

# Approaches to the development of platform employment in the BRICS countries

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Academic editor: M. Sheresheva | Received 22 September 2023 | Accepted 4 November 2023 | Published 22 November 2023

**Citation:** Zolotina, O., Kosareva, A., & Chernykh, E. (2023). Approaches to the development of platform employment in the BRICS countries. *BRICS Journal of Economics*, 4(3), 347–368. <https://doi.org/10.3897/brics-econ.4.e113139>

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## Abstract

The main goal of the paper is to examine the process of development and institutionalization of platform employment. Using statistical data from national sources and international research organizations, the authors study the evolution of platform employment in China, India, Brazil and South Africa in comparison with the development of this type of employment in Russia and then create socio-demographic portraits of the each country's platform workers, classify and systematize the national platform models and define specific characteristics of their formation and functioning. This is followed by the authors' comments and recommendations concerning further development of platform employment in Russia which largely depends on the evolution of government regulation of this sphere.

## Keywords

Platform employment, digital labor, BRICS, digital labor platforms, self-employment.

**JEL:** J21, J4, F66.

## Platform work as a new form of employment

One of the trends of recent decades is the active transition of all spheres of human life to digital space. Digitalization has affected both the labor market and migration relations. Owing to the coronavirus pandemic, the majority of the population in Russia and other countries has gained experience in remote work and now, in the absence of restrictions, many people prefer to work remotely. Digital labor platforms are penetrating various sectors of the economy. This trend allows employees in most occupations to work for companies around the world without leaving home.

Platform employment is a flexible format for inclusion in the labor market; it involves the use of an online platform as an intermediary between service providers and consumers. According to OECD, *digital platform work* is “any productive activity performed by persons to produce goods or provide services carried out through or on a digital platform”. The Handbook also includes the definition of a digital platform: “the digital platform or a phone app controls and/or organizes essential aspects of the activities, such as the access to clients, the evaluation of the activities carried out, the tools needed for conducting the work, the facilitation of payments, distribution and prioritization of the work to be conducted” (OECD et al, 2023). The International Labor Organization (ILO) divides platforms into two types depending on the location of the worker:

*Crowd-working platforms* are platforms for mass work, on which many performers can carry out small tasks for large organizations, including those that do not require high qualifications, i.e. they help outsource work to people regardless of the geographic location of performers and customer.

*Location-based platforms*, used, among others, by delivery, taxi and face-to-face services, are platforms that distribute work to individuals in a particular geographic area.

This division is justified not only by the territorial specifics of the location of customers and performers, but also by the type of the work and by the socio-demographic portrait of such platforms’ typical employee. Crowd workers primarily perform clerical tasks and compete on a regional or global scale. Workers on platforms with a specific territory compete in the local environment, which may reduce the quality of services provided.

*Digital labor* is any form of work carried out through the use of digital technologies and means of communication, for example, the Internet, smartphone, social networks, etc. It is not only people of IT professions, such as web designer, application developer or copywriter, who are involved in digital labour. Medical professionals, lawyers, teachers and representatives of other traditional professions have to use digital technologies in their work. Today, the digital labor is a broad concept that covers various types of work and is not limited to platform employment<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Digital labor means “the automation of labor by leveraging digital technologies to augment or automate the tasks undertaken by knowledge workers in business”. (KPMG, 2017).

The platform economy allows for a range of socio-economic benefits to be realized both for workers and employers, as well as for consumers and the economy as a whole (McKinsey Global Institute, 2016):

- 1) increased labor force participation and numbers of hours worked, and, as a result, higher labor productivity and better work allocation among more people;
- 2) expanded opportunities for innovation, creation of customized goods and services, new types of products, innovative business models, flexible organizational structures;
- 3) improved use value of goods and services through deeper specialization of labor, consumers benefiting from greater availability of goods and services, balanced supply and demand, greater choice and reasonable prices;
- 4) expanded opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses to enter domestic and international markets, increased aggregate demand and supply;
- 5) reduced transaction costs: information, communication, logistics; increased production flexibility; expanded access of business organizations to more extensive labor resources at lower costs;
- 6) increased employment flexibility, expanded opportunities for people with disabilities, workers with family responsibilities (mothers with children), and residents of rural or economically disadvantaged areas.

The potential of the platforms for providing new employment opportunities is indeed significant. Yet, the development of these forms of employment may entail certain socio-economic problems.

One of the major problem areas is the expansion of precarious employment, i.e. forced employment, accompanied by the absence of standard labor relations based on an open-ended employment contract with a full working week; it includes elements of informal employment in the formal economy, elements of unprotected employment in informal production, unprotected employment in hidden production or illegal activities, and temporary unemployment (Bobkov et al, 2018).

To gain access to the work offered on the platform, workers must agree to certain conditions without any negotiations. These terms often contain “independent contractor” or “self-employed” clauses that clearly state that the worker is not an employee and that the platform is not obligated to protect the worker from risks such as illness, disability, unemployment, or preparation for retirement, maternity leave, etc (ILO, 2018). Workers spend a significant amount of time on unpaid work, such as searching for tasks, conducting qualification tests or customer research.

Platform workers are solely responsible for paying social security contributions and are also excluded from other forms of labor protection.

**Table 1.** Signs of instability of platform employment

For employees	For employers
unclear employment status	low employee motivation
unfair treatment (discrimination)	high staff turnover
individualization of work and lack of collective action, lack of interpersonal communications	low level of professional skills of workers (for micro-tasks or in Uber-like companies)
low income	low barriers to entry for workers
frequent cases of non-payment of wages for completed tasks	shortage of methods of interaction with employees
intensification of work “anytime, anywhere”; blurring the line between personal and work life, leading to stress and burnout	potential conflicts between permanent employees and those attracted through platforms
demand exceeds supply from platforms	skills and qualifications of employees do not correspond to the request
redundancy of skills compared to employers’ demand	
job instability and dissatisfaction	
few prospects for professional development	
high competition for jobs	
lack of social protection provided by legislation on standard employment	

Source: (Bobkov & Chernykh, 2020).

The threats that platform employment poses to workers, employers, consumers and the economy are rather numerous, as it

- undermines the social function of labor as the autonomy of employment in comparison to a traditional company narrows the space for social integration, increases risks of destruction of social ties, people losing their social identity, growing isolation, uncertainty and alienation. All this stands in contrast to the expansion of power of the companies operating the platforms.
- causes the so called “algorithmization” of individual behavior, work and consumer habits, social and cultural preferences, “normalization” and standardization of personality, which limits the personal development of employees.
- leads to polarization of jobs, erosion of jobs requiring average qualifications, growing inequality in the distribution of income from employment. In high-income countries, online platforms can attract lower-wage workers located in other countries, reducing local employment.
- increases heterogeneity of labor markets, due to their fragmentation (digital employment, freelancing, crowdworkers, etc.) and hence information asymmetry and information gaps among potential employees.

- destroys the standard employment as it narrows the scope of sustainable and stable employment and expands the scope of flexible and precarious employment, including the growth of fictitious self-employment for the purpose of “evading” taxes by employers, the use of cheap labor, deregulation of labor relations. This will result in the destruction of the tax base of state and local budgets, decreased financing of social insurance and social protection and therefore growing economic and social polarization.
- Increases risks of the emergence of monopolies and oligopolies in the market for goods and services and of shortages in the supply of jobs with excess demand for them, i.e. monopsonies in the labor market, which are a factor constraining economic growth and realization of the labor and human potential of society.
- Increases the likelihood of erroneous decisions due to failures of digital technologies, their opacity for users and digital surveillance, which in turn leads to trust deficit.

## The current state of platform employment in Russia

Various types of platform employment are actively developing in the Russian labor market: delivery applications, taxis, offers of various services and other aggregators have already become traditional employment areas. Despite the high speed of digital services development in the country, platform employment is still a new form of economic activity, which is not properly regulated in legal terms. That is why the major issues concerning this type of employment are about *formulation of the most complete and precise definition of platform employment, its formalization and assessment of risks it poses for firms and employees*. Another pressing issue is gauging the size of the platform employment and digital labor market, the shadow sector included. According to the head of the School of Communications of the National Research University “Higher School of Economics”, President of KROS Sergei Zverev, the contribution of digital platforms to Russia’s GDP, according to various estimations, is between 2 and 5% (Sazonova, 2023). According to various estimates, the number of platform workers in Russia ranges from 7 to 10 million people, 3.5 million of them receive income using digital platforms on an ongoing basis, and 1.7 million consider this the main method of earning money. According to the consulting company Strategy Partners analytics, online platforms have become the main source of work and order fulfillment for 86% of Russian platform participants (Strategy Partners, 2022). The number of self-employed people — a broader category of workers that includes platform workers — exceeded 8 million people in 2023 (Nalog.ru, 2023). These numbers prove that the role of platform employment in the labor market of the Russian Federation is really significant, but, regrettably, the state, business and the population have not achieved common understanding of this type of employment nor created a system for its regulation.

At the beginning of 2023, a group of State Duma deputies introduced a bill to amend the “Employment in the Russian Federation” law, which introduced the category

of platform employment into the legislation. The explanatory note indicated the consolidation of the concepts of self-employment and platform employment at the legislative level. In March, this bill No. 275599-8 was adopted in the first reading. The document states that the principles for regulating platform employment will be specified in “satellite laws”.

A number of new provisions are proposed to be included in the new platform employment law (Sazonova, 2023):

- development of a mandatory register of digital platforms, where each platform must be registered;
- the obligation of platforms to maintain a rating of performers using the platform for its clients;
- requirement to provide necessary information to clients and platform employees;
- introduction of requirements for payment procedures;
- creation of conditions for voluntary social insurance;
- introduction of a procedure for resolving individual disputes between platforms and those employed on the platforms;
- creation of a council of digital platform operators with mandatory participation in it for platform operators;
- the possibility of creating an association (trade union) of platform workers.

It is proposed to introduce tangible control over platforms and their employees, i.e., among other things, oblige companies to register in special official lists, maintain ratings of platform employees and inform performers about all essential conditions of the order. The main issue of the bill on platform employment is how to distinguish between platform and labor relations and who should be given immunity from reclassification of these relations from one type to the other (Boiko et al, 2023).

## **Development of platform employment in the BRICS countries**

In this section, we consider the features of platform employment evolution in the BRICS countries and then compare them with those in Russia.

**China** is one of the countries where platform employment is developing most dynamically. The main driving force behind this development has been the high rates of economic growth, including in the field of Internet technologies and e-commerce. The history of the development of platform employment in China began around 2013, when the first online food delivery services were launched. Since then, the Chinese digital economy market has grown rapidly, and by the end of 2019, its size reached 35.8 trillion yuan or \$5.1 trillion (RT.com, 2020). The market has been growing at 20% per year and, due to the stimulation of economic transformations, its share in the country’s GDP reached 36.2% in 2019. The total volume of the platform economy market in April 2020 reached \$2,39 trillion (Xinhua, 2020). Today, the Chinese platform employment market can be divided into several main segments: online labor markets, taxi and car sharing

services, food and goods delivery, freelance platforms, and some others. Similar to the Russian digital platform market, in China local platforms are replacing the international ones, e.g. the Uber taxi service having faced tough competition from the DiDi platform left the market due to unsustainable losses.

The main reasons why platform employment has become an important issue in China are the needs to automate production and organize a direct communication channel between producers and consumers. Thanks to its platforms, the Chinese economy has become more flexible and efficient. Currently, about 670 million people in China are using various online platforms, accounting for more than half of the country's population (Yu, 2023).

According to an ILO study, 23% of platform investments in 2020 came from China (ILO, 2021). In 2020, the size of China's platform economy market was \$1.23 trillion, up 14.4% from 2019. Moreover, the Chinese platform economy market is expected to continue to grow and reach \$2.23 trillion in 2023. Investment in Chinese technology companies exceeded \$71 billion in the first half of 2021, up 22.5% from 2020, according to the China Internet Report 2021 by the South China Morning Post research platform. More than half of this amount came from investments in various platform ecosystems (South China Morning Post, 2021).

The Chinese platform Tencent, which owns many popular services including WeChat, earned \$73.5 billion in 2020, which is 28% more than in 2019. Another Chinese giant, Alibaba, earns approximately 85% of its profits through its platform ecosystem (South China Morning Post, 2021). These statistics demonstrate a significant increase in the size of the platform economy in China and an increase in investment in this area from both Chinese companies and the government.

*The socio-demographic portrait of the platform workforce in China is that of a woman aged 18-35, employed on one of the platforms and working as a seller or courier in online trading. Most platform workers in China have secondary or higher education. This is because working on the platform requires certain skills in computer technology and communication with clients. Many platform workers in China live in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen (China Labour Bulletin, 2023). These cities have more developed infrastructure, which makes it easier to work on the platforms. Although platform workers in China are relatively well-educated, their wages are generally low. Many of them earn less than 5,000 yuan (about \$750) per month. The platform employment in China is therefore additional to the main job (Zhou, 2020).*

Most of Chinese platforms tend to register their workers as self-employed without entering into employment contracts with them. According to the RCSE 2020 annual report on the development status of the sharing economy in China, only 8% of platform workers have an employment relationship with their platforms (Zhou, 2020). These workers are mostly highly qualified IT specialists and management executives. The remaining workers are classified as self-employed.

The exact number of digital labor platforms in China is rather difficult to determine as the market is growing very quickly and new platforms are constantly emerging.

However, according to the China Internet Report 2021, at the end of 2020, the Chinese platform employment market had at least 38 major platforms providing various services such as food delivery, taxi services, online trading, etc. It is also noted that the Chinese platform economy market is quite competitive, and many platform companies are seeking to increase their market share and expand their functionality.

**Table 2.** Leaders of China's platform employment market

Platform	Business area	Number of employees
Alibaba's Ele.me	Food delivery	More than 3 million couriers (2023)
Didi	Taxi, Transportation industry	More than 13 million drivers (2021)
Meituan Dianping	Food delivery	More than 4 million couriers (2023)

Source: developed by the authors based on (CNBC, 2021; Yuanyuan, 2023; Technode, 2023).

Growing e-commerce in China is leading to an increase in the number of people offering services through platforms from 50 million in 2015 to 75 million in 2018. The share of these workers in total employment also increased — from 6.5% in 2015 to 9.7% in 2018. Compared to other countries, the proportion of platform workers in China is the world's largest, exceeding the 4% share of the employed population in the UK and less than 1% in the US. DiDi, in particular, has over 31 million drivers registered on its platform, dwarfing Uber's figure of 3.9 million drivers. In the food delivery business, Meituan has more than 2.7 million registered drivers, compared to 60,000 for Deliveroo, the leader in this sector of the British economy. By the number of platform workers China has obviously outstripped all other countries both in absolute and relative terms (Zhou, 2020).

The development of platform employment in China is most promising. The country has just begun to actively explore the possibilities of this form of employment to create more favorable conditions for workers. It is worth noting that platform employment is an important element of China's policy of digital economy development. The Chinese government is actively supporting the platform economy by such measures as introducing legal regulations and standardizing the relationship between platforms and workers. This not only reduces inequality of income distribution in society, but also expands China's economic opportunities on a global scale.

Chinese platform companies are expected to play a big role in stimulating employment and creating new jobs. China's digital economy reached \$7.1 trillion in 2021 (Xinhua, 2022). According to a report by the Chinese Academy of Human Resources Sciences and tech giant Tencent Holdings, it plans to create 31.8 million new jobs over the next five years (Yu, 2023). The future of digital work in China is linked to the expected growth in the digital economy. It is important that good jobs and social protection are provided for people working in China's digital economy, so that the development of platform employment could further reduce disparities in the labor market and have positive impact on the transformation of the Chinese economy as a whole.



Platform employment **in Brazil** is much more developed than in other Latin American countries. Currently, there are tens of thousands of job search platforms in the Brazilian market, as well as specialized sites and applications. Digital labor employment in Brazil is dynamic and rapidly growing; it has significant potential to create new jobs and boost economic growth. However, like any other type of employment, it faces challenges related to the social and economic implications of this form of work.

Digital employment platforms emerged in Brazil in 2014 and since then have grown and spread across various sectors. That same year, the government started the process of significant changes in labor legislation and social security systems that culminated in the 2017 labor reform led by President Michel Temer and Congressman Rodrigo Maia. This productive restructuring of the labor laws sent a welcome signal to the financial elite following the country's 2016 coup d'état.

Similar to how it was in Russia, platform employment in Brazil became relevant and up-to-date practice for various reasons. One of them is the rapid development of technology and growth of the Internet economy that created new opportunities for work and business expansion. Another factor is Brazil's high unemployment rate (according to the World Bank, it was 11.9% in 2019); it gave impetus to the creation and spread of platform employment. This is what makes the Brazilian labor market similar to that of South Africa. In 2014, Brazilian labor market was plagued by inequality, weak social protection and large informal sector; at present, one of the main challenges is to *determine whether the emergence of digital platforms in Brazil has exacerbated these characteristics or helped improve the quality of employment*. In 2019, there were 16.2 million unemployed in Brazil, 6.7 million people worked part-time, 38.4 million people were informal workers (Fairwork, 2022). Platform work renews and reinforces historical informality, reorganizing various sectors and professions, many of which already existed before the advent of digital platforms. The market consists of platforms for delivery, taxi booking, homework, general services, as well as the growing number of cloud-based work platforms for solving micro-tasks and bringing together freelancers and clients in large projects.

According to the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), between 2016 and 2021 the number of workers in Brazil's delivery sector grew by 979.8%, from 30,000 to 278,000 (Fairwork, 2022). Academic research in Brazil shows that the typical delivery worker in the city of Sao Paulo is a young black man, which implies reinforcement of racial inequalities that have historically existed in Brazil.

The *socio-demographic portrait of platform workers in Brazil shows that they belong to the age group under 35, with a higher proportion of women*. About 60% of platform workers in Brazil have secondary or higher education. Many platform workers are from migrant communities or have migration experience, as platform work can be more flexible for people who move from city to city or from country to country. These workers live mainly in large cities, mostly due to the development of platforms in delivery and offline services sector. A fairly large proportion of the platform workforce in Brazil are the unemployed or low-income workers in need of extra money, who use the platform to find work as a temporary or additional

source of income. According to the studies conducted in 2021, the average income of Brazilian platform workers is between 1,000 and 2,000 reais (180 to 360 US dollars) per month (Fairwork, 2022). However, this amount can be higher or lower depending on many factors, such as the type of platform, the number of hours worked per week, the rating and reputation of the employee, the quality of work, others. It thus becomes clear that the majority of the population involved in Brazil's platform economy are the young people that have moved to larger cities looking for opportunities and higher wages.

**Table 3.** Leaders of platform employment market in Brazil

Platform	Business area	Number of employees
iFood	Food delivery	More than 200 000 couriers (2022)
Workana	Freelance Exchange	More than 3 million freelancers (2023)
AppJusto	Food delivery (founded in 2020)	More than 2 700 couriers (2022)

Source: developed by the authors based on (Workana, 2023; Fairwork, 2023).

*One of the specific features of platform employment in Brazil is "platform cooperativism".* That means that workers cooperate to jointly manage and develop the platform. Such co-ops can offer the same services as traditional platforms: food delivery, beauty services, repairs and a lot more. Given the precarious conditions offered to workers on most leading digital platforms, these self-managed organizations are an increasingly attractive reality, especially in the wake of delivery and taxi driver strikes during the pandemic.

One of the main benefits of "platform cooperativism" is a fairer distribution of profit. In traditional platforms, profit is mostly spent on shares and directors' benefits, while workers receive low wages and minimal social security. In cooperatives, profits are divided among all participants. Another advantage is that cooperatives can provide more stable and rewarding working conditions for employees, including higher wages, better insurance services and other benefits (Zanatta, 2023). It is not surprising that platform cooperatives have received increasing attention from government agencies, universities and social movements.

In 2017, the first platform cooperative in Brazil, called Delivery Much, was created. This delivery platform was founded in Ponta Grossa, where residents complained about low wages and no social protection for delivery workers. In 2018, Brazil created a cooperative for Uber drivers, called CooperUber, which unites drivers and allows them to participate in the management of the platform. Within this project, drivers receive 75% of the income, and the rest goes to the maintenance and development of the platform (Fairwork, 2022).

In the general services sector, the contract service Quem Luta (Hire someone who is struggling) has been launched. This is a virtual assistant created by the Brazilian Homeless Workers Movement (MTST). The services offered include a variety

of work in civil engineering, cleaning and domestic help. This initiative came from the technology center MTST, since income generation is the crucial factor of supporting participants, especially in conditions of high unemployment. It serves a dual function of promoting cooperation on the platform and supporting the homeless worker movement (Fairwork, 2022).

More than 13 million Brazilians are employed in the “informal” economy, including platform work or work in businesses without valid official registration. Implementing a strategy of platform cooperativism is an alternative way to improve working conditions and social protection for these workers.

Digital work in Brazil as a relatively new and rapidly developing form of employment has its own specific characteristics and challenges. This type of work can contribute greatly to job creation, economic growth and general well-being of the nation, provided that due attention is paid to social protection and protection of workers’ rights in the digital economy.

Digital labor **in India** represents a significant part of the country’s economy. The value of the Indian market digital economy is about \$1 trillion, which is about 7.5% of GDP (Singh, 2023). The digital sector in India is growing rapidly as more and more people start working online. It includes a wide range of business sectors such as IT services, digital marketing, software development and e-commerce. *India is one of the most successful countries in the platform economy.* Its market of Internet employment platforms began to develop as a way to meet the work capacity of a growing vibrant economy. Today, platform employment has become so significant and well-established that many schoolchildren and students consider it an attractive form of work. However, platform employment has become popular not only because of the attractiveness it provides to workers, but also for a variety of economic, social and cultural reasons. The freelance industry in India has quickly evolved from an alternative career option to an integral part of its job market. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the freelancing industry was expected to grow to around \$20-30 billion by 2025.

According to a report published at the end of 2020, the platform employment economy in India had grown by 60% since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. The largest number of platform workers was concentrated in the transport and delivery services sector but this form of employment has been increasingly expanding into other sectors, such as cleaning services, tutoring and freelance work (Singh, 2023). These trends are consistent with the development of platform employment in Russia, where the most popular and numerous platforms are Yandex.Taxi and Profi.ru, the taxi service and microtasking platform.

One of the main reasons why platform employment has become important in India is the large number of people who do not have good education, work experience or qualifications in a particular field, but want to find a job. In addition, employment platforms provide flexible work hours, which attracts many people. This significantly improves the situation in the country where unemployment remains high. Moreover, working through platforms allows people from remote areas of India to gain experience and improve their professional skills and provides opportunities for socially vulnerable

groups (youth, people with disabilities and others) to enter the labor market (Islam & Kain, 2022).

*The socio-demographic profile of the platform workforce in India* is as follows: about 70% of platform workers in India are men, although there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women working on online platforms. The majority of platform workers are people aged 18-35. Most platform workers in India have low-secondary or primary – education (Gupta et al, 2022). India is one of the countries with the fastest growing urban population in the world and many platform workers live in urban areas working in big cities like Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, etc. Most platform workers in India belong to the poor and lower middle social class. Platform workers in India take on additional financial and work burden to support their families. The income they receive on the platforms ranges between \$3-5 per hour, although the amount may vary up- or downwards depending on the city and type of work (NITI Aayog, 2022).

Currently, about half of India's platform workforce is engaged in semi-skilled work. However, this trend is waning while the layers of highly qualified and low-skilled employees is growing. NITI Aayog estimates that after 2030, the dominance of semi-skilled platform workers may cease to exist due to the emergence of new forms of mass assignments.

**Table 4.** Leaders of platform employment market in India

Platform	Business area	Number of employees
Swiggy	Food and grocery delivery	About 205 thousand couriers
Zomato	Delivery and housekeeping services	More than 350 thousand couriers
Ola	Taxi, transportation industry	More than 1.5 million drivers

Source: developed by the authors based on (Your Story, 2022).

Currently, the legal status of those involved in the gig economy<sup>2</sup>, which connects platform workers in India, is that of independent contractors (Graham & Woodcock, 2020). The key difference between regular employees and independent contractors is the amount of control the employer has over how the work is performed.

In a normal employer-employee relationship, the employer dictates when, where, and how work is to be performed. Independent contractors, unlike employees, have full control over these aspects under the terms of the contract and are responsible only for ensuring that the expected result is achieved, not for the manner in which the work is performed.

According to the National Statistics Office of India, in 2019, the share of workers employed in the information technology and customer service sector was 7.7% of the total employment in the country. It is expected that by 2025 this share will increase

<sup>2</sup> The definition of Gig-Economy (according to (Graham & Woodcock, 2020)): the total amount of labor markets, that are characterized by independent contracting that happens through, via, and on digital platforms.

to 10%. It is also worth noting that in 2018, more than 1,000 platforms for finding jobs and performing services were registered in India (Gupta et al, 2022).

The NITI Aayog Report notes that the platform economy currently employs 6.8 million people and projects this number to reach 23.5 million by 2030. Although they still make up a relatively small share of the total workforce, the report indicates that the number of workers will continue to grow in the near future, partly due to the general expansion of the sector and partly because people will prefer to join it, trusting or confirming the motto promoted by the platforms that by working for them, “you are your own boss”.

A specific feature of the Indian labor market is the dominant informal sector. According to experts, in 2017-2018 informal employment was 90.7% of India’s employment (NITI Aayog, 2022). In this regard, the transition to gig economy and platform employment is a solution to India’s daunting task of pulling the economy out of the shadows. Despite imperfections in social security and the present-day quality of working conditions, India continues to develop digital labor platforms and improve the package of social guarantees for platform and gig economy workers. It is easier for such workers to obtain loans, temporary disability benefits and pensions. With further development, platform employment can contribute to improved living standards and economic growth as a whole.

Competition on the Indian platform employment market will further intensify as new players with new ideas and services continue to enter the market. Some of them could become major players in the future if they succeed in meeting the growing demand for platform employment services.

Overall, the platform employment market in India is quite diverse and the applications of platform services are wide. This could be the taxi service, food delivery, online learning or finding home services. Large players in the platform employment market usually have sufficient financial support, extensive network of users and innovative solutions that allow them secure leadership in the market.

Digital work is a relatively new phenomenon **in South Africa**, but it is rapidly evolving owing to the increased use of mobile devices and social media platforms. The number of people employed in web-based platforms in South Africa reached 100,000 and the number of location-based platform workers was approximately 35,000 employees in 2020. The share of such workers in the South African employed population is about 1% (Mokofe, 2022). The development of digital economy may unleash enormous potential for digital technology as the large amounts of work that can be done remotely will be driving growth in the numbers of platform workers.

One of the reasons for this growth has been the increase in the country’s unemployment rate. The South African Institute of Labor Economics estimates that unemployment stood at 29% of the population in 2019, making digital work a viable option for generating income. Flexible work hours and low entry barriers to using the platforms allow people of different social classes to find work on the platforms (Mokofe, 2022).

Another reason is the high level of digital penetration and the huge number of Internet users throughout South Africa and the growth in the number of platforms:

ride-hailing and transport services (Bolt, DiDi, Droppa, Uber and PicUp), food delivery services (Mr D Food Delivery, Uber Eats and Checkers Sixty60) and other online services for business (GetTOD, M4Jam, NoSweat, SweepSouth, Upwork). Demand for independent services has increased from both consumers and businesses. As online platforms are becoming more numerous, the number of independent workers increases, not only because of the growth of the platform economy, but also because of its ability to absorb the unemployed, given the high unemployment rate in South Africa.

Reducing unemployment is a top priority for South Africa so the country needs to ensure that technological change mitigates rather than aggravates unemployment. Benefits and costs of the gig economy remain the subject of intense debate, particularly in relation to employment and the quality of working conditions. Platforms create employment opportunities and thus benefit socially marginalized groups such as the unemployed. On the other hand, the social and legal status of platform workers in South Africa is still uncertain. They are not entitled to the state social protection, guaranteed minimum wages or decent working conditions. In this South Africa is similar to Russia, where the platforms became widespread before the necessary legislation was enacted.

More than 1% of South Africa's workforce finds work through digital platforms, but a new report from Fairwork shows, that many of these workers have to agree to low pay and dangerous conditions. In this report, thirteen of the most popular platforms in South Africa were rated much lower than 10 according to the 10-points rating of "Five principles of fair performance" (pay, conditions, contracts, governance and representation) (Africa.com, 2022).

**Table 5.** Leaders of platform employment market in South Africa

Platform	Business area	Number of employees
SweepSouth	Cleaning services	More than 1 5000 workers (2019)
M4Jam	Microtasking	Over 81 000 workers (2021)
MrD	Food delivery	More than 4 500 couriers (2023)

Source: developed by the authors based on (702.co.za, 2019; Fairwork, 2021; Mr D Food, 2023)

Platform employment in South Africa is a relatively new concept which is only beginning to be reflected in publications. However, we will highlight *some general socio-demographic characteristics of platform workers in South Africa*. More than 60% of platform workers are men and, as in other BRICS countries, their age ranges mainly from 25 to 35 years. At the same time, a significant proportion of platform workers have bachelor's degrees. The majority of platform workers in South Africa live in urban areas, where demand for such services is higher, and this form of employment is becoming popular among various ethnic groups. Although platform employment in South Africa is a recent development, it has the potential to become increasingly popular among young people and people from lower social classes (Mokofe, 2022).

The prospects for the development of this form of employment in South Africa are generally positive. The use of platform employment can significantly reduce

not only labor taxes, but also increase employment levels, which has a positive impact on the South African economy. Already, the country's legislation is gradually becoming more stringent towards employers, establishing minimum thresholds for payments, standards for working conditions and regulating other issues.

At the same time, there is a risk of greater algorithmic instability of systems, which may increase vulnerability of platform workers. The government must be ready to put in place the necessary laws and mechanisms to regulate the area and ensure the protection of workers' rights on the platforms. In this context, the *Fairwork framework* (Fairwork, 2022), which evaluates working conditions and protection of workers' rights on platforms, may be useful. In addition, *the Code of Good Practice for the Regulation of Platform Work in South Africa* (Fairwork, 2020), formulated by the South African Government, can also help improve the social and legal status of platform workers.

Platform employment in **Russia** has emerged as a result of the rapid development of the digital economy and technology, as well as changes in consumption and production patterns. Similar to other countries, platform employment has become popular because it provides flexible employment opportunities and access to additional income. Besides, platforms can connect demand for and supply of services in the most efficient way, which makes them attractive to businesses and consumers.

The development of digital labor and platform employment in Russia began in the mid-2000s, when the platforms assisting freelancers and offering remote technological services appeared on the Russian market. The leading players in this area were freelance services such as Freelance.ru and the Fair of Masters. The opportunity to make money from advertising has attracted a large number of businesses. However, the real growth of this segment began later, due to the development of online stores and commercial platforms such as Avito.ru and AliExpress, as well as the digitalization of taxi services carried out by such operators as Uber and GetTaxi.

Based on the results of the 2022 Center for Strategic Research study, we compiled *the socio-demographic characteristics of the platform workforce in Russia* (Center for Strategic Research, 2022). About 62% of Russian platform workers were men for whom platforms are the main source of income. As in other BRICS countries, platform employment in Russia is popular with the young people: the average age of platform workers was 31 years. For more than 85%, platform work is their main source of income, and almost 70% of workers receive tips. A specific characteristic is that in Russia there is a high share — 32% — of foreign platform workers.

**Table 6.** Leaders of platform employment market in Russia

Platform	Business area	Number of employees
Yandex.Taxi	Taxi, transportation industry	More than 700 thousand drivers (2022)
Profi.ru	Microtasking	Over 2.3 million performers (2023)
YouDo	Microtasking	More than 3.5 million performers (2023)

Source: developed by the authors based on (Ivolgin, 2023)

In Russia, information on the volume of platform employment is obtained indirectly — through surveys and sample surveys. Between 2021 and 2022, the Institute for Social Policy of the National Research University Higher School of Economics conducted two sample surveys aimed at assessing the number of people employed in the platform economy. In August 2021, 5,000 respondents aged 18 to 65 years living in Russian cities took part in their online survey. According to the results obtained, 33.1% of city residents aged 18 to 64 years have experience working through digital platforms. Among all respondents, 22.7% perform work in this format occasionally, and for 10.4% platform employment is regular (working at least once a month). The share of participants in platform employment among working respondents is higher and amounts to 35.8%, while the number of regular participants reaches 11.3% (Sinyavskaya et al., 2022).

Another approach to indirectly assessing the size of the platform economy segment in Russia is to study freelance workers. It should be noted, however, that platform and freelance employment are not identical. To confirm the assumption that freelancers are also employed through platforms, it is necessary to refer to the general arguments used in assessing self-employment. In Russia, since 2009, using a unified methodology, one of the largest Russian-language remote work exchanges, FL.ru, has been conducting an online survey “Census of Freelancers” (Sinyavskaya et al., 2022). The approximate number of electronic freelancers at that time was estimated at 300-500 thousand people. Another survey, that was conducted by HeadHunter among freelancers in 2022 based on a sample of 3.7 thousand respondents, showed that among working applicants, 31% worked remotely. Of these, 14% were freelancers, and 17% were remote employees on the payroll. According to the report, there were 14 million freelancers in Russia in 2020, which is almost 20% of the total employed population. In 2019, the number of such workers was only 5 million, and in 2014 there were only 3 million. Moreover, as reported on the FL.ru portal, in 2020 alone the number of new freelancers increased by 76% (Sinyavskaya et al., 2022). This indicates that there was a gradual increase in the prevalence of freelance employment, which may be associated, among other things, with the development of the platform economy.

One can also indirectly judge the size of platform employment in Russia by the number of self-employed. In 2019, a project for a new tax regime, “Professional Income Tax,” was launched, which is associated with the emergence of such a work form as self-employment. From the start of the project until the first quarter of 2023, the number of self-employed in Russia increased to 7 million people, 7,500 people become self-employed every day (Nalog.ru, 2023).

The development of platform employment in Russia was boosted by high speed and high level of digitalization. Information technologies used by the platforms are some of the most efficient in the world. *The further spread of platform employment in the Russian Federation should be associated with the popularization of this form of employment, the determination of the legal status and package of social guarantees for platform workers and it should lead to greater formalization of the Russian labor market thanks to this form of employment.*



## Platform employment models in the BRICS countries

Based on the experience of developing digital labor and platform employment in the BRICS countries, we present our analysis of different attributes and specific features of every country in a more structured way. Platform employment models in these countries have a number of similarities in that they all use technology and platforms to manage work and pay for it. However, each model has its own characteristics, which can be presented as follows:

**Table 7.** Specific features of platform employment in the BRICS countries

Criteria	India	China	Russia	Brazil	South Africa
<b>Start of active development</b>	Late 2000's-early 2010's	Late 2000's-early 2010's	Late 2000's	Middle 2010's	Middle 2010's
<b>State of regulation</b>	Different categories of workers with various guaranties	Different categories of workers with various guaranties	Development of regulation, basic social guaranties	Development of regulation, basic social guaranties	Development of regulation
<b>Reasons for development</b>	High share of low-skilled unemployed	Need to automate production and organize a direct communication channel between producers and consumers	Technical progress and digital economy development	Technical progress and high unemployment rate	High unemployment rate and growth of the number of Internet users
<b>Competition of platforms</b>	High	High	Growing	High	Low
<b>Formal/informal sector</b>	Reducing informal sector	High share of formal employment	High share of informal employment	High share of informal employment	High share of informal employment
<b>Skills of workers</b>	Semi-skilled workers	Low and high-quality segments of employment	Mostly low	Mostly low	Both, Low and high quality segments
<b>Main job/additional source of income</b>	Main work, can use several platforms at the same time	Additional source of income	Main work	Main work, can use several platforms at the same time	Additional source of income
<b>Main risks and disadvantages</b>	Low payment, deterioration of working conditions	Competition of platforms is morphing into monopolies; deterioration of working conditions	Unsettled status of platform employment; low-skilled work places, informal employment	Unsettled status of platform employment; low-skilled work places, informal employment; Low payment	Unsettled status of platform employment, Lack of social guarantees for employees, informal employment

Source: developed by the authors based on research provided

The BRICS countries have not developed a successful practice of collecting official statistics on platform employment; the main methods are sample surveys, aggregation of data from individual platforms, or approximation using related employee categories. It is typical of countries in this group to remove platform workers from the informal sector through self-employed status, or less often through the employment contract. In terms of the scale of distribution of platform employment in the BRICS countries, the leaders are India and China, followed by Brazil, Russia and South Africa.

In addition to the general aspects of analysis, it is worth highlighting the *specific features of some of the BRICS countries*. **India and China** are the largest domestic labor markets and, thanks to the creation of a legal framework, the platform employment in these countries has become one of their standard forms of employment, which has led to high competition. **In Brazil, South Africa and Russia**, this type of employment is still developing and there is no regulatory framework.

The key specific characteristic of the Brazilian platform employment market is the high level of unemployment and informal employment, as well as platform cooperativism. These factors contribute to the choice of platform employment as the main job. In South Africa there is high unemployment rate and discrimination in the labor market. Besides, the South African platform employment market is relatively new. The country has yet to resolve many difficulties on the way to the formation of a mature market for platform employment. Nevertheless, digital platforms help to reduce unemployment and increase workers' incomes.

The analysis carried out by the authors allows them to identify the following types of *platform employment development* models:

1) **India and China have a fairly mature platform employment system** with targeted regulation, growing formal employment and jobs that require relatively high qualifications, but without clear regulatory framework for gig workers and their social protection;

2) **Brazil and Russia are developing their platform employment systems**, boosted by technological development, with insufficient regulation, growing competition of platforms and a large share of informal employment with low-skilled jobs; there is some protection for the platform and digital economy workers.

3) **South Africa is at the earliest stage of development of platform employment** with nascent regulation, lack of social guarantees for employees and still a low level of competition and a large share of informal employment.

The BRICS countries also differ in *the degree of development of technology infrastructure and accessibility of the Internet*. **(1) South Africa and India** have low levels of access to social infrastructure, including the Internet and mobile communications, compared to **(2) Russia, China and Brazil**. Therefore, in South Africa and India, government and corporate investments in digital labor and the digital economy will have a more noticeable effect than in the other two countries.

The wage levels of the platforms are not displayed in the comparative table because wages vary on different platforms and depend on user numbers, product specifics and pricing, worker rating, platform commission and other factors. Wages received

for individual tasks are generally low in all BRICS countries, but for different reasons. For example, in Russia, the bulk of low-paid employees are labor immigrants, in India and China they are their own citizens. In Brazil, high unemployment reduces the average wage level; in South Africa, it is the unevenly developed digital infrastructure.

The key problems associated with the regulation of platform employment in the BRICS countries are related to the legal status of platform workers and high share of informal employment, which complicates the assessment of the size of this segment.

## **Directions for further development of platform employment in Russia**

Russia, like many other BRICS countries, has enormous potential for the development of the digital economy and platform employment. However, to achieve success in this area, it is necessary to create favorable environment for the development of digital labor and platform employment. Here the top priority is regulation of platform employment that will lower informal employment which, in turn, could reduce the share of low-skilled jobs for platform employees.

The Russian government is actively promoting digitalization and investing in new technologies. Russia may follow the path of China and decide to further develop the economy with the help of digital technologies and the platform economy. The question of which platforms should be subject to special regulation is now being discussed by experts and government officials. It is believed that these should be technologically mature platforms but the criteria for inclusion in this category require further clarification.

Today, in the world practice, there are no ready-made successful regulatory solutions for platform employment with reliable effectiveness. Unlike many countries, Russia has developed a large number of its own platforms with certain specific features. When developing tools to ensure social guarantees for platform workers, it is necessary to take into account the high mobility of platform workers and temporary nature of their employment, and to build on the actual needs of workers. The decision to provide social guarantees to platform workers must ensure a balance of interests of the three parties: workers, platforms and the state. It is important for business to make a profit; in addition, excessive regulation of platform employment will slow down the development of aggregators that may cause a decline in the quality of service and a rise in prices. Platforms want to classify relations with employees as entrepreneurial, in which case there is no place for social guarantees provided by labor legislation. Those employed on the platforms demand respect for labor rights, and trade union organizations believe that the only possible form of such regulation is the formalization of relations under the Labor Code of the Russian Federation. Market players and the regulator are looking for compromises that will suit all participants. Indeed, on the one hand, protection must be ensured without harm to the economy of the platforms; on the other hand, the state wants to be ensure people's social and pension security.

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