale.

Their high score on the precarity scale is mainly due to the presence of insecure contracts, long and antisocial working hours, low and unstable wages and the lack of basic rights (e.g. insurance in case of an accident or for third-party damages) faced by Brussels meal couriers (see Figure 2). However, the impact of this uncertainty on several levels may differ within the group of couriers. For instance, the situation of a student who delivers meals to earn a little extra is clearly different from someone for whom this job is the only way to make a living. Nevertheless, analyses on our sample show that high scores on the precarity scale go together with poor scores for well-being.

Fieldwork and informal discussions with Brussels-based meal couriers also provided some important insights into how they carry out their work. For instance, renting accounts on the platforms - mostly through online courier groups on social media - turned out to be a common practice in Brussels, especially among undocumented individuals and minors.

Figure 2. Precarity score of Brussels food couriers (N=99), compared with that of transport sector workers (N=50) and employees in general (N=2332)⁶



⁶ This comparison should be interpreted with some caution, firstly because of the non-representative nature of the sample of Brussels food couriers and secondly because the information for employees dates from 2019 and the data for couriers was collected in 2021.

Conclusion

The question that arises is to what extent platform work can currently be considered as a sustainable form of employment and how it could possibly be organised in a more sustainable way in the future. Existing discussions focused on contractual status are interesting because a more stable contract can provide access to some basic rights that is currently lacking for some platform workers. However, the whole package of employment conditions (wages, social protection, working hours, etc.) and working conditions (autonomy, control, etc.) is even more important for the sustainability of a job and for the well-being of the workers under consideration.

It is also crucial to take into account the great heterogeneity within the group of platform workers. Indeed, the presence of precarious elements in this type of work does not have the same impact on all platform workers. Much depends on how the platform work fits into a person's life and career and on the degree of dependence on platform work to be able to make a living. Although a segment of very precarious employment

situations exists, there is also a large group of individuals for whom platform work merely represents a flexible and above all temporary additional income. Precariousness mainly surfaces where there is a very high dependence on the platform, such as for people who (for whatever reason) cannot easily find another job.

While the benefits associated with the flexible and accessible nature of platform work cannot be denied, it is important to also examine the downsides of this organisational model. The difficult working hours, the unpredictability of the amount of work and remuneration and the lack of protection are elements that potentially threaten the sustainability of platform work. In this context, initiatives towards more regulation and protection are certainly desirable, for example by making platforms co-responsible when it comes to the safety of the workers employed through them, by giving platform workers more (structural) participation or by offering a basis of social protection, thus overcoming elements of this type of work that might threaten well-being.

