



Institution
of Occupational
Safety and Health

A platform for success: building a better future in the gig economy

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Foreword

Imagine you're about to finish for the day, or you've just sat down for dinner with your family, and you get a notification to say you need to deliver someone else's meal immediately. Or you're about to attend your child's school play or sporting event but you have to quickly change plans and pick someone up in your vehicle. Or a job has come through on one of the apps offering desk-based services such as accounting or administration that requires immediate action.

For many platform workers in the gig economy, this will be a familiar story. They face unpredictable working hours and an expectation to provide short, on-demand jobs, usually arranged through a digital platform or app. And, with the amount of gig work still growing, and expected to continue to grow in the years to come, it will likely become reality for many more.

Of course, many of those who currently work in the gig economy benefit from the flexibility it offers and opportunities for a good work-life balance. However, there are many drawbacks which overshadow these perks, ones which pose risks to people's safety, health and wellbeing and are inconsistent with decent work standards and principles.

The absence of social protections or provisions in this type of work, for example the right to paid sickness absence, can lead to issues such as people working while too ill to do so or experiencing 'burnout' from not having any time off. This was demonstrated in an IOSH-commissioned Opinion survey of 1,000 platform workers and highlighted in the IOSH-Arup 2024 report *Towards a safe and healthy future of work*.

This cannot be allowed to happen. With a safe and healthy working environment recognised within the International Labour Organization (ILO) Declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work, it's time for those people working in the gig economy to receive the same protections as those employed on more 'traditional' contracts and step away from the precarity, unpredictability and insecurity that is associated with gig and platform work.

This white paper builds on the report and survey findings and makes a series of calls to action for the UK Government, while also highlighting action and progress made in other countries.

Put simply, as the world of work continues to change, no one should be left behind.



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The rise of the gig economy: a friend or foe?

The gig and platform economy is growing at a fast pace. In early 2024, it was estimated that the UK gig economy workforce was made up of 1.7 million people. Twenty per cent of UK gig workers class this work as their main source of income¹. It is expected to continue growing, with some sources suggesting it could expand by more than 300 per cent by 2027².

This situation is mirrored around the globe. In late 2023, it was estimated that there were around 435 million gig workers worldwide, with demand for gig work having grown by 41 per cent since 2016³.

Gig or platform work refers to all paid labour that is provided through, on, or mediated by digital platforms. It involves a wide range of work ranging from taxi driving and parcel deliveries to data labelling and online content review. Its emergence represents one of the most important new transformations in the world of work. Many people say they enjoy the flexibility and independence it offers. However, questions have been raised about the impact it has on their safety, health and wellbeing and the relationship between platform operators and gig and platform workers.

In 2017, an IOSH-commissioned survey found discrepancies between permanent employees and non-permanent workers in safety, health and wellbeing measures. The survey found non-permanent workers came out second best when it came to access to occupational health services, employee assistance schemes, and receiving fire safety inductions. A third of non-permanent employees reported that they had not been given an initial health and safety induction.

In the same year, then Royal Society of Arts chief executive Matthew Taylor conducted an independent review of modern working practices in the UK. His report, *Good work: the Taylor review of modern working practices*⁴, acknowledged that the employment status and rights of gig economy workers were an area requiring attention. It also highlighted several areas for improvement with the

ultimate goal of achieving fair and decent gig and platform work. Meanwhile, there was a key ruling from an employment tribunal within the UK which acknowledged that Uber drivers were not independent contractors and that they were entitled to certain employment rights (being classed as a worker rather than self-employed)⁵.

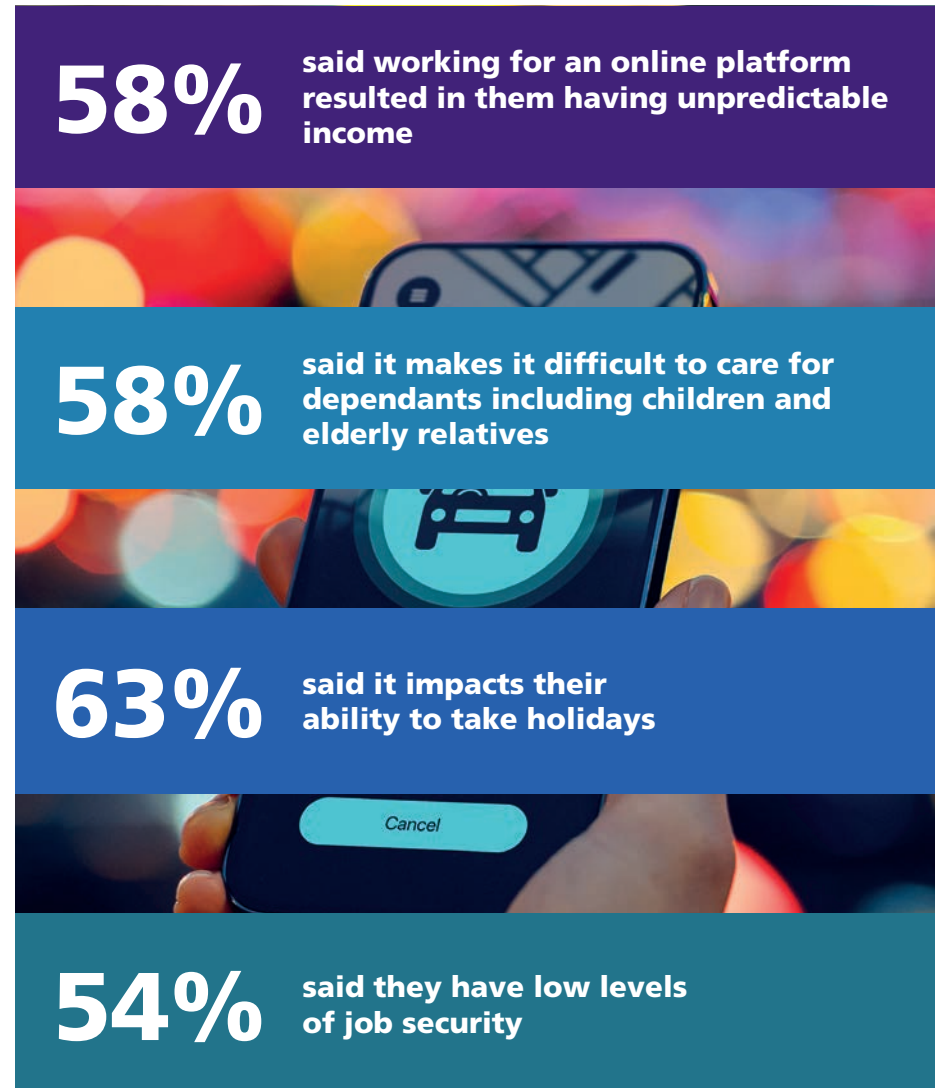
So, what has changed?

Five years later, in 2022, the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) at Work Regulations were updated to include employer and employee responsibilities for the provision of PPE to 'limb (b) workers', to cover those who generally have a more casual employment relationship and work under a contract for service⁶.

Although all of this is a positive step in the right direction, the IOSH-Arup 2024 report *Towards a safe and healthy future of work*⁷ highlighted that this type of work still comes without the social protection and provisions that traditional employment offers. It also identifies that, from an occupational safety and health (OSH) perspective, it often uses monitoring, surveillance and algorithmic management which exposes platform workers to OSH risks, in addition to other physical and psychosocial risks, and poor working conditions.

The recently announced Employment Rights Bill 2024 appears to pave the way for levelling the playing field for enhanced protections for gig and platform workers, indicating the right to request more predictable working hours/patterns but access to essential social protections and OSH protections will not happen straight away.

To continue and support its call for worker protection and rights for those within the gig and platform work, in 2024, IOSH commissioned a survey of 1,000 platform workers on their experiences. **Among the key findings were:**





Defining gig and platform work

So, it seems there is still a huge issue for gig and platform workers. Before exploring these issues further, it's important to define what gig and platform work is.

Essentially it involves providing services requested by customers and users online. It is also referred to as the 'gig economy', 'crowd work', or 'on-demand economy'. The activity includes a digital interface, or an online service provider, positioned between the providers of the services or goods and their clients.

The most common types of platform work can be divided into two areas:

On-location/location-based platform work

These are tasks which are mostly performed in the physical world and can be done either on-site in public areas, on the road or at a client's premises. Tasks include:

- transport (transporting people, food delivery or other goods and services).
- household tasks (cleaning) and care (healthcare, elder care, childcare and so on).

Online platform work

This refers to tasks that are matched with workers online and are performed only or mostly virtually on an electronic device⁸. These tasks can include:

- professional and creative tasks (for example, IT programming, accounting, administration tasks, helpdesk, software development or graphic design).
- microtasks (for example, tagging images on web pages, online content moderation).

Reasons to be concerned

The rise of the gig and platform economy has the potential to provide work to a large number of people. It offers increased flexibility for those who need it, including to those workers the 'traditional' labour market is less favourable to, such as women, people with disabilities and migrant workers.

Businesses are also benefiting, as they can use these platforms to access both a global and local workforce, to improve efficiency and enhance productivity and enjoy wider market reach.

However, it's not all positive news. Gig and platform work also involves non-standard working arrangements which have the potential to create significant OSH challenges⁹.

Platform workers are reported to experience poor OSH management compared with other workers. There are many reasons for this, including poor risk assessments, a lack of access to OSH information, training, services and support, and lack of provision and access to PPE^{10 11 12}. It is also associated with long working hours¹³, a shortage of places to take breaks and lack of bathroom or similar facilities. And it is linked to increases in risky behaviour, for example drivers ignoring traffic rules due to pressure to meet targets¹⁴.

Online platform work can lead to physical issues such as eye strain and musculoskeletal problems. There can also be issues with time pressure and isolation. Platform workers providing online services such as video and social media content editing may be exposed to hate speech, violence and pornographic content, all of which may pose psychological harm¹⁵.

These OSH risks and challenges can be aggravated by the conditions people face in their work. These include unpredictable working hours, the use of algorithmic management and digital surveillance, professional isolation, a poor work-life balance and a lack of social support^{16 17}.

The precariousness of these jobs can also be enhanced by algorithmic decision-making in performance management, worker surveillance and monitoring, and technology determining the pace of work as well as the monitoring of that worker's every move. This all combines to make work of a more casual, insecure, intrusive and irregular nature.

Furthermore, the use of algorithms and technology such as wearable devices can create intensive micro-management due to the growing surveillance of workers that goes with it¹⁸. This can add to stress, anxiety and other psychosocial issues.

Time for action: our calls to support decent work in the gig and platform economy

In our 2024 UK General Election manifesto, IOSH called on the new Government to “follow through on the UK’s commitment to provide a safe and healthy working environment as a basic right for everyone, including endorsing and fully implementing related international OSH conventions”. It added “this must cover *all* workers, irrespective of their status, including non-permanent ‘gig’ workers and those in supply chains”.

Many of these principles could be applied more widely, beyond UK national regulatory boundaries, albeit with the caveats of the national regulatory context, labour market conditions and robustness of labour and OSH systems. Translating this commitment into reality will require Governments to:

- **Gather up-to-date information** on the number of people in the UK platform and gig economy and their working arrangements to **ensure policy decisions are evidence-led**. Data should include any underlying trends based on occupation, gender, age, ethnicity and migrant status indicators.
- **Introduce legislation which entitles gig and platform workers to the same rights as all other employees**. This should include compensation for work-related accidents, ill health and occupational diseases, the right to good working conditions, the right to basic pay and the right to union representation.
- Ensure the proposed Advisory Board for the Labour Market Enforcement Agency **considers gig and platform workers in its three-year strategy on the labour enforcement**.
- **Proactively enforce** employment and occupational safety and health protections for gig and platform workers through an adequate system of inspection. This should include **ensuring that health and safety training is provided to all workers**.
- As part of the Employment Rights Bill, **seek other options to zero-hour contracts which offers the same level of care for their health, safety and wellbeing as that of permanent employees**. This could include offering minimum hour contracts or upfront agreements between workers which provides stability within working hours.
- **Provide legal assurance regarding labour protections**, including insurance against work-related injuries and occupational diseases, covering medical expenses, income loss, and lump sum compensation in the case of disability or death.
- Implement regulations that **facilitate gig and platform workers to raise a complaint about poor treatment and conditions**.
- Gather evidence and explore regulatory approaches to **limit the amount of time workers spend on-call/‘always-on’** to protect gig and platform workers against long working hours, ‘always on’ cultures, overworking and ‘burnout’.
- **Introduce obligations for platforms to legally conduct and share the findings of an impact assessment** before implementing digital monitoring and algorithmic management systems. This must also require businesses to be transparent in what they are monitoring and how the data will be collected and used.

Meanwhile, there are a number of actions that digital labour platforms can take to ensure workers are protected. We call on them to:

- **Ensure they have policies to protect workers from risks** arising from their work and take proactive measures to protect and promote platform workers' health and safety.
- Ensure platform workers' **OSH concerns are heard, actioned and followed.**
- Ensure the use of digital surveillance and automated **decision-making systems does not put undue pressure on platform workers.**
- **Provide restrictions on work-related data collection** from platform workers and implement real-time risk assessments on the impact of algorithms on the safety and health of workers.



A global perspective

Platforms in the gig economy are set apart from more regular employment by some characteristic features. These include a lack of transparency in reporting and disclosure of corporate information, a strong degree of flexibility, the prevalence of young and migrant workers employed in the industry, the high levels of workforce rotation and/or how temporary these jobs are, the use of ratings based on algorithms, and poor social and health coverage.

All these issues make the case for the adoption of new protections and rules to improve the working conditions of people operating in the platform economy. There are several regulatory developments around the world which stressed the need for improved protections, provisions and decent conditions for platform workers in the context of a safe and healthy working environment.





Timeline of regulatory developments affecting the platform economy

October 2016

United Kingdom

A UK employment tribunal rules that Uber cannot classify their drivers as self-employed, and must extend them the same rights as full-time employees.

April 2019

European

The European Union implements a Directive on transparent and predictable working conditions and enhanced minimum standards for all platform workers, including more predictable hours, the right to training and compensation for cancellation of planned work.

December 2021

European

The European Commission proposes a Directive on Platform work to improve the working conditions of platform workers, giving them access to paid holidays, minimum wage, health and safety protection, health benefits, workers' compensation.

2016–2019

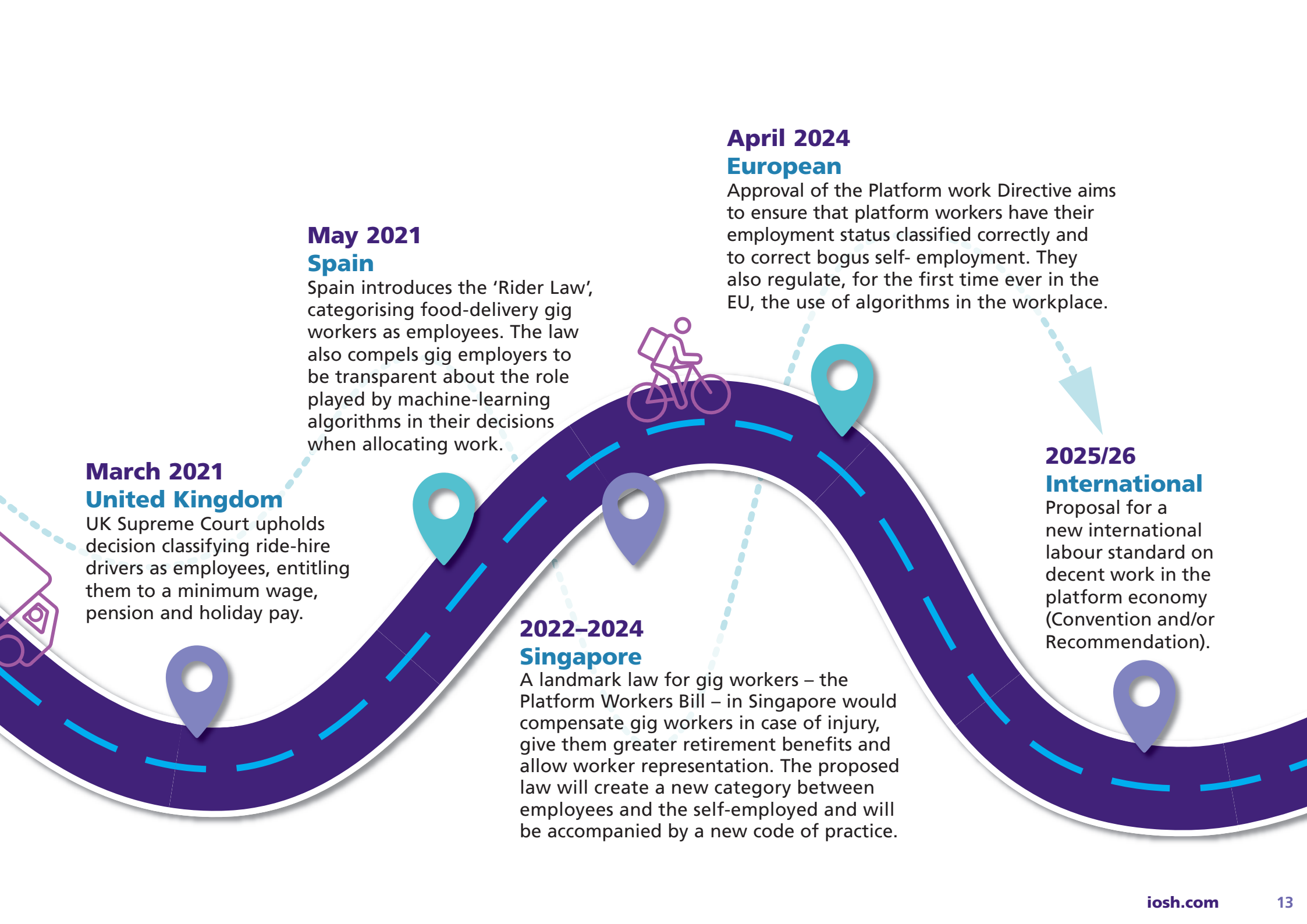
France

Law that provides extended occupational accident and disease insurance coverage, access to training and the right to organise for some self-employed platform workers.

November 2020

California (US)

In the USA, Proposition 22 was passed in California which guaranteed healthcare stipends, injury protection insurance, and safety training for drivers and couriers.



March 2021
United Kingdom

UK Supreme Court upholds decision classifying ride-hire drivers as employees, entitling them to a minimum wage, pension and holiday pay.

May 2021
Spain

Spain introduces the 'Rider Law', categorising food-delivery gig workers as employees. The law also compels gig employers to be transparent about the role played by machine-learning algorithms in their decisions when allocating work.

2022-2024
Singapore

A landmark law for gig workers – the Platform Workers Bill – in Singapore would compensate gig workers in case of injury, give them greater retirement benefits and allow worker representation. The proposed law will create a new category between employees and the self-employed and will be accompanied by a new code of practice.

April 2024
European

Approval of the Platform work Directive aims to ensure that platform workers have their employment status classified correctly and to correct bogus self-employment. They also regulate, for the first time ever in the EU, the use of algorithms in the workplace.

2025/26
International

Proposal for a new international labour standard on decent work in the platform economy (Convention and/or Recommendation).

On the global stage: ILO proposal for an international standard¹⁹

As part of its report, due to be presented to the International Labour Conference in 2025, the ILO is bringing the conversation of gig and platform workers to all ILO Member States. The ILO has indicated that a dedicated standard can inform and guide national initiatives. In view of the above, this could take the form of a convention, a recommendation, a convention supplemented by a recommendation, or a convention comprising provisions that would be mandatory and provisions that would provide guidance.

An international labour standard of this nature could address the nature of platform work while making the right to a safe and healthy working environment a reality for platform and gig workers. In practice, this would mean the implementation of a one-size-fits-all global standard across a diverse spectrum of platforms. This development is certainly one to watch.

European Platform Work Directive

Approved in April 2024, and ratified by the Council of Europe in October 2024, this is the first-ever piece of EU legislation to regulate algorithmic management in the workplace and to set minimum standards to improve working conditions for millions of platform workers across the EU. The regulation will also help correctly determine the employment status of people working for platforms, enabling them to benefit from any labour rights they are entitled to. The directive also promotes transparency, fairness, human oversight, safety and accountability in algorithmic management in platform work as well as transparency more generally.

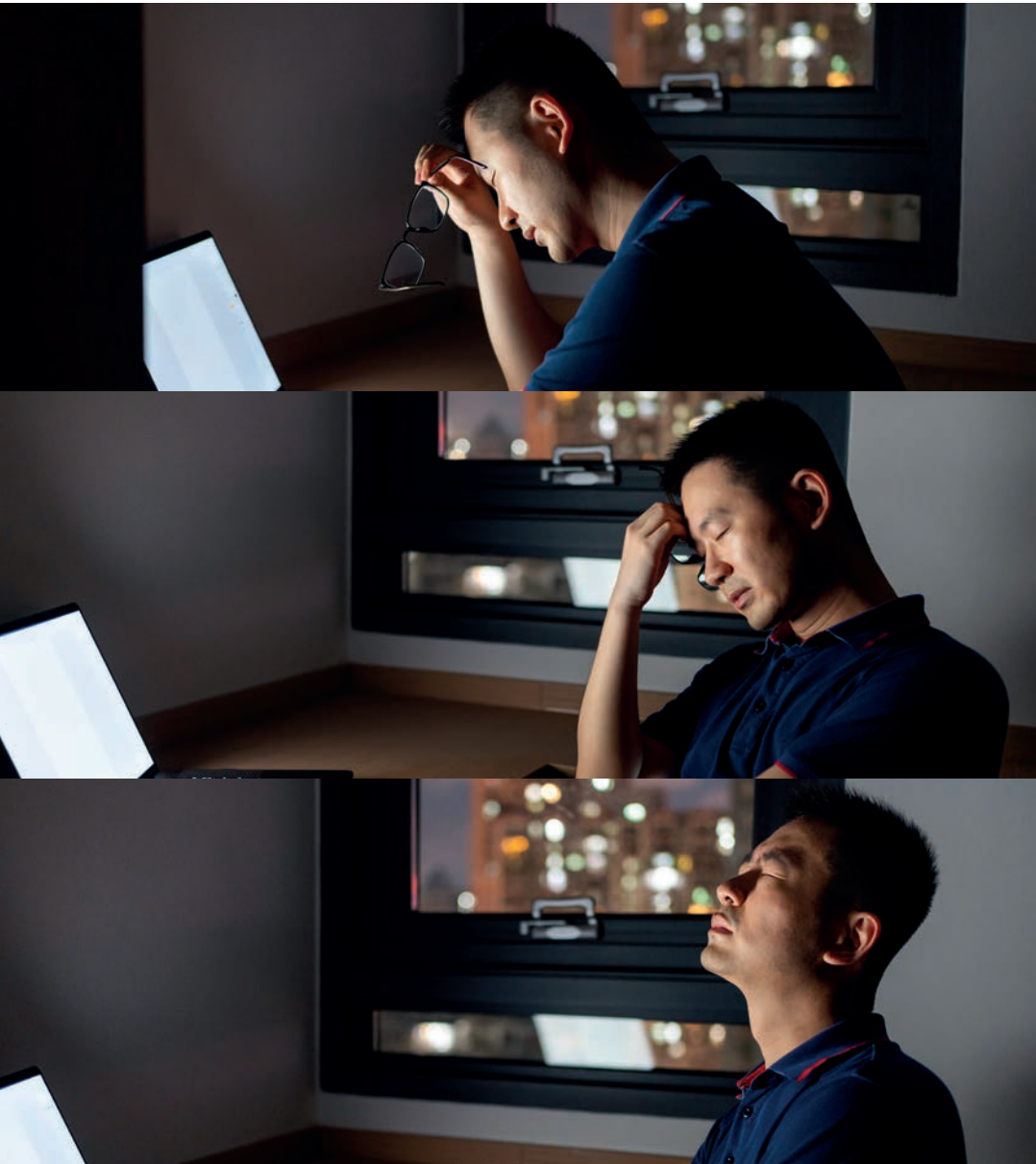
EU Member States will then have two years to incorporate the provisions of the directive into their national legislation.

National case study: Singapore

Singapore's Platform Workers Act, due to take effect in January 2025, will strengthen protections for platform workers. This development creates a new category of workers in addition to employees and the self-employed. Platform operators will have to address OSH risks through a risk management-based approach while providing coverage when workers are performing their job. It will be implemented in conjunction with the Workplace Safety and Health Council (WSH) Code of Practice for Platform Services that looks to address specific risks like fatigue, heat stress, vehicle safety and the carrying of excessive loads, while also covering standard workplace safety and health requirements, such as risk assessment and risk management.

This comes after Singapore's Ministry of Manpower accepted the recommendations from a tripartite workgroup to enhance platform workers' protections as part of an extensive series of consultative exercises (surveys, multi-stakeholder dialogues, focus groups, discussions and a feedback-gathering exercise through a public consultation) that reached out to more than 20,000 platform workers, over 30 platforms and associations, as well as close to 2,700 platform users and other key stakeholders such as insurers.





A tale of struggle

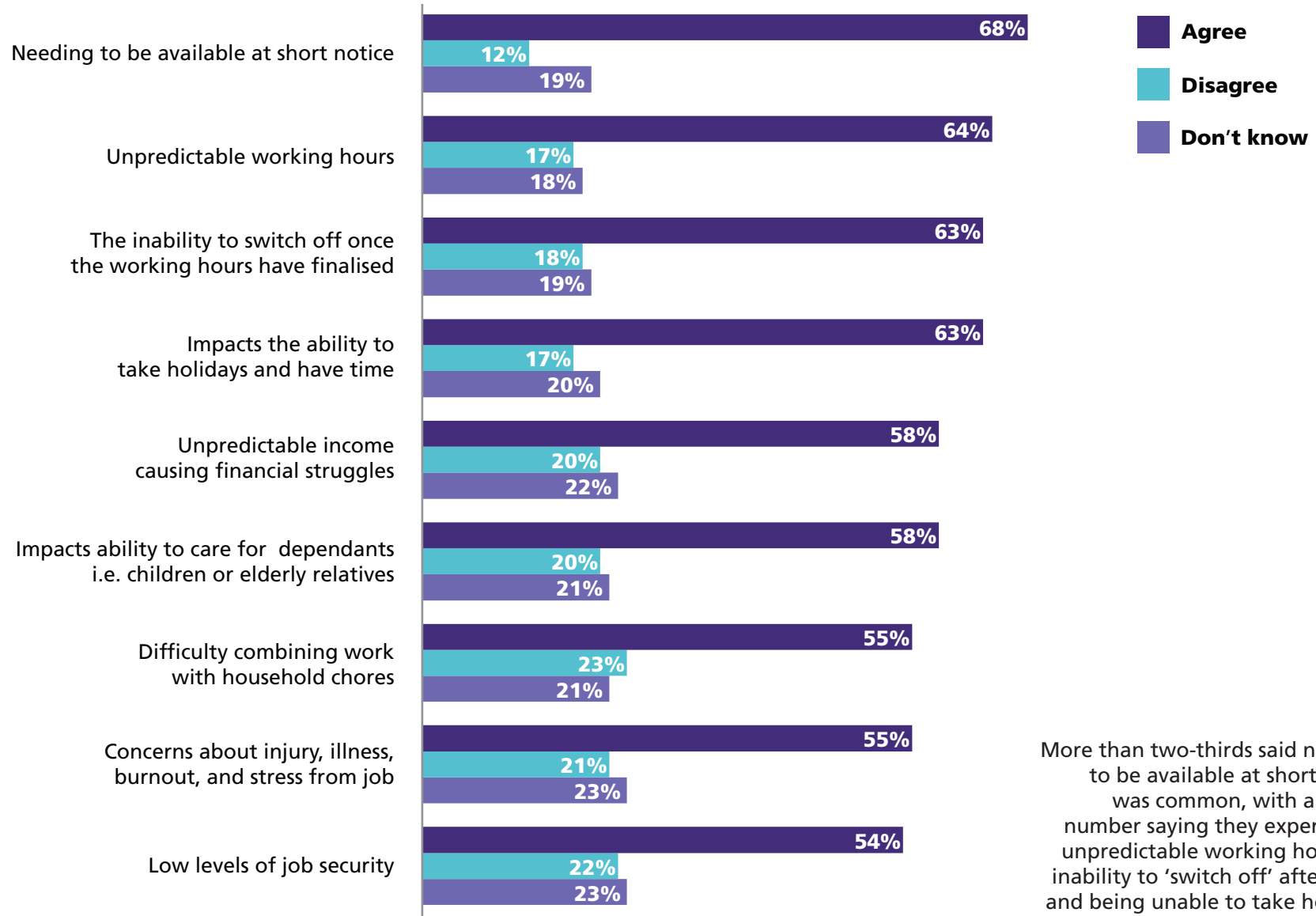
In March 2024, IOSH commissioned Opinium to better understand the OSH challenges and opportunities of platform workers undertaking on-location and online platform work within the UK. Opinium surveyed a sample of 500 on-location platform workers (delivery, ride-hailing and so on) and a sample of 500 online platform workers (helpdesk, call centre, IT, content moderators). The following charts display the full results from this survey.

Among our sample, the most common form of platform work undertaken is 'customer support', where just over a quarter (26%) work. This is followed by data entry (19%), online content review (17%), remote programming (14%), graphic design (14%) and transportation and delivery services work (13%).

There is a broad range with respect to the number of clients that are worked with. Less than a third (32%) of platform workers work for less than 10 clients, a quarter (25%) work for 11–20 clients and over a third (36%) work for 21 or more.

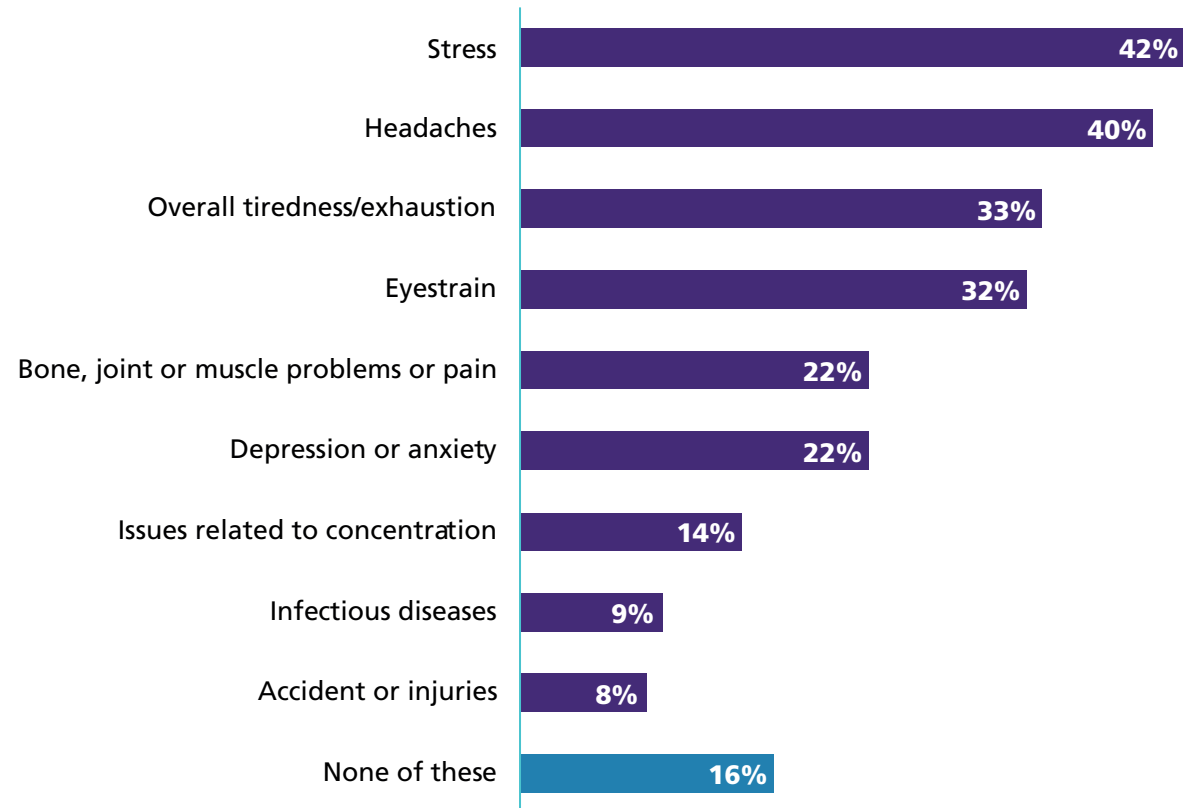
Four in ten (38%) spend 11–20 hours working for an online platform a week, whilst three-in-ten spend either 10 or fewer hours (31%) or 21 or more hours (30%) a week doing this form of work.

To what extent to you agree platform work results in the following:



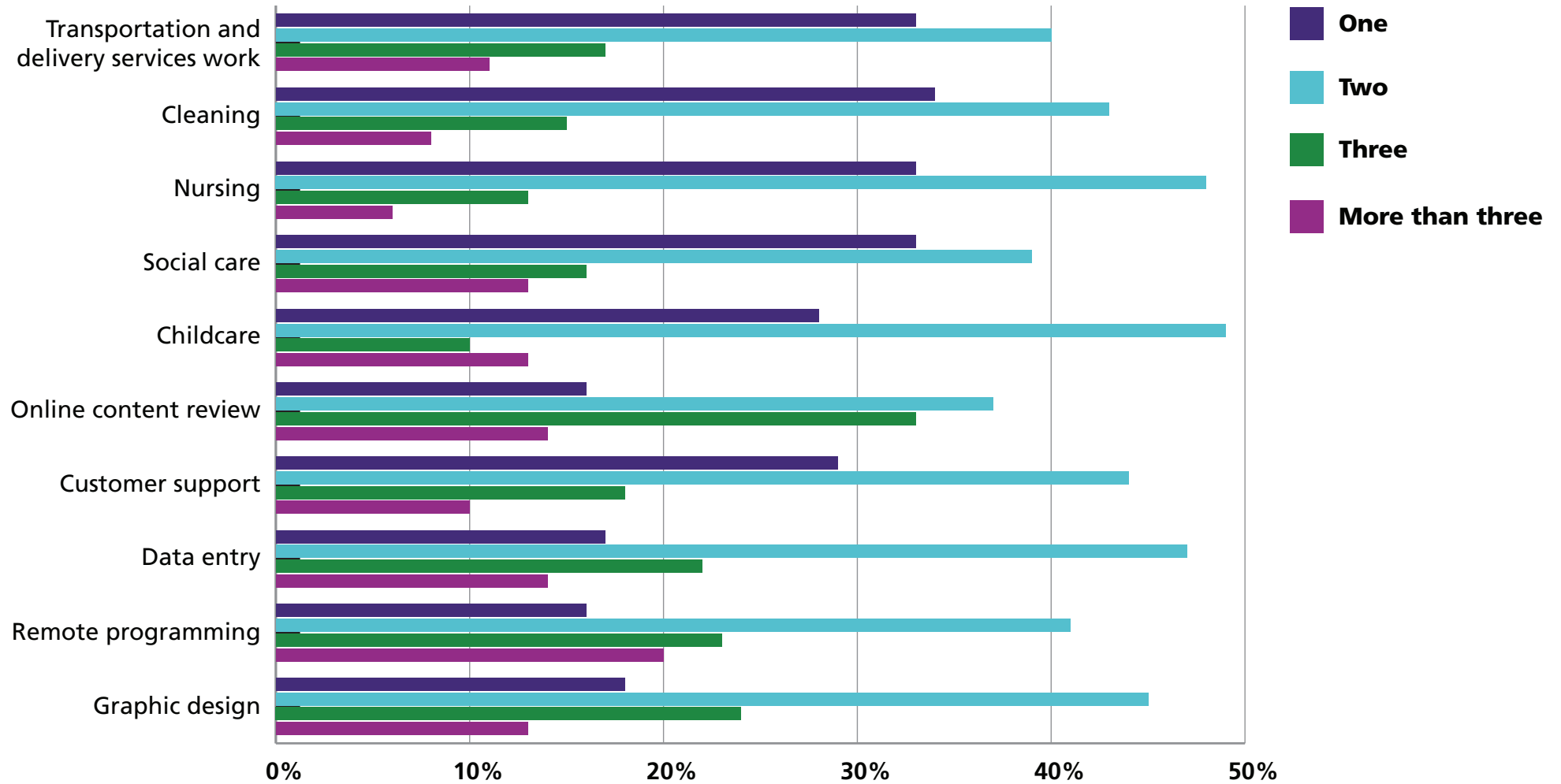
More than two-thirds said needing to be available at short notice was common, with a similar number saying they experienced unpredictable working hours, an inability to 'switch off' after work, and being unable to take holidays.

Have you experienced any of the following health problems that you believe were caused or made worse by platform work?



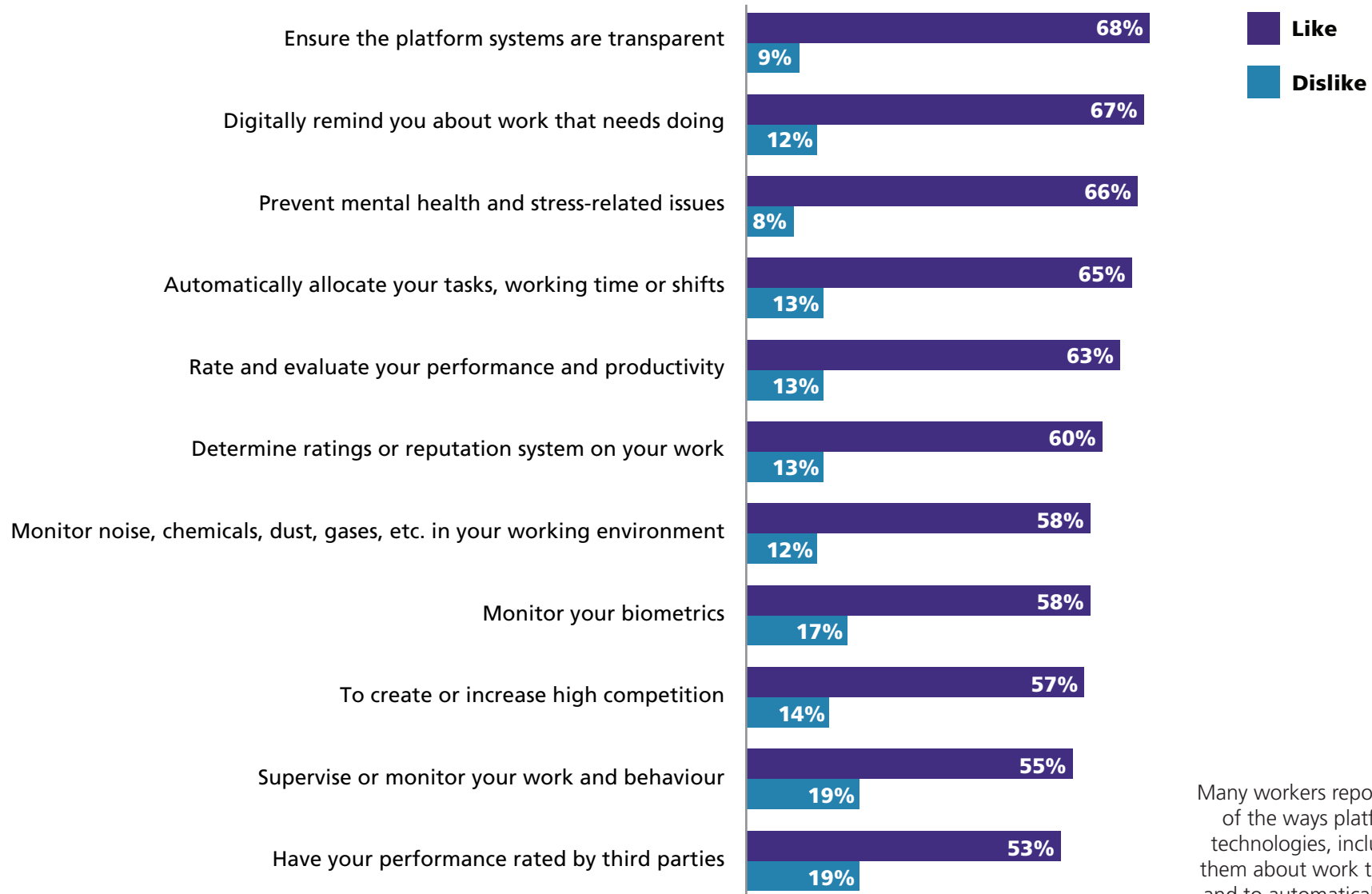
Stress, headaches and tiredness/exhaustion are among the most common symptoms experienced by platform workers.

How many platforms do you work for the majority of the time?



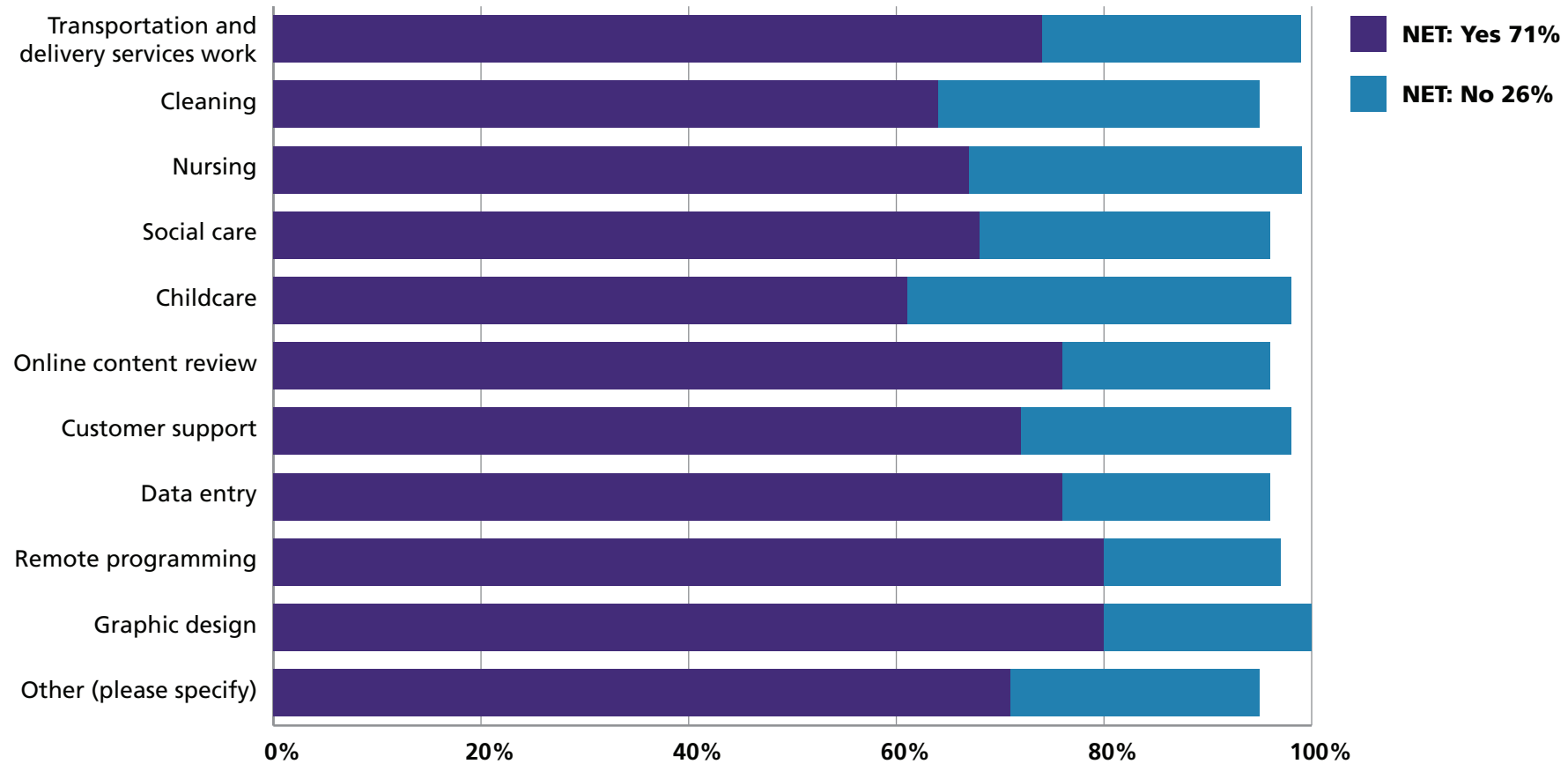
Three in five people work for more than one platform, with around a quarter working for three or more.

How do you feel about your platform's use of digital technologies to:



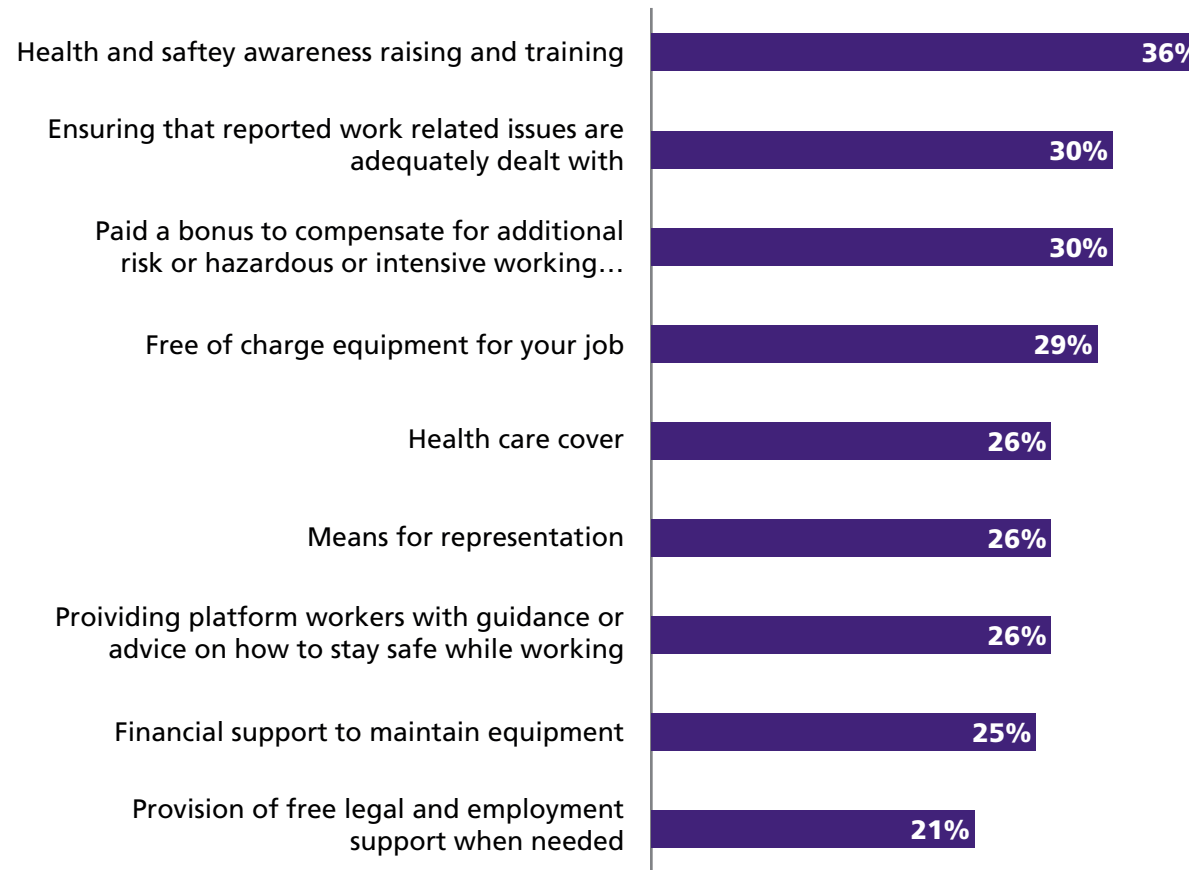
Many workers reported liking some of the ways platforms use digital technologies, including reminding them about work that needs doing and to automatically allocate work.

Would you say that the use of digital technologies in your workplace(s) increases surveillance of you at work?



There is a clear concern about the way digital technologies increase surveillance at work. This can pose a risk to platform workers on their right to good working conditions. It also represents a potential risk that platforms could make use of digital technologies for unintended or unauthorised purposes linked to surveillance and monitoring.

Which of the following types of support would most improve your working conditions?



When asked what types of support would most improve their working conditions, over a third said further awareness raising and education on health and safety matters would be most beneficial.

Disclaimer

Survey limitations. The final sample of 1,000 UK platform workers might not be representative of the general working population of gig or platform workers within the UK and might not be indicative of an underlying trend based on sex, age and migrant status indicators. We also acknowledge that further research is needed to explore other factors, such as impacts on women and ethnic minorities.

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The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) is a global Chartered body. The largest membership organisation for health and safety professionals worldwide. We connect our members with resources, guidance, events, and training, and we're the voice of our profession, campaigning on issues that affect millions of working people.

As a qualifications Awarding Organisation, a developer of training, and an advocate for positive transformation, we seek to build excellence in our profession, drive action from everyone who can influence occupational safety and health standards and ensure that protecting people is at the heart of sustainability.

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