

## Future Workers Short-Changed: The Societal Transformation of The Global Employment Landscape from Secure Permanent Work to The Gig Economy and Precarity

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### Abstract

The employment landscape is going through a radical transformation, substantive change which was well underway before the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020. There are numerous causal factors that are policy drivers, resulting in the societal transformation of the landscape for workers. The 1990s digital revolution has created a new dimension to the employment landscape. Society now has digital platform workers who have a unique relationship with traditional workplace issues. Digital platform owners can be based in a different continent to the worker, who sometimes doesn't know who they are working for. Many digital workers work alone which makes collective bargaining and union formation virtually impossible, enabling exploitation of digital workers. Anxiety, stress-related conditions, physical and mental health conditions caused by the workplace, are of significant concern to digital platform workers. Technological panopticism, workplace surveillance, discipline and control, masquerading as algorithmic management, will become the norm for increasing numbers of workers. Artificial intelligence, smart devices and the internet of things (IOT) are other features of digitalisation, which will significantly reduce the number of workers. The employment landscape in the 2020s, will be shaped by the continued proliferation of insecure temporary work, the gig economy and precarity.

**Keywords:** *Digital labour platforms; Digitally enabled workers; Gig economy; Precarity*

### Introduction

The International Labor Organisation's (ILO(b) 15) 'Shaping skills and lifelong learning for the future of work' study has multiple utility. This ILO(b) study acts to articulate the main causal factors which will influence the development trajectory of the future of work. The study also signposts the likely nature of the employment landscape in the 2020s, in terms of workers being enabled to transition (see also Trenerry et al. 2). This latter point is key as it involves equal access to the resources for workers to be reskilled for digital work (Fuller et al. 41).

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Utility is also manifest in the interoperability of the information provided, re-skilling will be required for the new environmentally sustainability work. Demographic changes (ILO(b) 22),

especially the increasingly ageing population demonstrates there will be a growth in health and social work. The COVID-19 pandemic informed us in stark terms, how important care work is to the global society as a whole (Klowden and Lim 27).

The health and care work sector will see a closing of the pay gap, between itself and semi-skilled workers. This future improvement in pay and conditions, won't be reflected in terms of graduate first choice of career or of worker prestige. From the corporate sector, Smith et al. (15) in their 'Future of Work' study, surveyed 9,000 global workers. They found that 83% of salaried employees wanted the workplace to be hybrid in the future. Hybrid working can be defined as the option to work remotely between 25% and 75% of the time (Smith et al. 8). The corporate sector also predicts the end of middle management, the leaner fitter mantra of the 1990s will come to pass in the 2020s. The main causal factor producing this change in the workplace being technological advances, artificial intelligence, digitalisation, the internet of things. Smart machines and algorithms will replace person to person management in many workplace spheres especially for teleworkers (Anderson et al. 37; Langley et al. 860). Whole of life permanent salaried positions will be a thing of the past for workers. The most tried, tested and trusted temporary workers will find themselves often only being offered short-term employment contracts. This conceptual theoretical analysis of the future of work, reveals an employment landscape where the employer/worker power imbalance is significantly more acute.

### **The 2020s global employment landscape: Digitally enabled workers only**

The traditional worker physically travelling to a single onsite workplace, will radically change in the 2020s (Deganis et al. 3). The way, when, where, why and with whom people work will have transformed beyond all recognition from the early 2020s (See Castells 141; Fuller et al. 8). Workers who have digital dexterity will be the most valued, especially digitally savvy workers who can quickly upskill in line with employer demands. As the societal transformation continues, digital platform labour workers will become the norm (Anderson et al. 138; Berg et al. 6). The future workplace will place a higher value on workers who have creative, cognitive, critical thinking, problem-solving skills. The ability to be able to use the latest smart machines to if not solve, then communicate and graphically visualise problems will be key. What survey data from the corporate, non-governmental and public sector inform us, is that a growing proportion of workers will require substantial in-house training (Trenerry et al. 8). The employment landscape will be very fluid, workplaces will focus upon continuous learning environments and knowledge

acquisition, workers will have to unlearn and relearn. The workplace has been a global village for some time now, certainly since the 1990s, technology will take global connectedness to a new level (British Sociological Association, Work, Employment and Society Conference, 25-27 August 2021). Workers will be able to use dialect software, conversational interfaces, real-time language translator to enable direct communication with work colleagues in different continents. Employees will be able to speak with team members in different languages, enabled by digital software to address issues of culture and dialect in real time conversation. Communication will be virtually the same as online meetings, between colleagues working remotely. Good working relationships will develop, as there will be no loss of context or meaning using real time dialect and/or language digital software. There will be constant assessment and ratings by algorithmic management and fellow workers, digital relationships built on professional issues of competence and trust (ILO(a) February 2021; Klowden and Lim 8; see also Fairwork(b) (UK) 8).

There will be workplace segmentation: consisting of sedentary workers who work best onsite; not everyone will have developed high value digital skills especially older people, such workers will be limited to fluctuating hours, insecure, precarious, temporary work (Heeks et al. 270); transitioning workers can adapt best to hybrid conditions, adaptable workers who can acquire new skills quickly; critical workers are those people required to fill key roles to guarantee continuous productivity. These are workers who will be offered the few long term or permanent contracts. The other roles will often be offered on an agency or temporary contract basis (Beirne 8 October 2021). Corporate social responsibility, given impetus by workers with passion and purpose, wanting their work to have a social impact will grow (Ramanathan and Bravery 2 June 2021). The societal impetus will be continuous, especially as extreme weather events due to climate change will become ever more severe as the 2020s progress. The employment landscape will change to such an extent, that employers will find they are having to demonstrate a social purpose in their work. This will be in order to attract sufficient highly skilled critical workers. The work-life balance for many people, high- and low-income workers will be challenging. People working remotely may overwork for career advancement or productivity purposes, leading to a number of worrying work-related conditions. Anxiety, depression will become increasingly common as people feel they need to work excessive hours (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2; Fairwork(b) 7). There will also be increased work-related stress from isolated remote workers, not being able to build work relationships or fit into a workplace culture. Remote worker isolation, with no digital

devices monitoring people's biorhythms, exercise needs, nutritional requirements and wellbeing, will result in increased disengagement. As the 2020s unfold remote workers with mental health conditions will become more prevalent, worker burnout will increase (De Kock et al. 4; Samek Lodovici 51; Sovold et al. 2).

Ioannides et al' (2) 'Sustainable Tourism Employment' study helps set the scene; acting to describe the employment landscape for those not endowed with digital skills. Many workers who are not digitally enabled will work in third sector service jobs; where part time, temporary and seasonal work is commonplace, for example in the hospitality industry (UNCTAD(a) 42). There will be gender bias in work segmentation, with an over representation of women in non-digital, low-income, non-skilled jobs. People with multiple jobs will increase, as small independent private service sector jobs, will be intermittent and fluid in nature. A significant proportion of immigrants both legal and illegal, will also occupy this often casual, unregulated sector, especially in the Global South (Deganis et al. 2). Platform-based gig workers and third sector service workers are equally vulnerable, easily disposable and readily exploitable. Large swathes of the employment landscape in the 2020s will be represented by a number of common characteristics: little employment rights or wage protection; poor working conditions; precarity; unequal power relations; high risk of discrimination (Heeks et al. 268; Ioannides et al. 2).

Fairwork(b)'s (4) 'Labour Standards in the Gig Economy' study, provides a rating of eleven digital platforms: compared to five 'Fair Work' principles, which act to reduce digital platform worker exploitation. There should be '**Fair Pay**': Workers should be paid a decent wage in relation to their local area. This should reflect significant differences between Global North and Global South economies. Digital platform owners should provide '**Fair Conditions**': The digital platform should protect workers from health and safety concerns. Often there is little oversight of this issue if the worker works from home or remotely. Digital work should be conducted under '**Fair Contracts**': The terms and conditions must be accessible to all parties; the digital platform owner should be subject to local law; there must be a reasonable notice period before changes the owner wants to make come into effect; there should be no clauses in the contract which prevent resolution of grievances or pass what should clearly be owner liability onto workers. The digital platform must be subject to '**Fair Management**': There should be an identifiable documented process for decisions affecting workers. Algorithmic management resulting in a negative outcome for a worker must be fully explained. There should be an identifiable policy, which documents how a digital



platform owner disciplines, fires and hires its workers. There should be **‘Fair Representation’**: Digital platforms should have a documented process to ensure the worker voice is expressed. Workers should have the right to take collective action, bargaining, form or join a union. Platform owners should be required to recognise a union, alongside being prepared to cooperate and work with digital platform worker’s unions (Fairwork(a) 6).

O’Keeffe et al. (1) in their ‘Continuing the Precedent study, articulate the corrosive effect of precarious work on young people, a marginalised group hardly supported by state interventions. This study acts to describe the likely effect of neoliberalism on the employment landscape in the post-COVID-19 recovery period. O’Keeffe et al. (2) effectively describe precarity as ‘a contemporary employment regime in which long-standing social inequalities have intensified’. Precarity, insecure, temporary precarious work, results from the implementation of neoliberalism employment policies geared towards the production of flexible labor forces (Fairwork(b) 14). Global North advanced economies which have chosen to adopt neoliberalism labor policies, have experienced employment landscapes characterised by casual, temporary, contract work. Not only are growing numbers of people, women, immigrants and the young disadvantaged by this, government spending on public goods also reduces (O’Keeffe 2). The state in most advanced economies will continue to shrink during the 2020s. This will result in more social division, polarisation, as fewer people will be able to develop a semblance of feeling secure (UNCTAD(a) 37). With the increasingly regular occurrence of extreme summers, there will be more incidents of serious social disorder in urban areas, including the Global South. The proliferation of the gig economy, especially non-digital work will have a number of indirect, non-work-related effects upon society which will be quite profound (Zodi and Torok 3). The 2020s will mirror the development trajectory of advanced economies employment landscapes 50 to 60 years earlier in the 1970s. In the post-war period up to the 1980s, large sections of Global North populations enjoyed secure, stable jobs for life employment. An employment landscape which was protected by strong union representation and worker-oriented legislation. The societal support of employment rights began to change in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. ‘The shift to neoliberal policy in the 1980s has eroded workers’ rights in policies that favour business, which has opened the space for exploitative work such as casual and gig work’ (O’Keeffe et al. 3). What happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century post-war period, the dawn of digitalisation will be replicated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, precarity will become prevalent. Mainly it will be digitally enabled workers only, who can secure work.

Hauben et al' (19) 'The platform economy and precarious work' policy analysis study for the European Parliament, describes the future of work. Hauben et al' study (21) describes the OECD and ILO significant concerns of this contemporary form of employment. Both recognise a need to ensure adequate social protection and labor and collective rights (Deganis et al. 4). The ILO and the OECD harmonise with Fairwork(b)'s (18) position on the importance of training. The OECD recognise that the employment landscape of the future would benefit from a more worker-centred approach: which would include education, housing, taxation, transport and industrial policy. 'Under the Global Future of Work Initiative, the OECD calls for the adoption of a, **'whole of government transition agenda for a Future that Works for all'**, pointing to the need to overhaul existing policies and institutions that are inadequate in improving conditions for non-standard workers, including platform workers and those who need it most' (Hauben et al. 64). A broad spectrum of state and non-governmental organisations, want to address foreseeable problems in the future development of work (Trade Union Congress 4; Johnston et al. 17).

#### **Technological panopticism unchallenged: Normalisation of surveillance of workers**

Issues raised in Stanton's (85) 'Reactions to Employee Performance Monitoring', seminal review study will be reinforced and replicated in the 2020s. There are psychosocial concerns of the effect upon monitoring, workplace surveillance, especially that which is excessive, intrusive and/or nondisclosed, making the surveillance pervasive (Samek Lodovici et al. 53). Psychosocial risk factors in the workplace are described as follows. "Psychosocial risks arise from poor work design, organisation and management, as well as a poor social context of work, and they may result in negative psychological, physical and social outcomes such as work-related stress, burnout or depression" (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 5 November 2021). Stanton (89) identifies several categories of psychosocial risk factors, some of which are utilised in the surveillance, discipline and control of workers. A taxonomy of Stanton's (89) conceptual framework, mirrors the characteristics of 2020s workplaces experiencing high staff sickness absences due to psychological disorders. **Organisational Context:** a reliance on monitoring-led digital appraisal of workers; **Monitoring Characteristics:** an absence of social factors not detectable by digital means, for example, the reason behind a supply chain failure; **Monitoring Cognitions:** Workplace surveillance preventing job satisfaction and worker buy-in that the employer's terms and conditions are fair; **Feedback Reactions:** A failure by the employer to take

on board and resolve workplace issues raised workers; **Long-term Outcomes:** Low commitment, morale, satisfaction or staff retention. High staff turnover and lower productivity.

Ball's (22) 'Electronic Monitoring and Surveillance in the Workplace' study, explains the new techniques employers use to keep their workforce under surveillance. A practice which will continue apace during the 2020s. Ball's (22) study describes four main social locations where employers will monitor their workers, internal sites which are quite intrusive. Employee surveillance will target thoughts, feelings and behaviour; physical location; task; and reputation. Increasingly, thoughts, feelings and behaviour control will be implemented by electronic performance monitoring. There will be an increase in the use of undisclosed employer spyware, which monitor emails sent and received by workers on workplace computers, tablets and mobiles. Social media monitoring and social network analysis will also increase; enabling employing organisations to track any political, social or union forming relationships in and outside of work (ILO(b) 5). Undisclosed biorhythm software can reap biometric information regarding a worker's heartrate and body heat emission. Datafication will increase, where artifacts of a person's work and social life are stored, to be utilised for employee assessment and behaviour modification later. The latter employer use of data collected as part of worker surveillance, raises a number of ethical concerns (Ball 22). 2020s employment legislation in many countries will continue not to challenge undisclosed data collection of this information for these purposes (Zodi and Torok 11).

There will be a proliferation of the gig economy and digital platform workers in the 2020s. Berastegui (5), explains the gig economy is a facet of the employment landscape, where companies can hire workers for a short period. Often effectively a buyer, an organisation with a short task they would like to be done; is able to contact or be contacted by a seller, a worker with time to perform task at a paid rate. This usually requires an online hub or platform owner to coordinate the buyer, seller and the customer (Feyen et al. 7). There can be problems in terms of data protection, ethics and management fees. A lot of gig work are tasks which can be completed, verified and sold online, for example coding, writing software or creative piecework. The buyer and seller may prefer the task to be done at a specific location, for example a customer contact worker, who works from home. Alternatively, the buyer wants the work carried out in a specific area, for example an Uber taxi driver; or a Deliveroo pizza delivery service (UNCTAD(a) 43). There are specific hazards associated with both the main models of the gig economy; workplace dangers which are often not addressed, as there is little in the way of union representation in the gig economy. There

are also psychosocial risks regarding the manner in which the gig economy affects workers. These risks virtually unique to gig workers, are related to how their work is designed, organised and managed, by non-human algorithmic computer software (Berastegui 5).

Digital platforms and their workers will often appear in one of three primary categories, online freelancing, microwork or on-demand physical services (Berastegui 7). Delivery services of goods or people, taxi driving belong in the latter category, manufacturers need builders, engineers or plumbers onsite for short periods. Digital supply chain piecework is typically the type of work that will feature in the gig economy, manifest with increasing numbers of people waiting to be given work by an online platform (See ILO(c) 42). The COVID-19 pandemic will be seared on people's minds in the late 2020s, short-term cleaners, care and food production operatives will find themselves in increased demand (see Boons et al. 13). High-value specialist workers will form the majority of the online freelancing group, they would perform accounting, actuary, creative, legal administration, translation tasks online. Online microwork will expand exponentially in the 2020s, this group will be occupied by many low to mid skilled digital workers. These micro or crowd workers will in the main perform mundane, thankless data gathering, cleansing, entry and labelling tasks (UNCTAD(b) 91). Microworkers will also be able to reclassify keywords, take selfies and describe scenic routes during travel excursions. It is unlikely that technological advances in artificial intelligence (AI) would be sufficiently nuanced to perform these tasks by the end of the 2020s. This digital deficit will be filled by online microworkers who can implement supervised machine learning tasks, performing repetitive work, for example recoding scanned receipts. This supervised demonstration is fed into learning algorithms until the AI machine is able to autonomise digital labor platform work. More people will become technologically redundant (Berastegui 8; Langley et al. 856; Trenerry et al. 7).

The issue of technological panopticism cannot be underplayed. Prospect (UK) (5 November 2021), a United Kingdom professional service union with over 150,000 members, found some worrying findings after survey polling in 2021. 13% of home workers are being monitored by cameras at home, compared to 5% six months earlier in April 2021. 52% of workers feel that webcam monitoring at work should be banned; another 28% of the same sample felt that such webcam monitoring should be heavily regulated (See also Kalischko and Riedl 2). There appears to be some form of work segmentation, manifest as an employer perceived hierarchy of which type of workers require workplace surveillance. Young people typically aged 18 to 34, are at significantly

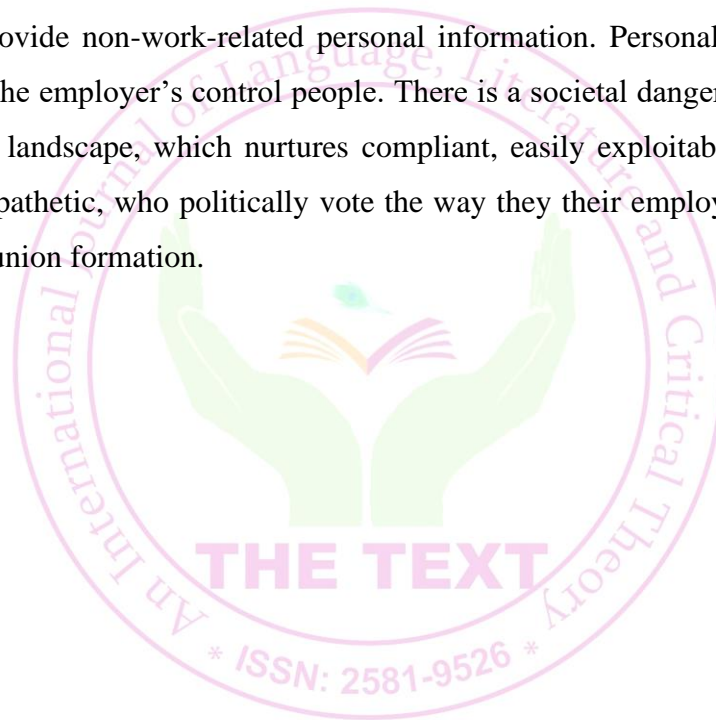


higher risk of being monitored at work than their older colleagues. Intrusive monitoring particularly affects workers in sectors with higher levels of remote working; employment areas which have larger proportions of younger workers and lower levels of trade union membership; for example, the digital platform worker gig economy sector, the tech sector or service sectors requiring onsite delivery (Prospect). As the future of work develops clearly there must be transparency in how technological panopticism, societally beneficial workplace surveillance is allowed to work. The findings revealed that union members were twice as likely to have been consulted about the introduction of workplace monitoring, compared to non-union workers. The issues raised by Prospect's (UK) 2021 study, provides a worrying blueprint of what the future of work employment landscape will look like. Especially in specific countries where legislation allows implementation of technological panopticism on a unilateral basis, without any requirements to consult with workers or disclose (Hunter, 24 September 2021). A degree of private sector and state surveillance of workers in their home outside of work, will be prevalent in the 2020s workplace. For the fear of 'Big Brother' not to be realised, appropriate fit for purpose workforce monitoring safeguarding policy formulation becomes a global societal priority.

### **Conclusion**

The future of work is inextricably linked to the issue of digital sovereignty, who controls the data, what purposes is this information used for. Appropriate governance and scrutiny safeguards must be implemented, or we may find ourselves to far along a downward spiral to prevent unfettered surveillance capitalism. There is a distinct possibility that global tech giants and their smaller subsidiaries will achieve digital supremacy in the 2020s (UNCTAD(b) 87). Such huge global corporations would own vast amounts of demographic, personal data of large proportion of the populations of several countries. Big tech companies would have a virtual monopoly on this personal data, which will provide the critical information systems for public and private service provision (UNCTAD(b) 87). In the 2020s there will be examples of governments who could only deliver their education and/or healthcare provision, in partnership with a tech giant. Due to data monopoly, delivery of a range of essential goods for example, electricity, gas and water, will only be feasible to large corporations. Effectively this will be enforced privatisation on a fait accompli basis by the back door, in a growing number of countries globally. Developing countries will be particularly hard hit by digital sovereignty deficit, the data filtering aspects of demographic profile information cannot be underestimated. Discriminatory and/or racial biases can be accidentally (or

covertly) factored into data algorithms (see Heeks et al. 278), resulting in unnecessarily negative outcomes for some minority groups (UNCTAD(b) 88). Marginalised people will find they have difficulties securing employment, healthcare, insurance or access to credit. Many unemployed and low-income people will feel disenfranchised, powerless in the face of big tech corporations, who own the data which controls their lives. Often marginalised people are unable to communicate as a collective to participate in union formation, the ability to communicate is key in power relationships (Castells 143). The inequality cannot be clearer, in order to secure work in the 2020s, workers will increasingly have to surrender their personal information to employers. Algorithmic management or some other form of technological panopticism, will keep workers under surveillance and provide non-work-related personal information. Personal data which is used to keep people under the employer's control people. There is a societal danger of sleepwalking into a 2020s employment landscape, which nurtures compliant, easily exploitable, zombie workforces. Workers who are apathetic, who politically vote the way they their employer wants them to vote, too docile to enact union formation.



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