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Digital labour platforms and the future of work

Towards decent work in the online world



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FOREWORD

One of the major transformations in the world of work over the past decade has been the emergence of online digital labour platforms. This new form of work has not only disrupted existing business models but also the employment model upon which these business models relied. Work on digital labour platforms provides workers the opportunity to work from any place, at any time and take up whatever jobs suits them. However, there are also some risks from engaging in such work with regard to their status of employment, whether they receive adequate income, social protection and other benefits. The opportunities and risks that the workers face raise questions about what motivates these workers to undertake this form of work. Do these motivations vary across different parts of the world? And what are the consequences for workers of engaging in this form of work?

To investigate some of these questions the ILO Research Department along with the Inclusive Labour Markets, Labour Relations and Working Conditions Branch (INWORK) carried out two surveys in 2015 and 2017, covering 3,500 workers living in 75 countries around the world and working on five major globally operating microtask platforms. This was supplemented with in-depth interviews and other qualitative surveys undertaken by researchers at IG Metall. The survey focused on microtask platforms, wherein businesses and other clients have access to a large, flexible workforce (“crowd”) who are geographically dispersed around the world to undertake short, simple and mostly clerical tasks and are remunerated on the basis of task or piece completed.

Based on the survey findings, this report provides one of the first comparative studies of working conditions on microtask platforms. It presents the basic characteristics and motivations of workers to undertake these tasks, and finds both commonalities and differences between workers from the global North and global South. The report analyses the working conditions on these micro-task platforms and advances a series of principles for improving working conditions on digital labour platforms.

This report will be helpful to the ILO’s Future of Work Initiative and aims to support the work of the Global Commission on the Future of Work, an independent commission convened by the Director-General of the International Labour Organization in August 2017. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the ILO.



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