BEYOND THE SIDE HUSTLE: AI, DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF WORK IN NIGERIA

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Published by Global South Academia — November 2026

Abstract

The increasing pace of digital development has revolutionised work in Nigeria, giving rise to new avenues for income generation but also new dimensions of precariousness and inequality. Side hustles, which have traditionally been an important part of people's livelihoods, especially young people facing limited opportunities in formal employment, are becoming more common. Simultaneously, generative AI is also changing the nature of platform work. It is making it easier for people to produce digitally and automate mundane activities, and creating new forms of AI-enhanced work. This article highlights how the combination of artificial intelligence and digital platforms is changing work dynamics in Nigeria. The article asserts that while AI-based platforms have enhanced opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship, and global market participation among youth users, these advantages are constrained by digital inequality, skill limitations, income instability, algorithmic control mechanisms, and limited social protections. The article also addresses the implications for education and digital skills development, stating that "equipping Nigerians for the future of work" will require more than traditional employability training alone.

Keywords: Gig economy, Generative AI, Digital platforms, Nigeria, Employability, Algorithmic management

Introduction

Despite emerging as one of the fastest-growing economies in 2015, Nigeria maintained a downward economic trajectory, with negative outcomes including rising unemployment, inflation, and low purchasing power. Fortunately, Nigeria, like other underdeveloped countries, seems to benefit from a global expansion of digital platforms, as reflected in skilled professionals' access to evolving work opportunities in remote and digital settings. For example, freelance platforms like Upwork and Fiverr allow Nigerians to demonstrate relevant skills such as graphic design, video editing, and content writing in exchange for globally measured incentives (Opesade, 2024). As a result, it is plausible to assert that Nigeria benefited immensely from a recent global demand for skilled professionals for technological innovation and digital globalization. However, artificial intelligence (AI) threatens the existing framework, with AI models capable of performing international skills functions such as creating effective marketing copy, designing flyers, and even producing realistic videos. While AI tools threaten the adoption of AI output, facilitating the training of these language learning models with data from professionals globally, the future of work is expected to advance in the next decade (Georgiou, 2026). Thus, this article reviews how existing skills may become irrelevant in the future, the need for new skills in the AI era, and the implications for the nature of work in Nigeria and globally.

The evolution of Informal Work to Platform-mediated work in Nigeria

The shift from informal work to platform-mediated work in Nigeria, often described as the gig economy, was driven not solely by the immediate availability of these platforms but also by economic pressures and the desire for short-term, flexible, and project-based work. Specifically, while the formal sector offers significant job security, skilled professionals may prefer the informal sector due to the unattractive nature of the traditional work sector in Nigeria, given poor wage structures and incentives that do not reflect the country's economic realities. Thus, in recent realities, it is plausible to assert that more Nigerians will prefer to work as service providers across sectors such as ride-hailing, which accounts for a significant share of gig economy participation in Nigeria (Adekoya et al., 2024). Consequently, as digital platforms become popular, skilled employees' engagement has become a significant source of financial inflows from other countries (Hasan & Sadat, 2023). However, Nigerian employees and freelancers working on these various digital platforms experience significant limitations, including a lack of access to opportunities compared to their peers in other countries, unfair treatment from some platforms, such as taking a significant percentage from agreements between workers and clients, and unfair treatment by customer service. Thus, despite the availability of remote opportunities on digital platforms, Nigerians, like workers from other underdeveloped countries, also face significant challenges.

AI is changing the equation

Before the advent of generative AI like ChatGPT, Gemini AI, Claude AI, and a host of others, skilled professionals across different fields have been in high demand as they take on tasks such as writing, coding, video editing, graphic design, and even administrative tasks. Digital platforms also enhanced the availability of professionals, ensuring that these workers benefit from a global market of employers and brands (Mou & Faruk, 2024). Nevertheless, generative AI continues to disrupt the system by reducing the demand for skilled professionals through the availability of functions such as website development, article planning and writing, and graphic design for marketing. Moreover, agentic AI is another form of AI disruption that threatens the existing ecosystem by enabling brands and employers to automate their systems, improve efficiency, reduce project delays caused by difficult freelancers or remote workers, recruit talent-fit workers for a project, and enhance overall project expertise (George, 2026). Specifically, businesses and employers can reduce the costs of employing remote workers and freelancers, but may consider retaining talent, especially when human input is indispensable to a project (Evans-Uzosike & Okatta, 2023). However, AI disruption does not mean a complete neglect of skills that generative AI can now perform, as employers still seek to hire freelancers for various projects. Instead, remote workers and freelancers who use digital platforms as a "side hustle" may be required to provide more specialised skills that can improve AI systems or require less AI input. For example, AI training jobs have been on the rise, with workers required to annotate data produced by AI or ensure the accuracy and reliability of AI systems, suggesting that AI has not completely disrupted the digital space but has transformed it, presenting new opportunities that should not be ignored for businesses, brands, freelancers, and remote workers (Tubaro et al., 2020).

The Nigerian/Global South Experience

Digital platforms remain relevant as "side hustle" ventures for millions of Nigerians. While some individuals still harness opportunities from working within these platforms, others are quietly leaving them due to obvious

challenges. Firstly, discussions around digital inequality, which suggest that certain individuals feel targeted in accessing opportunities on these digital platforms, indicate a prevailing issue of discrimination and unfairness (Zervas & Stiakakis, 2025). Although these platforms may argue that their algorithms naturally match jobs with the right talent based on the required skills, experience, and availability, some employees or clients may intentionally focus on remote workers in their own country or those from developed countries. Consequently, new professionals may avoid digital platforms due to fear of being scaled on them (Thorson & Battocchio, 2024). Similarly, brands and professionals may continue to face staffing shortages due to such discrimination. Nonetheless, skill deficits may account for differences in the treatment received by professionals from underdeveloped countries like Nigeria. As a result, professionals, freelancers, and remote workers in Nigeria need to explore ways to address existing deficits to remain relevant in the global system.

The Education Questions

Employability training receives the strongest advocacy in discussions about Nigerians' readiness to take on tasks and responsibilities compared with their peers globally (Kolajo et al., 2026). However, employability training does not account for the dynamic nature of the future of work, which can take different forms, such as developing agentic AI models for automation, AI performance monitoring, ethical compliance, and other evolving roles. Employability training remains important in helping graduates develop interpersonal skills such as communication, negotiation, and leadership that help them manage the demands of working within dynamic multinational teams (Aserfer & Abidin, 2021). Nonetheless, the AI evolution is not predictable. It can take different forms, including artificial general intelligence or artificial superintelligence, which are useful for monitoring and coordinating physical systems, as has been applied in autonomous driving. As a result, continuous learning and adoption of AI become highly important for Nigerian professionals, freelancers, and remote workers.

Conclusion/policy recommendations

The changing nature of work makes it clear that employability is not limited to certain technical or occupational skills. Digital platforms have opened up new opportunities for young people and skilled workers in Nigeria to engage in the global labour market through freelancing and remote work. The advent of generative and agentic AI, however, is changing this landscape by automating tasks previously performed by human workers, such as writing, coding, graphic design, and administration. AI doesn't just phase out jobs; it's redefining what is expected of the workforce in terms of skills and contributions. The new opportunities emerging in fields such as AI training, data annotation, system evaluation, performance monitoring, and AI governance illustrate how the technological revolution can not only diminish the demand for certain skills but also create new ones.

For the Nigerian context, it is suggested that employability training needs to shift away from preparing trainees for existing jobs. AI literacy, digital competence, critical thinking, creativity, communication, problem-solving, ethical considerations, and adaptability should be integrated into programmes in employability at universities and other educational institutions. Rather than dropping technical skills because AI can do some of them, individuals should be able to use them alongside higher-order skills that allow them to break down problems, critique AI-produced results, draw on their own expertise and judgment, and

navigate complex human relationships. This will enable people to take on a complementary role to AI rather than a head-to-head competition with automation.

In addition, there is a greater need for investments in inclusive
access to AI education and digital infrastructure. In the future, reliable Internet connectivity, affordable digital devices, and opportunities for ongoing professional development are increasingly critical to participation in the world of work. If these inequalities are not addressed through investments, they could be perpetuated by unequal access to new technologies, jobs, and opportunities abroad. Governments, educational institutions, the private sector, and development institutions should thus work together to increase access to digital and AI learning, especially for youth and workers seeking to engage in global labour markets.

Nigerian professionals and freelancers need to embrace continuous learning as a key part of their career development. Being reliant on a single platform or a specific technical skill is becoming increasingly dangerous, as so much can change so quickly. Technical, interpersonal, commercial, and AI skills must be learned as a set of transferable skills. At the same time, workers need to gain proficiency in fields where human judgment, creativity, negotiation, leadership, and relationship-building skills are essential.

Lastly, AI-powered labour markets need to be complemented by enhanced tools for fairness and inclusion. There is a need for increased transparency in algorithmic decision-making, recruitment, worker evaluation, and access to opportunities on digital platforms and among employers, especially in light of current concerns about the treatment of workers from the Global South. In summary, the employability of AI versus human labour in Nigeria isn't an either-or situation. What is more important is to build an education and employment ecosystem that ensures Nigerians can continually adapt to technological change, collaborate with AI, and deliver value in areas where human expertise and judgement are still required.□

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