

Summary

When the boss is an app

The topic of this report is digital platforms and platform work. In this context, 'platforms' refers to digital market places where providers of services, platform workers, are linked to customers. The services intermediated may include lease of assets, such as apartments or vehicles, or work, such as transport, cleaning or graphic design. We have studied the emergence of platforms in the Norwegian market, in particular on platforms that provide work, and the relationship between the platform companies and the platform workers.

Among the Norwegian public, the platforms and services that are provided are frequently referred to as 'the sharing economy'. We have chosen to use the terms 'platform work' and 'platform economy'. The reason for doing so is that the platforms' fundamental feature is the on-demand matching of supply and demand of services, and these services are not being shared, but paid for. The report provides a picture of the scope of platform work, assessments of whether the platform economy involves employment relationships, and its implications for health, safety and environment.

The report is based on various data sources. We have undertaken a desk study and interviews with various stakeholders to establish an overview of existing platforms. In addition, we have conducted three surveys among a representative sample of the population to identify the number of platform workers. We have also conducted interviews with eleven different companies associated with the platform economy. Finally, we have undertaken a study of relevant literature.

Our main finding is that as of today, the platform economy in Norway is marginal. In our identification of platforms, we distinguish between those that intermediate objects (capital platforms) and those that intermediate work assignments (labour platforms). There are 30–40 platforms that cater to the Norwegian market. We cannot observe any growth in the number of platforms since the autumn of 2016 although new platforms have emerged and others have disappeared. Many of the platforms that operate in Norway broker local services to local customers. This applies to capital as well as labour platforms. The services provided through the labour platforms mainly

include low-skilled, manual labour. FINN småjobber and Uber are the largest labour platforms in the Norwegian market.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to identify people who work via platforms. In our estimation, between 10 000 and 30 000 people have undertaken assignments through a platform over the last year. Most of these are on platforms (FINN 'small jobs', Uber) where the work is intermediated digitally, but performed locally. Work through platforms (Upwork, Freelancer), where the work is both intermediated and performed digitally, appears to be less widespread.

Moreover, we have also used survey data and data obtained through web scraping conducted by Oxford Internet Institute to assess the number of client companies who use platforms to outsource work. Seven per cent of the companies report to have done so. Few companies have used English-language platforms to outsource work. Programming and technology are the largest category of jobs brokered online, also in Norway, and the fastest-growing category internationally.

Platform work involves a tripartite relationship in which the platform serves as an intermediary between the worker and the client. The framework for the interaction between the worker and the client is primarily established by the platforms. They do so through their choices of form of linkage, payment and assessment systems and the use of data and algorithms to match providers to clients.

The labour relationships that exist in the platform economy today can be characterised as atypical. They involve self-employed without own employees, freelancers and marginal part-time contracts. Many of the platforms have contracts with providers that require them to be self-employed or freelancers.

The extent to which the relationship between the providers and the platforms can be regarded as an employment relationship in the sense defined by the Working Environment Act, is debatable. Such assessments are concrete and must be made specifically for each individual relationship. Although the platforms do not necessarily exercise any traditional form of leadership and management of the providers, this is to some extent embedded in the technical solutions that the platforms are using. The platforms define the frameworks for the interaction through their payment and rating systems and their use of algorithms to link providers to clients.

Few of the platforms engage in systematic preventive efforts regarding the workers' working environment. Even those who employ the workers directly appear to pay little attention to such issues. Risk factors include unclear

responsibilities, working alone and stress related to the use of individual data in assigning work.

New technology and new customer-friendly solutions generate enthusiasm, and it is easy to dismiss critical concerns as reactionary and anti-technology. This report provides a picture of the platform economy seen from a labour perspective. Although the platform economy is marginal in Norwegian working life, it can be linked to broader tendencies in the labour market, such as digitalisation, outsourcing and emergence of new forms of atypical work.

Several studies have argued that the platform economy will grow. On the other hand, it is difficult to separate the platform companies from non-platform companies. It is reasonable to assume that traditional companies will adopt solutions created by the platforms, and this will apply not only to new technology, but also to on-demand work. Such trends may erode the distinction between platforms and other companies in the long run.