

DO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES PERCEIVE DIGITAL PLATFORM WORK AS A CHANCE FOR EMPLOYMENT?

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According to the SORS data, persons with disabilities make up approximately 10% of the total population in Serbia (between 700,000 and 800,000 persons) (Marković, 2014). Of that number, only about 13% are employed, significantly less than the 42.5% employment rate in the total population (Mamula Nikolić et al., 2019). The low employment rate among persons with disabilities results from discrimination, unperformed assessment of work-related functional abilities, unfavorable socio-economic background, and low educational and skill levels. The advances in digital technology can offer fairer work opportunities for traditionally excluded groups in the labor market. This paper aims to investigate the attitude of persons with disabilities towards work on online labor platforms (so-called freelance platforms) and assess the level of their digital competencies and digital entrepreneurial competencies as a precondition for this type of work engagement.

To obtain information on socio-economic background, the level of digital competencies and digital entrepreneurial competencies of persons with disabilities in Serbia, their knowledge of the digital labor platforms, and the intention to engage in digital freelance work, the authors developed a structured, four-point Likert scale questionnaire. The assessment of the

possessed level of digital competencies is performed by applying the methodology used in the Digital Competences Development System – Contents of the Self-Assessment Tool (2018). This methodology is essentially based on DigComp 2.1 framework.

This research concludes that a significant percentage of persons with disabilities in Serbia positively assess their general digital competencies. It could result from numerous retraining programs organized by the National Employment Service (nsz.gov.rs). On the other hand, digital entrepreneurial competencies, knowledge of freelance platforms' work mechanisms, and employment opportunities they offer were not rated accordingly. The respondents mainly stated that they have never created a digital business, have no intention of starting one, would not know how to apply for a job on a digital labor platform, nor to determine a price for their work.

Due to unfavorable socio-economic status, persons with disabilities are at a higher risk of long-term unemployment and withdrawal from the labor market. The results of this research point to the need for introducing tailor-made retraining programs in digital competencies and digital entrepreneurship, which could provide persons with disabilities with practical knowledge and empower them for self-employment through digital entrepreneurship on digital labor platforms. The results and insights that this paper offers could be beneficial for persons with disabilities and policymakers.

A plethora of studies have already addressed the topic of digital competencies among the general population. Anyhow, the evidence regarding the digital competencies of persons with disabilities is scarce. Accordingly, a research gap is determined, as there is a lack of evidence on the intention of persons with disabilities to engage in work on online labor

platforms. This paper can serve as a starting point in investigating the alternatives to traditional employment for traditionally excluded groups from the labor market. This paper's limitation is that the authors have examined only the basic digital competencies of persons with disabilities. Further research should examine advanced digital competencies and specialized skills needed for engagement in the online labor market.

Key Words: Persons with disabilities, Digital competencies, Digital platform work, Serbia.

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