

AGORA 81

UBERISATION SPREADS TO PUBLIC SERVICES

Uberisation is spreading to more and more sectors of the economy. Even public services, which have so far largely been spared, could be affected by this phenomenon, which is radically shaking up labour relations. It is essential that workers and their representatives be involved from the outset in the digital revolution so that workers can be granted effective protection from its consequences, not least with regard to health.

What is 'uberisation'? It is a difficult term to define as it refers to an ongoing process, and the forms it takes, the challenges it entails, its implications and even its fields of application remain very vague.

In 2016, a thesis from the Université Catholique de Louvain¹ identified and compared seven different definitions, which examine uberisation from five different perspectives (making our under-used assets available for a fee, peer-to-peer exchanges, an online platform, a rating system, and the transformation of traditional business models through innovation). None of the definitions covered all five perspectives and none of the perspectives were present in all the definitions.

A French online dictionary (lintern@ute²) gives a fairly general definition:

'Uberisation refers to a business model whereby professionals and customers are put in contact with each other directly, even instantaneously, through the use of technology. This model has the advantage of being much less expensive for the customer than the conventional business model.'

This was, in fact, the model adopted in 2009 by UberCab (which became Uber in 2010) for its transport services. Less than ten years later, this business model has taken root throughout the world in a wide range of economic sectors.

It is to be found in sectors such as hospitality (Airbnb, Booking.com), transport (Uber, Blablacar, Drivy), home improvements, renovation and odd jobs (Lulu dans ma rue, Hellocasa, Mesdépanneurs, Amazon Home Services, etc.), legal services (Cma-Justice), and even in the fight against terrorism with initiatives such as hackathons or non-profit incubators.

While many of us will have cause to use their services in our daily lives, the break with the traditional model of economic activity that these firms represent raises a number of important questions and poses a serious threat to companies in the sectors concerned - as well as to their employees.

'Being uberated' and 'uberisation' are notions that elicit apprehension and fear. In an interview with the *Financial Times*³, the advertiser Maurice Lévy said: 'Everyone is starting to worry about being uberated. It's the idea that you suddenly wake up to find your legacy business gone...!'

Let us look at a few examples:

¹ *Uberisation : définition, impacts et perspectives*, R. Lechien et L. Tinel (http://www.ipdigit.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/TFE_Renan_Lechien_et_Louis_Tinel.pdf)

² <https://www.linternaute.fr/dictionnaire/fr/definition/uberisation/>

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/377f7054-81ef-11e4-b9d0-00144feabdc0#axzz3M8s3UwVa>

Taxis: taxi drivers denounce the precarious working conditions of the Uber model in which drivers are independent contractors responsible for financing their own vehicles and insurance, with no or very little social protection and none of the advantages of employees, but with considerable freedom, at least in theory, to organise their own time - in short, they are an on-demand labour force paid on commission.

Hotel sector: tourism professionals are worried about lost revenues and are putting pressure on governments to toughen the legislation governing Airbnb-type rentals, which are becoming increasingly popular. According to organisations representing the tourism industry, which employs a million people in France, companies in the sector 'face an explosion of unfair competition linked to the proliferation of illegal forms of trade, in particular short-term tourist rentals. This activity is expanding exponentially, without any control, taking advantage in many cases of legal uncertainty to become professional hotel activities in disguise'.

Lawyers: there are numerous legal services websites that propose, for fees of less than a hundred euros, online assistance to individuals preparing court cases at which the assistance of a lawyer is not always mandatory. In France, the bar association regularly lodges complaints for unlawful practice of law against those it refers to as 'poachers' within the field of law. According to the creators of an online legal services platform, 'there are three types of innovation that exemplify this process of uberisation: new software solutions using document-generation algorithms, semantic tools that allow legal solutions to be proposed directly on the basis of the web queries submitted by users, and innovations linked to big data and applied to the law'⁴.

The issue of uberisation also arises in connection with other transformations of traditional economic activities which do not involve this peer-to-peer contact between supply and demand. For example, bookshops feel that they are being 'uberated' by Amazon, traditional banks are threatened by online banks, or even by 'quasi-banking' activities that are, or will be, offered by technological giants such as Google and, in the insurance sector, 'connected devices' gather and transmit information on our behaviour patterns, thus calling into question the standard economic model and the evaluation of risk that underlies it. Back in 2015, in an article in *Le Monde*⁵, Mathilde Damgé argued that 'uberisation' was a catch-all term that reflected the fears of a range of economic sectors whose profitability was under threat.

Public services: except where it engages in commercial activities similar to those mentioned above, the public sector has so far been relatively unaffected by uberisation, though it is increasingly ready to make use of the services offered by these 'disruptive' companies. For example, Uber transport expenses or Airbnb accommodation expenses are regularly accepted and reimbursed by public administrations or institutions as if they were 'traditional' taxi or hotel expenses.

Nevertheless, technological developments and the computerisation or digitalisation of a range of activities have had a considerable impact on the public sector for many years, with consequences for work organisation, the balance between work and family life, and the physical and mental health of workers.

In June 2018, the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) organised a seminar on issues relating to collective bargaining in the Member States, and in particular the impact of digitalisation in public services. Researchers from the European Social Observatory took this opportunity to present

⁴ https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/06/19/vers-une-uberisation-du-droit_4658065_3232.html

⁵ https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/06/26/de-quoi-l-uberisation-est-elle-le-nom_4662261_4355770.html

the results of a study commissioned by the EPSU entitled Impact of digitalisation on job quality in public services⁶.

Basing themselves on two sectors (home care and employment services), the researchers highlighted the consequences for workers of the digital transformation. It should be noted that digitalisation has not affected these two sectors in the same way: employment services have been computerised for many years whereas, in the case of home care, only the planning of work has been computerised through the recent introduction of smartphones and tablets.

Workers in both sectors have experienced a heavier workload and a more intense rhythm of work, as well as increased monitoring of their activities, with a gradual move towards 'performance-based' management. The requirement (whether real or imagined) to be permanently 'connected' makes them view the right to disconnect as necessary and welcome protection. However, most workers do not consider that digitalisation has had a significant influence on their salary or on their social protection.

In general, workers in the public employment services feel a greater impact of digital transformation on all aspects of their jobs: the actual content of their work has changed and workers no longer feel in control; the line between working time and family life has become blurred; social relations with the public or among colleagues have been reduced or have become perfunctory; and the digital divide has created an ever-greater gulf between colleagues who are at ease with the new technologies and those who are not.

As regards health, employees in both sectors consider that the digital revolution has had, or could have, adverse effects: vision problems as a result of working on screen, musculoskeletal - or even cardiovascular - disorders related to immobility, fatigue, and an increased risk of road accidents owing to more frequent use of mobile telephones and tablets, without even taking into account the stress caused by an excessive workload and the need to respond immediately, whether by telephone or email, to the public, colleagues and superiors. This stress entails a marked increase in psychosocial risks (depression, burnout, etc...).

Despite the implications of the digital revolution for the future of work and for workers, the latter admit that its consequences are ignored or minimised in collective bargaining and in public policies at all levels.

The researchers recommend:

- that the impact of the digital transformation on the quality of work in all its aspects be integrated horizontally into the framework of social dialogue at all levels (inter-professional, sectoral or within companies);
- that the potential negative effects of the digital transformation be taken into account and be addressed by legal provisions that protect workers;
- that the public authorities (local, regional or national) and other stakeholders conduct detailed studies of the consequences of the digital revolution in all sectors;
- that measures be taken to ensure, within the framework of this integrated approach, that neither service users nor workers become victims of the inevitable advance of digitalisation.

At European level, the consequences of the digital transformation should be integrated into an overall strategy that is not confined to promoting economic growth and gains in productivity, but that also seeks to protect workers and citizens. The social dialogue structures should, from the very beginning, be stakeholders in this revolution. The European Union and its Member States need to reinforce

⁶ [https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/FINAL REPORT EPSU DIGITALISATION - OSE June 2018.pdf](https://www.epsu.org/sites/default/files/article/files/FINAL%20REPORT%20EPSU%20DIGITALISATION%20-%20OSE%20June%202018.pdf)

existing rights, such as the right to the protection of personal data and workers' rights, and to establish new rights, in particular by opening a debate on the right to disconnect, which is destined to become a new fundamental right for workers.

In conclusion, uberisation is but one aspect of the digital revolution confronting society as a whole. Despite the convenience offered by Uber, Airbnb and Amazon, we need to be aware of the potentially disastrous consequences of this new economy for the social rights of workers, who will have to devise and put into place new forms of social dialogue and social protection. Even in the public sector, where social rights are better protected, the digital revolution has had a significant negative impact on the nature of work itself and on the physical and psychological well-being of workers, and this needs to be taken into account in the existing social dialogue structures.

Félix Gérardon
Deputy Secretary-General, Union Syndicale, Brussels