

Platform work performed by a qualified work force – the case of technical translators

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So far, the discussion and research on platform work have focused on simple services with low skill requirements (for instance within the transport and catering sectors), and on how platforms blur responsibilities and contribute to the exploitation of different segments of unqualified workforces (Parker, Alstynne & Choudary, 2016; Steen et al., 2019). This policy brief highlights the fact that the logic of the platform economy may also apply to the mediation of qualified work. More precisely, it explores the section of the translation industry that is concerned primarily with technical translations in Finland and Sweden¹.

At present, practically all companies in Finland and Sweden outsource their translation tasks. Due to the disappearance of in-house translation units, translation firms have seized the opportunity to expand their business into global enterprises. In doing so, they have used digital platforms as a means to mediate resources and jobs between independent translators, who work as self-employed individuals, and firms requesting different types of technical translations. These translation companies also use machine-aided translation, emerging more or less as assets that are routinely applied. They have reframed translation work as a digitally conditioned work process, pushing translators to work as freelancers, dependent on increasingly more advanced tools. Drawing on 22 semi-structured interviews in both countries, this NfoW brief focuses on how the translators' work is organized. Interviewees comprise professional translators, managers at different levels representing global translation firms, and representatives from unions such as Unionen and DiK in Sweden, or Akava in Finland. The interviews also include respondents from professional associations such as the Swedish Association of Professional Translators (SFÖ), and the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters (SKTL). The translators interviewed work for one or more multinational translation companies. The companies as well as the interviewees are anonymised in this brief.

¹ Technical translation is a professional field involving for instance technical, legal and medical translations. It is dependent on qualified translators and large firms mediating jobs from mostly large companies or public organizations. Policies, official recommendations and regulations usually differ from literary translations or the emerging field of gig-work comprising an unqualified workforce.

Platforms and the relation between translation firms and technical translators

There are less specialized platform companies applying digital platforms to simple peer-to-peer translation services, engaging extensive numbers of people who are not professional translators. However, in the translation industry, the situation is different; platforms introduced by translation firms are strictly defined by their specific business and established connections with only qualified professional translators. These firms conceptualize themselves as mediators, using digital platforms guided by a business interest in facilitating the distribution of work between constituents and translators possessing university degrees within the realm of linguistics and translation. Relationships between translators, translation firms and constituents draw on business-to-business relations, and do not entail direct links between the customer and service providers.

With regard to contractual status, translators then emerge as highly educated self-employed individuals, working for the translation companies as entrepreneurs. Thus, the companies rarely have to consider the collective agreements that otherwise provide guidelines for negotiations between employers and employees. Furthermore, the companies are able to maintain extensive influence over prices and working conditions by mobilizing crowds of geographically dispersed technical translators on their platforms. These crowds allow companies to leave it to the translators to accept job offers or leave it to another translator willing to accept the payment, deadlines or other work conditions offered by the company. In practice, the first translator that accepts an offer automatically distributed via these platforms gets the job unless it is a specialized translation offered directly to a certain translator who is, for example, an expert in the terminology of a certain industry. In order to maintain quality, translation companies frequently also review their work.

In this way, these platforms foster a competitive crowd of highly educated, skilled entrepreneurs, making it difficult for the translators to negotiate their price or the quality of the work. Nevertheless, some of the translators still refer to their qualifications as an advantage while emphasizing the benefits of entrepreneurial independence or actively attempting to influence and shape their own working conditions. The translators we interviewed from Finland emphasized the importance of an entrepreneurial spirit: they reported that they knew their craft and appre-

ciated knowing the rules of the game, that they must know their own value and have the courage to negotiate their deals etc. Interviewees from both countries also underscored their ability to independently refine their skills and that the companies sometimes value their craft by prioritizing their specific competences, or even engaging them in peer reviewing the quality of others' translations. Another typical strategy to enhance their independence drew on disloyalty, in the sense that technical translators in both Finland and Sweden tried to avoid being totally dependent on one company and listed themselves as potential subcontractors for various companies.

Providing technical translations on platforms - opportunity or necessity?

At the same time, the translators in both countries complained about unsustainable competition by referring to the threat from 'others' in the crowd, who accepted deals with excessively low fees. Interviewees representing both the companies and the translators also described how the companies constrained the opportunity to negotiate prices by using these platforms to centralize administrative functions and project management to different parts of the world, thereby reducing communication between translators and firms. In addition, translators described how the companies strengthened this asymmetric power relationship by insisting on the use of computer-aided translations or other types of software, containing strict instructions for how they should translate different texts, from which they must not deviate.

Most of the translators described this development as unsatisfying or at least challenging. The Swedish translators also underscored that they became frustrated and struggled with perceiving themselves as self-employed under such circumstances, in particular because they wanted to show that they were skilled translators, but received job-assignments that they could not influence or negotiate. In Finland, the translators seemed to accept the entrepreneurial position more easily, but not the problems with terms and conditions of work. Respondents from the Swedish unions claimed that a highly educated work force, performing knowledge-intensive work such as translation, could influence their work much more than most others engaged in simple platform services. They nevertheless confirmed that the anonymous management of their work via platforms often seemed to have a demotivating affect by making it difficult for them to influence their working conditions.

Finally, the translators also underscored that even though the use of new digital applications changed their work content, they continued to do knowledge-intensive and rather time-consuming editorial work. This meant that despite short deadlines and difficulties in negotiating their payment, they have to spend considerable time finding linguistic solutions while making their translations fit with predefined instructions or already computer-generated translations. Thus, they still faced high demands with regard to their craft. Several of them described it as highly dissatisfying to be forced to face unhealthy compe-

tion from the crowd while also doing work that demanded a lot of competence. Some of them also described this as an increased job intensity causing stress and economic concerns that made it difficult to engage in reskilling with a view to finding a new job.

Voicing discontent and collective mobilization – relations between technical translators and unions

In many ways, the translation industry reflects the platform economy's challenge to the Nordic trade unions' traditional engagement in protecting and voicing the interests of weaker groups in the labour market. Anonymous and less transparent platform management appears to make it difficult for the unions to mobilize and channel technical translators' opinions and concerns. According to interviewees from unions in both countries, they are struggling with the fact that most platform companies do not perceive themselves as employers or provide regular workplaces where unions may identify and mobilize the employees. Union representatives in both countries nevertheless explained that this concern was not new to them. The challenges they saw in identifying and mobilizing platform workers rather reminded them of how the unions since the 1990s have tried to engage both self-employed individuals and staff working for manpower agencies.

The unions thus struggled with the fact that self-employed translators do not constitute a group of employees, with traditional wage or salary earner status that they could represent in collective bargaining or any other negotiations with employers. Unions in both countries also tended increasingly to assume a support relationship with this category of qualified self-employed individuals. By providing health and unemployment insurance as well as business support, they described themselves as service-oriented consultancies in terms of how they attempt to represent this group. In Finland, the unions were also seeking direct cooperation with the translation companies by organizing shared discussion forums on the topic (e.g. quality challenges in translation). None of the Swedish unions referred to similar initiatives, but interviewees representing the Swedish Association of Professional Translators (SFÖ), engaging both companies and self-employed translators, reported that they were discussing the translators' concerns regarding the increased use of digital platforms.

Interviewed translators confirmed that unions trying to mobilize them would face extensive challenges in both countries, by emphasizing that as self-employed persons they did not perceive themselves as potential union members. Some of the translators admitted their concern that companies would stop giving them work if they joined a union. However, in most cases they described themselves as simply having to voice their concerns on an individual basis. Many of them also added that they did not even know that the unions were organizing qualified self-employed individuals such as themselves.

Responses from government and social partners

In none of the countries did social partners engage exclusively with the translation business. Primarily, they refer to future visions where they discuss platform work in general. For instance, the largest Swedish employers' confederation Svenskt Näringsliv published a report titled 'Arbetsmarknadsekonomisk rapport – olika vägar till job' (Arbetsmarknadsekonomiska rådet, 2018) concluding that platform work in general is a limited but potentially disruptive phenomenon. There are similar references to the future impact in Finland, where Business Finland, the Finnish Government and the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment published a 'Roadmap for the digital platform economy' (Viitanen et al., 2017) pointing out possible advantages in an attempt to boost the development of the platform economy in Finland. The Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2019) has also appointed a cross-sectoral working group with the objective of presenting alternative solutions to future challenges such as 'drawing a line between professional and non-professional operations, facilitating compliance with work-related obligations, and clarifying the regulatory framework for the sharing economy.'

Finally, we may notice that governmental responses in both countries so far seem to neglect issues related to labour law (cf. Westregård, 2017). Public inquiries as well as reports from both unions and employer confederations addressing issues of bogus self-employment, work organization and environment nevertheless suggest that labour law may become a topic in the future (e.g. SOU 2017:24; Juntunen, 2017; LO, 2018; SAK, 2019).

Summary

In the same way as with other types of less qualified platform work, these technical translators thus struggle with their contractual status and payment. In both countries, they end up tackling a variety of concerns that are typical for self-employed individuals, confirming that the regulation of self-employment contracts is of key importance when dealing with work-related problems in the platform economy. In addition, the study implies that the use of digital platforms might intensify work-related problems whenever they are applied to the mediation of a more qualified workforce. In particular, translators in both Finland and Sweden are concerned with the combination of demands placed on knowledge-intensive and time-consuming work and the lack of means and position to negotiate prices and conditions. They also struggle with the fact that digital platforms make it possible to move administration and project management further away to other countries, making it more impersonal and difficult to voice their concerns with regard to increasing stress, for example, or to renegotiate deals.

The way platforms facilitate self-employment also entails challenges for the trade unions and other interest groups that are engaged in voicing translators' concerns in these countries. Despite efforts from the unions, translators from both Finland and Sweden stressed that they identify themselves either as entrepreneurial or skilled self-employed translators, expected to voice their own concerns rather than engage with the unions. The Finnish translators were more at ease with the demands that their position as business-minded entrepreneurs involved, perhaps reflecting that Finnish education and training for translators responded earlier to demands for entrepreneurial skills. Finland also has the highest general number of self-employed in the Nordic countries (Larsen & Ilsøe 2019). However, the fact remains that translators in both countries portray themselves as qualified self-employed individuals expected to have the capacity to deal with their own concerns.



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The future of work: Opportunities and challenges for the Nordic models

In this collaborative project funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers, more than 30 researchers from the five Nordic countries study:

- What are the main drivers and consequences of the changing future of work in the Nordic countries?
- In what ways will digitalisation, new forms of employment, and platform work influence the Nordic models?
- What kind of renewal in the regulation of labour rights, health and safety, and collective bargaining is warranted to make the Nordic model fit for the future?

Through action and policy oriented studies and dialogue with stakeholders, the objective is to enhance research-based knowledge dissemination, experience exchange and mutual learning across the Nordic boundaries. The project runs from 2017 to 2020, and is organised by Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo. www.faf.no

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