

## TRANSFORMATION OF EMPLOYMENT FORMS UNDER THE DEVELOPMENT OF DIGITAL TOURISM PLATFORMS IN UZBEKISTAN: AN ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL AND LABOUR RELATIONS

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### **Abstract**

The article examines how the development of digital tourism platforms in Uzbekistan is transforming employment forms and reshaping social and labour relations in the sector. It focuses on the spread of platform-based intermediation, online booking and smart tourism services, and analyses their implications for job creation, job quality, and social protection. Drawing on international literature on the platform economy and recent evidence on tourism digitalisation in emerging markets, the study develops an analytical framework to classify new employment forms and identify associated opportunities and risks. The results show a gradual shift from standard, full-time employment towards more flexible and hybrid forms, including gig work, freelancing and self-employment mediated by online platforms. The paper concludes by outlining policy directions to better regulate platform-mediated work in Uzbekistan's tourism sector and to support decent work in a rapidly digitalising environment.

### **Keywords**

digital tourism platforms, employment forms, platform work, social and labour relations, Uzbekistan, gig economy.

### **Introduction**

Digital transformation has become a key driver of change in the global tourism industry, reshaping how services are produced, distributed and consumed. Online booking systems, accommodation and experience platforms, digital payment solutions and smart tourism applications are increasingly embedded in tourism ecosystems, including in emerging economies such as Uzbekistan.

In Uzbekistan, reforms to digitalise tourism services have included the expansion of electronic visa systems, the introduction of national tourism platforms and the wider use of online booking and marketing tools by tourism enterprises. These developments are expected to increase tourist flows, improve service quality and strengthen competitiveness, but they also transform employment patterns and working conditions in the sector.

International evidence suggests that platform-based tourism business models are associated with both job creation and job precarisation, especially in accommodation, transport and on-demand services. Workers often engage as self-employed contractors or freelancers, with limited access to collective bargaining and social protection. Against this background, the central research question of this article is:

- How does the development of digital tourism platforms in Uzbekistan transform employment forms and social and labour relations in the sector?

The article aims to:

- Map key types of digital tourism platforms relevant for Uzbekistan.
- Classify emerging employment forms associated with these platforms.
- Identify main opportunities and risks for workers and employers.
- Outline policy implications for regulating platform-mediated employment.

### Methods

Given limited micro-data on platform workers in Uzbekistan, the study adopts a qualitative-analytical approach based on secondary sources and conceptual modelling.

The methodology includes:

- ***Literature review***

- Global research on the platform economy, tourism digitalisation and labour market effects.
- European and international policy studies on social protection and industrial relations in platform work.

- ***Context analysis for Uzbekistan***

- Review of recent publications on digitalisation of tourism in Uzbekistan and its impact on service quality and sector performance.
- Use of national digital economy and tourism policy documents that highlight the role of online platforms in tourism and services.

- ***Analytical framework development***

- Construction of a typology of employment forms linked to digital tourism platforms.
- Identification of key dimensions: legal status, income stability, autonomy, skills requirements and access to social protection.

The analysis proceeds in three steps:

1. Mapping main categories of digital tourism platforms relevant for Uzbekistan (e.g. accommodation, tours and experiences, transport, job matching).

2. Linking each category to predominant employment forms and social and labour relations characteristics.
3. Synthesising opportunities and risks in a structured table to support policy discussion.

**Results**

**1. Growth of digital tourism platforms in Uzbekistan**

Recent studies show that Uzbekistan has intensified efforts to digitalise tourism services through:

- E-visa systems and online registration for foreign visitors.
- Development of national tourism platforms and mobile apps that integrate booking, ticketing and digital guides.
- Wider use of online travel platforms and social media marketing by hotels, tour operators and related services.

Digital technologies contribute to:

- Increasing tourist flows and enhancing destination visibility.
- Improving service quality and customer experience.
- Strengthening competitiveness of Uzbekistan’s tourism sector.

However, these trends also alter employment structures, especially in:

- Accommodation and short-term rentals.
- Tour guiding and experiences.
- Local transport and mobility services.
- Tourism-related digital content and marketing.

**2. Main employment forms linked to tourism platforms**

Table 1 summarises key employment forms associated with digital tourism platforms and their main characteristics in terms of autonomy, stability and social protection.

**Table 1. Main employment forms in platform-mediated tourism work**

<b>Employment form</b>	<b>Typical link to platforms</b>	<b>Degr ee of autonomy</b>	<b>Income and stability</b>	<b>Social protection situation</b>
<b>Standard employee (hotel, tour operator)</b>	Uses platforms as distribution/marketing channel, but employed under standard contract	Low to medium	Relatively stable wage and working hours	Access to formal social insurance, labour rights and internal HR systems
<b>Dependent contractor (e.g. driver, courier, local guide)</b>	Works mainly through one or few platforms; formally self-employed	Medium	Variable income, often tied to platform algorithms and demand	Limited or no access to employer-based social protection; relies on individual insurance and tax

				compliance
<b>Independent freelancer (e.g. guide, photographer, content creator)</b>	Uses multiple platforms and digital channels to find clients	High	Income depends on individual reputation, skills and market conditions	Social protection depends on voluntary contributions; often fragmented
<b>Casual/gig worker (e.g. seasonal support, event-based services)</b>	Activated on short notice via platforms or messaging groups	Low to medium	Highly irregular, task-based pay; strong seasonality	Usually outside formal schemes; high risk of informality and lack of coverage

These forms frequently coexist within the same local tourism ecosystem. For example, a hotel may employ standard workers, collaborate with freelance guides and contract platform-based drivers for transfers, while simultaneously using online platforms for distribution.

### 3. Key transformation trends in social and labour relations

Based on the literature and contextual evidence, several transformation trends can be highlighted:

- *Shift from regulated to platform-mediated intermediation*

- Traditional travel agencies and tour operators increasingly compete with or integrate into global and regional platforms.

- In some segments, platform-based accommodation services can replace regulated offers, potentially reducing standard employment in hotels while increasing self-employment and informal work.

- *Increasing flexibility and fragmentation of employment*

- There is a clear trend towards flexible, on-demand and seasonal work in tourism, amplified by digital tools that match supply and demand in real time.

- This can support labour market participation for students, women and rural residents, but often at the cost of income stability and predictable working hours.

- *Rising skill requirements and digital divides*

- Platform-mediated work requires not only language and hospitality skills, but also digital literacy, online self-presentation and reputation management.

- Small tourism enterprises and workers with lower digital skills may struggle to fully benefit from platforms, reinforcing existing inequalities.

- *Blurring of employer responsibilities*

- Platform business models often position themselves as intermediaries rather than employers, which complicates assignment of responsibility for wages, working time, occupational safety and social insurance.

- This challenges traditional frameworks of social dialogue and collective bargaining in tourism.

**Table 2. Opportunities and risks of digital tourism platforms for employment in Uzbekistan**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Main opportunities</b>	<b>Main risks</b>
<b>Job creation</b>	New jobs in guiding, experiences, digital content and support services	Potential job losses in traditional intermediaries and some low-skilled positions
<b>Inclusion</b>	Easier market access for micro firms, youth, women and rural actors via online channels	Digital divide excluding workers and firms with low connectivity and limited skills
<b>Working conditions</b>	Flexible working time and autonomy for some categories of workers	Income volatility, long working hours and limited control over algorithmic management
<b>Social protection</b>	Scope to develop new portable and contributory schemes tailored to platform workers	High risk of informality and lack of coverage for dependent contractors and gig workers

### **Discussion**

The findings confirm that digital tourism platforms in Uzbekistan are embedded in a broader global restructuring of tourism work, where digital intermediation amplifies both opportunities for participation and risks of precariousness. In line with international evidence on platform-mediated tourism, new entrepreneurial opportunities emerge for small providers, women and rural actors, yet many workers face unstable incomes, limited bargaining power and weak access to social protection. This duality resonates with the ILO and UN Tourism agenda that frames tourism as a vehicle for decent work and inclusive growth, but warns about low-wage, low-protection service jobs in rapidly expanding tourism economies.

From a labour relations perspective, the spread of platform work challenges traditional employer–employee relationships and the institutions built around them. Studies on the platform economy in Europe show that many workers formally classified as self-employed experience levels of control and dependency similar to employees, while lacking corresponding rights to minimum wages,

collective bargaining and social insurance. Tourism-related platforms (accommodation, mobility, food delivery, local services) often operate in this grey zone, where responsibility for working conditions is fragmented between platforms, client firms and end customers. For Uzbekistan, where labour law and social insurance systems have historically been designed around standard employment, this raises questions about how to extend protections to workers who appear as independent service providers but depend heavily on platform algorithms and rules.

At the same time, international policy debates are moving towards more protective frameworks for platform workers. The European Parliament and other actors advocate minimum rights for platform workers, including transparent algorithms, predictable working conditions and access to social protection regardless of contract type. More recently, the adoption of the ILO's global convention on decent work in the platform economy indicates a growing consensus that classification issues and basic labour standards need to be addressed for all platform workers, across formal and informal segments. These developments are directly relevant for tourism, where platform-mediated work has become integral to service provision in many destinations. For Uzbekistan, aligning national regulation with emerging international norms could help ensure that digital tourism growth contributes to decent work rather than deepening informality.

The evidence also highlights the importance of data and measurement. UN Tourism and the ILO have recently launched improved datasets and methodological guides for measuring employment and decent work indicators in tourism, including by sex, status in employment and working time. Without reliable data on platform-mediated jobs in tourism, it will be difficult for Uzbekistan to design targeted interventions, monitor risks and evaluate policy outcomes. Integrating platform-related employment into tourism satellite accounts and labour statistics would be an important step towards evidence-based regulation of digital tourism work.

For Uzbekistan, three strategic directions can be derived from this discussion:

- **Regulatory adaptation.** Labour and social protection legislation needs to recognise and classify key forms of platform-mediated tourism work (e.g. dependent contractors, multi-platform freelancers) and define minimum standards for pay, working time, occupational safety and social security contributions. This does not necessarily imply treating all platform workers as employees, but rather ensuring that regulatory gaps do not leave them without basic protections.

➤ **Institutional innovation in social protection.** International proposals for portable benefits, multi-employer schemes and platform-funded social insurance could be adapted to the national context, especially for workers who combine multiple contracts and platforms. Tourism could be used as a pilot sector to test such mechanisms, given its visibility and policy priority in Uzbekistan's development strategies.

➤ **Strengthening skills and social dialogue.** Investment in digital skills for tourism workers and SMEs, combined with support for associative forms of representation (e.g. unions, professional associations, platform worker networks), can help rebalance power relations and ensure that workers have a voice in shaping platform governance and regulation. In this sense, social dialogue in tourism needs to expand beyond traditional employer associations and unions to include platform operators and new types of worker organisations.

Overall, the transformation of employment forms through digital tourism platforms should be understood as a political and institutional process, not only a technological one. For Uzbekistan, the window of opportunity lies in designing a proactive framework that embraces digitalisation to boost tourism competitiveness, while embedding robust safeguards for workers in line with the decent work agenda and emerging international standards.

### **Conclusion**

Digital tourism platforms in Uzbekistan are transforming employment forms by promoting more flexible, platform-mediated and often hybrid work arrangements in accommodation, guiding, transport and tourism-related services. While these trends create new opportunities for job creation, entrepreneurship and inclusion, they also generate significant challenges for job quality, income stability and social protection, especially for dependent contractors and gig workers.

A forward-looking policy approach should:

- Recognise and classify key platform-related employment forms in tourism.
- Extend labour and social protection standards to non-standard workers in a proportionate and innovation-friendly way.
- Invest in digital skills and support for small tourism enterprises and workers.
- Promote social dialogue and multi-stakeholder cooperation around the regulation of tourism platforms.

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