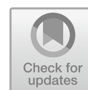
Skills Development as a Political Process: Towards New Forms of Mobilization and Digital Citizenship Among Platform Workers



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1 Introduction

This chapter explores skills in the context of platform work, with a view to redefining the concept in a way that can benefit workers. In addition to transforming the nature of work through the introduction of new technologies, the platform economy has also changed how skills are understood, how they are acquired, and how they align with job requirements. An updated definition of skills therefore needs to encompass those tasks typically performed by platform workers while allowing for an analysis of the (algorithmic) matching channels and processes used by digital platforms (CEDEFOP, 2020, 2021).

There have been three main dimensions to our efforts for mapping the political significance of skills in the context of the platform economy. The first involves identifying "new" or "supplementary" skills that have recently emerged while identifying the circumstances under which such skills are developed. Second, we assess whether the skills required for platform work are specific or general in nature—or a mix of both. Finally, looking primarily at urban contexts, we stress how the renewal of the

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political process through which such skills are defined needs to engage the primary stakeholders: platform workers themselves.

This all raises a fundamental question: In the context of the platform economy, what is the political significance of skills? We believe the answer lies in the relationship between the concept and the rise of digital platforms. Even when they are not directly using technology, contemporary citizens find their participation in society shaped by such platforms. Meanwhile, the ability to capitalize on new internet-based forms of employment and contractual arrangements depends on a wide range of factors, including access to educational opportunities and employment databases (Piasna et al., 2022). Amid this technology-driven transformation of the labour market and society at large, the meaning of skills is changing. Beyond merely something to be applied in the context of work, skills have become crucial for participating in society, developing a personal and political identity, and taking action in often unfamiliar and difficult situations. On the one hand, this underscores the importance of understanding the processes, actors, and conditions involved in "constructing" the skills required for platform work. Furthermore, it highlights the existence of a novel set of social and political processes, actors, and conditions that shape what could be called (urban) digital citizenship (Isin & Ruppert, 2020). Hence the need to redefine the very concept of skills.

The notion of digital citizenship is often rooted in the belief that digital technology is inherently beneficial, regardless of how a person uses it and their ability to use it. In reality, disparities in internet use and access to digital platforms exacerbate pre-existing social divisions and inequalities (Oyedemi, 2015; Scholz, 2016). Accordingly, beyond simply developing technical work abilities, acquiring skills adapted to the platform economy allows for the exercise of digital citizenship. And given the pace of change and the extent of uncertainty surrounding the future, it is vital for the widest possible range of stakeholders to participate in a broad discussion on the use of digital technologies and the promotion of critical literacy, rather than addressing the relevant issues in a piecemeal fashion (Cardullo, 2021).

Simply put, the importance of skills to digital citizenship makes their development a political process, not merely a matter of personal improvement. In a society shaped by digital platforms, skills provide access to the political sphere. But more than just a means to an end, skills also reflect political and societal values, power dynamics, and policy choices. In this way, the question of how the skills required for participation in the platform economy are defined and developed has become fundamental to understanding social and political engagement.

In the workplace and beyond, platform workers deserve a formal voice in the ongoing social and political processes that are redefining their role. As citizens, they need opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of their rights and duties, not to mention recognition as genuine political actors. European initiatives such as the PLUS project can help achieve these goals by providing space for critical reflection on underlying issues. By seeking to better understand and support the skill development process, this chapter aims to facilitate social and political engagement by platform workers. Regarding the political significance of skills in the context of the platform economy, we emphasize the importance of co-construction as an approach to

regulating emerging forms of work and encouraging the exercise of digital citizenship in urban contexts. The chapter's first section provides an overview of how the concept of skills has evolved. Drawing on the results of activities conducted in the context of the PLUS project, the second section shows how the potential for effective political mobilization in the contemporary context depends on a new definition of skills, one that considers both the concept's political dimension and the evolving relationship between workers and a platform-driven labour market. Finally, the third section explores the relationship between platform economy skills and digital citizenship while identifying key points that need to be addressed in terms of developing the skills of platform workers.

2 The Meaning of "Skills" in the Context of Platform Work

Scholars, especially sociologists, have traditionally defined skills in terms of the goal-oriented ability to accomplish a specific task (or series of tasks) in a given context by drawing on knowledge, functional competence, behavioural competencies, etc. (Coulet, 2011). In other words, the term generally refers to the competent application of a set of learned abilities, conditional on the availability of certain resources such as time. However, understandings begin to diverge when the concept is examined in more detail. Indeed, some authors have highlighted a deep ambiguity that can cause different actors in the same field to interpret skills very differently (Dietrich, 2002; Lichtenberger, 2003; Livian, 2002).

A skill can be defined as "a social artefact that comes into being through the artificial delimitation of certain work as 'skilled'" (More, 1982, p. 109). Applying a skill therefore involves leveraging a set of resources (knowledge, know-how, abilities, networks, etc.) to carry out certain activities in a specific professional context and achieve the desired result. Some have portrayed this as a highly individualized process: "The required competence is to the musical score what the actual competence is to its interpretation" (Le Boterf, 2017, p. 83). This means that a given skill can only truly be demonstrated in a situation where a person is called upon to "prove" they can meet the relevant workplace demands. Others have emphasized the distinction between prescribed work and real work (Clot, 2006; Dejours, 2013). From this perspective, the recognition of a skill depends not only on the real-world context in which a task is accomplished but also on the worker's ability to adjust to the changing circumstances typical of their profession (Clot, 2008).

Meanwhile, skills can enable "one to act and/or solve professional problems satisfactorily in a particular context by mobilizing various abilities in an integrated manner" (Bellier, 1999, p. 226). In its plural form, the concept has consistently been defined in terms of two key characteristics: the ability to work in multiple settings and to achieve a certain level of performance (Chenu, 2004). The notion of performance highlights the role social judgement can play in designating an individual as competent or not (Coulet, 2011), that is to say as skilled or unskilled. But as any constructivist would argue, norms are always the product of social construction.

Accordingly, skills are “dependent on situations and the representations that subjects make of them” (Jonnaert, 2009, p. 40), and a worker’s status as skilled or unskilled can be changed simply by modifying the norm. The socially defined nature of skills aligns with our emphasis on the political nature of the skills development process. We therefore see it as essential for the broadest possible range of social actors—including workers labelled as either skilled or unskilled—be involved in redefining the concept for a world shaped by the platform economy.

In the future, determining the relative importance of general and domain-specific skills (i.e., whether the relevant knowledge and experience can be applied only to certain specific professional situations or to work generally) in the platform economy will be key to understanding social change and skills development. Platform work is characterized by a high degree of variability in the tasks performed within each occupation; those workers best able to interact with platforms tend to be those who can apply a wide range of skills. Regardless of the extent to which automation ultimately shapes the future of work, workers and entire communities are already being pushed to diversify their skills. Accordingly, the development of individual skill sets needs to be understood as a participatory (rather than personal) process, whereby specific configurations of skills are co-constructed and co-decided with an emphasis on transferability (from one job or sector to another). This shift away from a labour market based on well-defined skills subject to top-down certification can undermine workplace stability, career success, product quality, and regulatory efforts. As a result, skills development (i.e., defining skills, recognizing them, and establishing a more or less rigid framework for acquiring them) has acquired its political dimension, insofar as determining the skill set required in a particular form of work increasingly requires a shared understanding of the processes involved, as opposed to the consultation of an established index of skills and tasks.

We need to think flexibly and creatively about which platform economy stakeholders hold the power to spark faster and more comprehensive reform through the redistribution of power (i.e., by engaging previously excluded stakeholders) and workplace organizing (Johnston et al., 2020). Currently, skills tend to be discussed in terms of either their technical/professional dimensions or the knowledge and techniques (education, training, experience) required to properly carry out specific forms of work. These largely pedagogical and technical perspectives obscure the extent to which skills are in fact political and social constructs. In other words, skills should ideally be identified, defined, applied, and assessed in a manner that provides all stakeholders—and, above all, workers—with an equitable share of economic opportunities and benefits. But although skills constitute an important pillar of modern (capitalist) economies, workers often see their skills undervalued and overlooked. With this in mind, various stakeholders (workers, employers, educational and training institutions, government agencies, etc.) need to be mobilized in a twofold effort to rethink skills development. On the one hand, what innovative approaches could be taken to establishing a framework for defining and developing the so-called new skills required by the contemporary labour market? On the other hand, what measures could be taken to ensure that so-called traditional skills are adequately valued, recognized, and remunerated in a changing economic landscape.

The European Commission's Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) is one tool that could help with addressing the issue of emerging skills. It groups 21 specific "competences" under five broad "areas": Information and Data Literacy, Communication and Collaboration, Digital Content Creation, Safety, and Problem Solving. Designed to support European countries in developing policies related to digital skills, DigComp also makes it possible for individuals to assess their level of digital proficiency (on a scale of one to eight). Furthermore, the framework recognizes that digital skills are not solely technical in nature (Zhu & Andersen, 2021), a reflection of how the European Union defines digital competence in terms of "the safe and critical use of information society technologies (IST)" (European Commission, 2006, p. 7). The Norwegian government has elaborated on this point by defining digital competence as

> the ability to relate to and use digital tools and media in a safe, critical and creative way. It is about knowledge, skills and attitudes. It is about being able to perform practical tasks, communicate, obtain or process information. Digital judgement, such as privacy, source criticism and information security, is also an important part of digital competence. (Norwegian Government, 2012, p. 18)

These considerations highlight two key aspects of skills development as a decidedly political process: (1) how working with digital technology requires the prior mastery of multiple digital skills and (2) how an open and shared framework needs to be developed for recognizing such skills and compensating platform workers accordingly.

Acknowledging skills as inherently political—and therefore shaped by a political process influenced by the voices and actions of a wide range of individuals and groups—is crucial for understanding citizenship in the context of the emerging platform economy (Zuboff, 2019). It makes it possible to recognize the power dynamics and structural inequalities that determine how skills are acquired, recognized, and applied in contemporary society (Soares Carvalho & Bignami, 2021). In short, it constitutes the first step towards creating more inclusive and equitable systems that empower platform workers to exercise digital citizenship in meaningful ways.

3 Skills as a Basis for Workplace Organizing and Political Mobilization in the Platform Economy: Lessons from the PLUS Project

Urban space provides an ideal context for studying economic and social changes associated with the platform economy (Barns, 2020). It is where most platform work takes place, whether in the form of food delivery, ride-sharing, and cleaning services, or temporary apartment rentals. One component of the Horizon 2020 project aimed to develop a deeper understanding urban discourses on skills in the platform economy. In addition to two meetings of the PLUS Community of Practice, we held workshops for workers, representatives, coordinators, and other stakeholders in

the project's seven case study cities (Barcelona, Berlin, Bologna, Lisbon, London, Paris, and Tallinn). These events were an opportunity not only to provide training but also to discuss how the notion of skills could be collectively redefined with the needs of platform workers in mind. To that end, we explored how the recognition of skills as a political construct can support the exercise of digital citizenship, how platform work offers certain opportunities for challenging power relationships, and how digital platforms and other forms of technology have undermined the nation-state's role in structuring the habitus of citizenship by providing access to new interactional spaces (McCosker et al., 2016). Taking both virtual and physical forms, these so-called platform spaces have a discursive significance that goes beyond the distinction between online and offline environments (Quodling, 2016). In fact, this dichotomy, which is reinforced through the use of terms like "cyberspace," obscures the inter-relational—and therefore political—dimension of such spaces (McCosker et al., 2016).

In terms of how platform spaces are created through interactions between individuals, consider the following points raised at the PLUS training workshops and Community of Practice meetings:

- Applying the technical skills demanded of some platform workers requires access to data stored on the platforms themselves. The workers concerned wanted to learn how to access this data while ensuring that platforms use it fairly. A desire for a better understanding of how the underlying algorithms work (as opposed to the technical details of how they are developed) was also expressed, insofar as being deprived of such information places platform workers in a position of inferiority in relation to management.
- Participating platform workers did not see a need for specific training on time management. They felt fully capable of effectively managing their time based on their experiences in both professional and household contexts. However, they did note how the way that platforms constantly change the rates for different time slots hinders planning. Instead of seeking to improve their time management skills, the workers concerned emphasized the need for platforms to apply rates in a stable and transparent manner.
- Many participants mentioned having acquired advanced navigation skills through their work with platforms like Deliveroo and Uber. However, these skills are neither recognized by the platforms concerned nor transferable.
- Several platform workers complained that they did not understand how platform algorithms work, noting how this lack of knowledge limited their ability to apply operative skills.
- In many cities, people using the Uber, Deliveroo and Airbnb platforms described having developed advanced social and communication skills through their work. However, such skills are not recognized by the corresponding platforms, nor are they transferable from one platform to another.
- Some participants mentioned not knowing where to turn when a platform discriminated against them. Most of the workers concerned knew very little about labour organizing strategies; how a union could help them pursue a claim; or other means

of sharing experiences, raising awareness, and applying political pressure (legal action, protest, strikes).

- Issues of health and safety, including psychological health, were rarely discussed. However, we noted various signs that platform workers enjoy little in the way of protection, especially where workplace accidents and injuries are concerned.
- Participating platform workers were often uncertain about transitioning to employment in another sector, including how to leverage skills and experience. In other words, the lack of employability skills is a crucial issue.
- With a few notable exceptions, participants generally lacked a clear understanding of how platforms collect and process data related to their work, nor were they familiar with procedures for obtaining a copy of their personal data from a platform and ensuring that such data is not used without their authorization or to discriminate against them.
- Along with many Airbnb hosts, some Uber and Deliveroo drivers complained that they were largely left to their own devices and had to rely on Facebook, and WhatsApp groups for advice on dealing with various issues. This reflects a lack of awareness of how both individual activism (taking legal action, sharing information, etc.) and collective activism (organizing protests, pursuing shared demands, social networking, etc.) can support skills development.
- Likewise, organizing skills and support from labour unions could prove critical to addressing problems associated with platform work. For instance, providing opportunities to develop cooperative skills has emerged as a key means of reaching platform workers and explaining their labour rights, the power of networking and collective action, etc.

At the Barcelona and Lisbon workshops, we learned that networks for defending the interests of platform workers already exist in those cities. Although the networks in question remain informal and largely uncoordinated, participants in the Bologna workshop pointed out how the connections established in spaces like Facebook groups or blogs can be effective in promoting shared interests. But regardless of the support that might already be available in a given city, workshop participants consistently emphasized two points related to skills development and workplace rights. First, if they are to improve their working conditions, platform workers need to know more about how platforms work. Second, attendance at any training required by a platform should be considered work time and compensated accordingly.

Both the workshops and the Community of Practice meetings highlighted the extent to which the politically aware co-construction of skills depends on stakeholders—especially workers—being present and active in both offline and online platform spaces. Accordingly, platform workers must have access to the skills required to effectively navigate such spaces; they must be able to develop the habitus and acquire the capital needed to participate in and contribute to communities of shared interests while casting a critical eye on the surrounding discursive environment. These requirements reveal the nodal nature of skills development and fully align the PLUS project's efforts with European calls for flexible policies based on input from all stakeholders (European Commission, 2021). Specifically, the European

Commission has identified three core policy issues: misclassification or downgrading of employment status; fairness and transparency of algorithmic management practices; and enforcement, transparency, and traceability of platform work, including in cross-border situations.

Ultimately, platform spaces are both fluid and political. As such, they allow for the co-construction of skill sets required for platform work while helping provide the level of technical and digital literacy needed to avoid becoming a casualty of technological disruption (Hanakata & Bignami, 2021). Created and developed through digitally mediated interactions between individuals, such spaces exist in a discursive environment that shapes not only how the opportunities offered by the platform economy are understood, but also how the skills citizens need to effectively navigate platform spaces are developed.

4 Platform Workers and (Digital) Citizenship: Framing Skills Development as a Political Process

Citizenship is often understood as a fixed concept reflecting status or membership. In reality, the meaning of citizenship is rooted in enacted practices and performed processes (Clarke et al., 2014; Pykett et al., 2010). Beyond questions of legal status, rights, and responsibilities, it is by seizing opportunities to claim substantive rights and participate in public life that individuals engage in the “social, political, cultural and symbolic” practices that confer citizenship (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 17). In other words, it is a matter of collectively developing a citizen habitus, which then serves as the basis for the ongoing co-construction of citizenship (Bignami, 2014).

In addition to providing access to employment (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008), platforms and the internet increasingly mediate social and labour relations. In this context, digital technology can facilitate opportunities for exercising new forms of citizenship through both online and offline interactions. Digital citizens can therefore be defined as individuals who engage in citizenship practices via digitally mediated technologies (Vromen, 2017). As Boyd (2014) has noted, “although it is not necessary to be technically literate to participate, those with limited technical literacy aren’t necessarily equipped to be powerful citizens of the digital world” (p. 183). In the same vein, Mossberger et al. (2008) have emphasized the need for people to develop, from a young age, an understanding of how the technology they use can support active participation in a digitally mediated world. But along with focusing on how such engagement benefits individuals, these authors tend to equate quantity with quality—a viewpoint questioned by many others (Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008; Hargittai et al., 2018; Isin & Ruppert, 2020; Livingstone & Helsper, 2010; Ono & Zavodny, 2007; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2011, 2019). More broadly, much of the existing research that touches on workers’ relationship with digital technology and what we call platform spaces lacks any explicit recognition of digital citizenship. Nevertheless, the latter concept offers a promising means of considering the different

ways in which people use digitally mediated spaces to build connections, as opposed to the prevailing focus on how they individually acquire "certain digital rights and abilities, skills, and agentic power" (Cardullo, 2021, p. 75).

Different concepts of citizenship can give rise to specific constructions of digital citizenship and associated skills. In the context of the PLUS project, skills that facilitate access to digital technology and platform spaces are considered symbolic capital connected to political and social status. Although this view could justify a formal right to access such technology and spaces, neither nation states nor lower levels of government are currently obliged to ensure access. Meanwhile, with the development and spread of e-government strategies (e.g., under the terms of the 2017 Tallinn Declaration signed by all member states of the European Union), the exercise of citizenship rights increasingly requires proficiency in the use of digital technology. But more than just a matter of access to technology and frequency of use, digital citizenship is a participatory model that recognizes the need for political and social engagement, as well as the significance of underlying skills and behaviours. Shifting the discussion on skills from technical and professional considerations (procedures, training, certification, etc.) to the active co-construction of skill sets through the exercise of digital citizenship in the context of the platform economy will be key to ensuring the sustainability of platform work (Huws et al., 2016). Such a transition will require recognizing citizens as active participants in an ongoing process, as opposed to simply producers and consumers of data (Falk, 2011). With respect to platform workers, this will mean ensuring that they can directly participate in how their skills are defined and formalized. And as we learned at the PLUS project workshops discussed in the previous section, there is a significant need for training and recognition in several areas.

In terms of our initial question regarding the meaning of skills, the current situation raises three key issues. To begin with, training needs to become a source of autonomy for platform workers, as opposed to a burden or constraint. This point is especially significant insofar as relevant training—such as on how platforms collect and monetize personal information—can help platform workers resist exploitation. Furthermore, the broader process of co-defining skills needs to address training from the multiple perspectives of learning through connecting, doing through thinking, collective action through awareness and commitment, and change through conscious action. Embracing a more comprehensive notion of training will foster recognition of the deeper political significance of taking action, building dynamic relationships, and applying skills. In practice, this will require major changes to training systems, which need to take a more critical and participatory approach based on shared understandings, co-constructed methodologies, and a transparent collective process for defining skills.

The second issue concerns systems of social protection. As noted in the previous section, skills can be leveraged to help pursue legal claims and political demands. Regardless of the various employment regulations in place across different jurisdictions, platform work is consistently shaped by a logic of outsourcing—including the outsourcing of risk to platform workers, who need access to the necessary tools

for safely carrying out their professional activities. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vital importance of the skills required for platform work, especially in the case of home delivery services. But lockdowns also helped expose the precarious conditions and risks faced by platform workers, whose state of economic dependence underscores the need to update labour laws in line with digital evolution (Bernier & Monchatre, 2018). In particular, the legal and economic distinction between self-employed workers and salaried workers has become increasingly blurred. The "grey zones" (Supiot, 2000) resulting from the rise of the platform economy and the decline of traditional wage employment have grown to the point where many forms of work appear to lack any legal framework whatsoever (Bureau et al., 2019). This raises fundamental questions about the (re-)distribution of value, especially in a context of tax optimization by digital platforms (Palier, 2019). In addition to extending existing protections to emerging employment arrangements and forms of work (e.g., by granting platform workers to right to employment insurance), the relevance of categories like self-employed workers and salaried workers should be questioned. Would establishing a single employment status (and associated tax regime) facilitate the adoption of a comprehensive set of protections for all workers (including platform workers)? Such an approach could be pursued alongside the implementation of a universal basic income (Palier, 2019; Stiegler & Kyrou, 2016). Meanwhile, instead of focusing exclusively on the regulation of private platforms, public platforms could be developed to promote a more equitable distribution of resources and more meaningful engagement in public life (Srnicek, 2017).

The final issue relates to the capacity for platform workers' skills to support the full exercise of digital citizenship, alongside more traditional forms of political mobilization. The activities discussed in the previous section highlighted the critical need to redefine skills in the context of the platform economy through a participatory process involving all stakeholders. Such a manifestation of digital citizenship in action would focus on achieving the following goals:

- Clarifying data ownership, ensuring workers can access their personal data, requiring disclosure of how platforms collect and process such data, and preventing it from being used in discriminatory or unauthorized ways.
- Identifying key allies and tactics in the fight to ensure platforms apply rates to different time slots in a stable and transparent manner (so workers can plan their time effectively).
- Defining and recognizing skills in a way that maximizes their transferability, so workers can more easily apply their skill sets to different workplaces.
- Providing workers with the skills they need to understand the principles governing how platform algorithms operate.
- Promoting social and communication skills.
- Providing clear information on labour organizing, how unions can help workers pursue claims, and how workers can effectively share knowledge about different forms of collective action (protests, strikes, etc.).

- Addressing health and safety concerns, including those related to psychological health (Where can platform workers turn? Who has the power to improve conditions?).
- Improving employability through development of transversal skills that make it easier for workers to transition from one sector to another, as well as by mapping informal skills, adding value to skills, identifying cross-sector and inter-sector opportunities, and building on work experience.
- Increasing the potential for collaboration between workers by fostering connections through networking and increasing awareness of activism as a tool for influencing how skills are defined or acquired, whether at the individual level (legal action) or collectively (coordinated action, political campaigns, social networking, problem-solving).

When considering how skills development constitutes a political process and skills themselves can serve as tools of digital citizenship, it is important to acknowledge that platforms offer opportunities to disrupt existing systems. This means that by using platforms to engage in political action, workers can fluidly adopt practices that reflect their habitus across multiple spaces (Loader et al., 2014; Robertson, 2009). Platforms therefore constitute a political terrain capable of facilitating cooperation, processes of co-construction, and the attainment of a level of technical and digital literacy that will prevent workers from becoming casualties of technological disruption. Instead, they will be equipped to participate in and benefit from the ongoing shift to "platform urbanization" (Hanakata & Bignami, 2023). Likewise, the politically aware co-construction of skills requires a presence in online and offline platform spaces, where individuals can contribute to communities of shared interests. And to the extent that these fully-fledged digital citizens can effectively navigate and critically assess such discursive contexts, they will be well positioned to acquire political, economic, and social capital (Ignatow & Robinson, 2017).

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