



OVERVIEW OF ABS ACTIVITY TO MEASURE DIGITAL PLATFORM WORK AND WORKERS



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), like most national statistical organisations, is working to expand its statistics on relatively new and emerging forms of employment, including digital platform workers.

While digital platform workers and their work have always been included within existing labour statistics on employment and hours, they are a relatively small group of workers who have not been separately identifiable.

Digital platform work is a relatively new form of digitally-enabled employment but it also shares common elements with older forms of short-term employment, that have always existed. Many occupations include a combination of longstanding forms of employment, together with new and emerging forms, including digital platform work.

Specifically measuring digital platform workers and their working arrangements will provide insights into the extent to which this working arrangement is used in Australia and how this is changing over time, the nature of digital platform work and the characteristics of digital platform workers.

The international statistical community (including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe) are in the process of developing conceptual and measurement approaches for new forms of employment, including digital platform workers. The ABS is involved in these discussions and is leveraging the experience of a broad range of countries, given this is still a relatively new area of labour statistics around the world.

The ABS is taking the evolving international conceptual and measurement frameworks for digital platform workers and applying it in the Australian context, beginning with a series of experimental questions that will be asked in conjunction with the Labour Force Survey, asked of respondents in the outgoing survey rotation group.

The ABS has been working with other parts of the Australian Government, including the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, to ensure that data gaps for digital platform workers are effectively identified and progressively addressed.

In time, the ABS expects to introduce a dedicated module within the 'Characteristics of Employment' supplementary topic in the Labour Force Survey, which already collects a broad range of working arrangement information from employed people on an annual basis.

1.1 WHO ARE DIGITAL PLATFORM WORKERS?

The 'Gig Economy' is a very broad concept, and potentially includes many different groups of people that can be categorised in different ways. For instance, it can potentially include a combination of digitally-enabled and non-digitally-enabled forms of employment.



Within digitally-enabled employment it can also involve a broad range of groups of workers and work, such as rental economy workers (e.g. Airbnb), marketplace workers (e.g. eBay), and labour services (e.g. Uber). It is important to note that not all of these populations are necessarily in scope of the standard definition of employment that is used by the ABS.

Persons in **employment** are those of working age who, during a specific reference period, were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit. Employment consists of work for at least an hour in the reference period.

In 2013, Resolution I of the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (the forum that sets international standards for labour statistics) defined digital platform work as *any productive activity performed by persons to produce goods or provide services carried out through or on a digital platform*.

In 2022, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe published a more detailed definition for digital platform workers:

Digital platform employment refers to employment performed through an online tool or an app that matches supply and demand for employment, most often based on an algorithm. An important aspect to consider in this context is that digital platform employment is about the assignment of individual tasks (smaller or larger), rather than about jobs ([United Nations Economic Commission for Europe Handbook on Forms of Employment, 2022](#)).

The ABS is defining digital platform work as *the provision of fixed duration labour services, in the form of tasks/jobs which are accessed by the worker through digital platforms and are paid per unit of work delivered through the same platform*.

It is also important to note that some businesses allocate work to their employees using digital platforms, through applications and algorithms, without their workers being considered digital platform workers. This reflects some of the inherent challenges in measuring digital platform work and workers, given many businesses and jobs in the labour market are increasingly digitally-enabled.

Digital platform workers are usually considered to be legally and functionally a subset of owner managers, rather than employees, according to the status of employment classification (which categorises employed people based on the nature of their relationship with the enterprise in which they work).

However, as with independent contractors, whom the ABS has been separately identifying using additional survey questions since 2008, there may be some digital platform workers who work in a way that is noticeably different to other types of owner managers. For example, some of them may not necessarily have a registered Australian Business Number.

Labour statisticians suspect that there may be a considerable proportion of digital platform workers who are multiple job holders, who may be operating as employees in their main job and a digital platform worker in their secondary job. This type of additional work is commonly referred to as a “side hustle” by those working in this way.



1.2 HOW IS THE ABS PLANNING TO MEASURE DIGITAL PLATFORM WORKERS?

The ABS has developed an initial experimental survey module on digital platform workers, which it is currently in the process of testing. The initial module is included in the ABS Multi-Purpose Household Survey, which is asked of outgoing respondents from the monthly Labour Force Survey, for the 2022-23 financial year.

From this, the ABS expects to progressively analyse data through 2022-23, to identify further refinements to the survey questions for 2023-24, and to determine what initial experimental statistics can be produced from 2022-23 data.

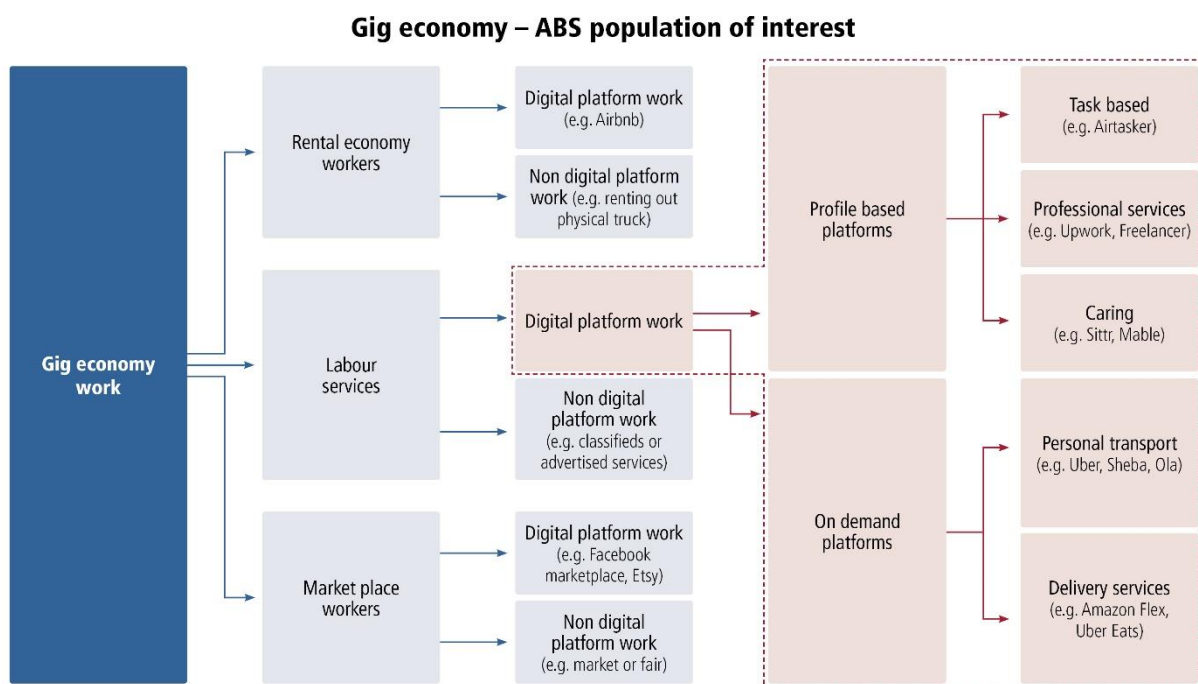
1.3 WHAT INFORMATION IS THE ABS EXPECTING TO COLLECT ON DIGITAL PLATFORM WORKERS?

The gig economy is a broad term that encompasses a many different activities, which range from buying and selling goods to providing short term labour services, such as providing care.

Given this breadth it is important for the ABS to consider the scope for its initial measurement of digital platform work and workers. Given the work associated with the supply of labour services through digital platforms are the most relevant for labour statistics, and of the highest interest in Australia, the ABS has focused on this in its initial scope.

Figure 1 outlines the labour services aspect of the gig economy which is the measurement focus of the ABS.

Figure 1: Scope of ABS efforts to measure digital platform work and workers



The initial information the ABS aims to capture using the survey module on digital platform workers has been informed by similar exploratory developments internationally, together with expert advice ABS has received over time.

The topics that the ABS will collect information on in the initial survey module includes:

- Whether people have undertaken paid-per-task work through digital platforms in the last 4 weeks
- The different types of digital platforms used, and the type of tasks undertaken
- How long they have been using digital platforms to undertake paid-per-task work
- Reasons for undertaking digital platform work and preferred work arrangements
- Time spent searching or bidding for tasks
- Hours spent undertaking paid tasks on digital platforms (in the past week)
- Hours spent undertaking unpaid tasks associated with digital platform work (in the past week)
- Percentage of total earnings from digital platform work

The Labour Force Survey collects information on industry, occupation, hours and other working arrangements, and a range of demographic characteristics (for example, age and sex). Some of this information will also be available to understand digital platform work and workers.

2. FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information, please email us at measuring.employment.consultation@abs.gov.au

