



Investment works

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**Discussion Paper**

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# Enhancing workforce engagement with technology



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## Executive summary

In a world where technology is transforming how we communicate with each other, there are a growing number of opportunities to improve the flow of information between workers, companies and investors. From using mobile phones to gather data on labour conditions directly from workers, to apps that facilitate ongoing dialogue between workers and management, digital solutions are helping to overcome a number of the constraints facing more traditional, face-to-face methods of engagement.

This report outlines a framework to help investors and companies consider how best to use digital technologies to enhance workforce communication and worker voice. **Section 1** asks ‘why’ use technology to support worker voice. First, it explores the benefits of enhanced workforce engagement, outlining evidence for improvements to productivity and customer loyalty, for example. It then outlines the benefits of using technology, relative to more traditional methods, establishing technology’s potential to facilitate engagement at greater scale and speed with a workforce that, in the modern economy, is increasingly disconnected from the workplace. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have only deepened these trends due to increased remote and flexible working.

For investors operating in emerging and frontier economies, where worker rights are not always well-protected in law, labour issues are often hard to uncover. Technology can complement the broader set of tools available to both companies and investors to optimise workforce engagement – and deliver greater insights into working conditions. Digital methods can be used to ‘collect’ data from workers; to ‘connect’ workers with each other or with management; or to ‘convey’ key messages to the workforce. Workers gain new ways of providing feedback and to raise issues that matter to them, and to access information critical to their role and wider wellbeing. Voices that were previously hidden – for example for fear of retribution from speaking out – can be heard because of the greater anonymity and security that digital communication channels can provide. This can potentially be helpful in uncovering safeguarding or gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) issues, as well as other sources of dissatisfaction among workers, enabling them to be addressed.

**Section 2** asks ‘where’ along the investment process such technologies are best deployed. Methods such as mobile phone surveys can be used to ‘collect’ data from workers during due diligence or monitoring, in order to explore the development impact of jobs supported through an investment or to understand risks and flag potential compliance issues. However, there are several constraints to using surveys during due diligence that need to be considered, such as time limitations and whether it is appropriate to engage with large numbers of workers during due diligence. Opportunities to use digital methods to ‘collect’ data on development impacts may be most appropriate where job creation or job quality is a core part of the investment’s impact thesis.

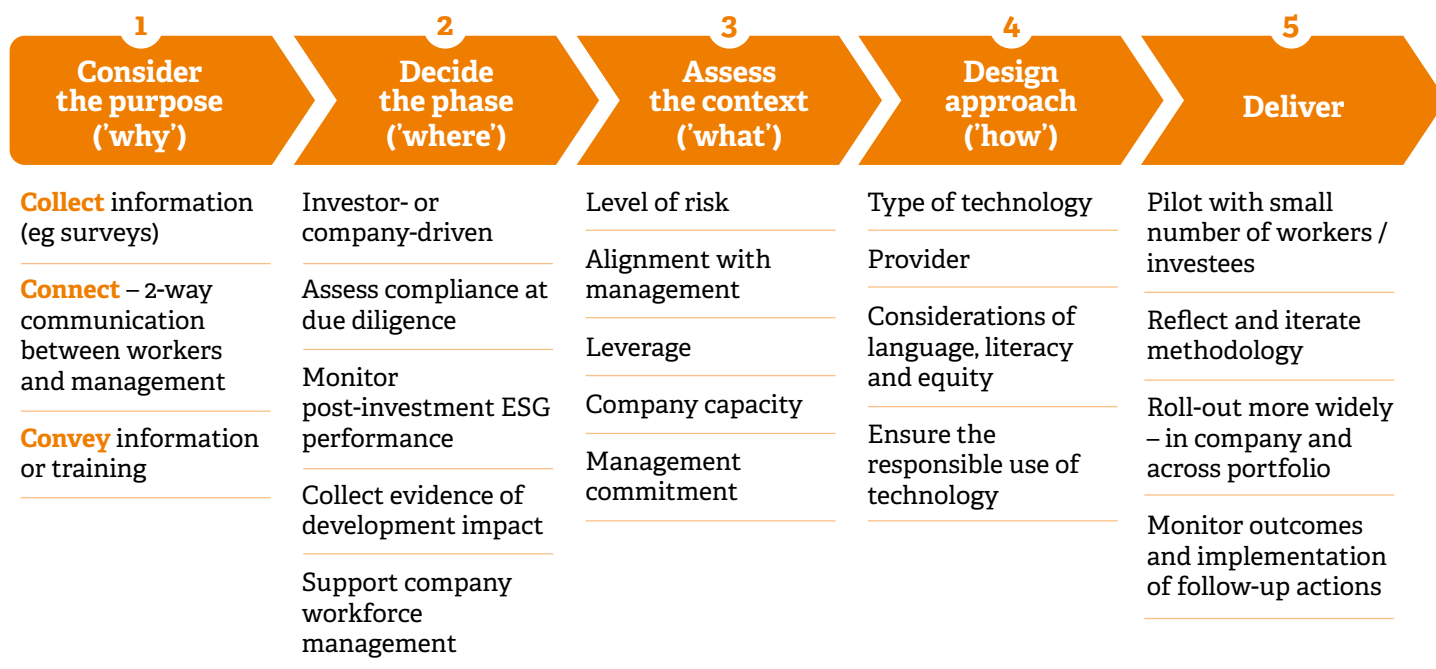
Post-investment, investors can work with management to integrate enhanced workforce engagement into corporate decision making, to ensure decisions aimed at improving productivity and retention are informed directly by workers’ views. This creates something of a ‘win-win-win’ for investors, companies and workers. By listening to workers, management can ensure efforts to improve workforce productivity and retention are targeted at the initiatives that will be most effective at achieving those outcomes. Workers feel more valued and, over time, experience improvements to their job quality tailored to their needs and aspirations. Investors benefit from the improvements to corporate performance and development impact, as well as gaining direct insights into the experiences of workers, which can be used to triangulate other sources of information received on compliance with labour requirements.

Investors can also support investee companies to understand and address specific business challenges – such as high staff turnover or the ability to attract and retain skilled workers – by ‘connecting’ with workers and ‘conveying’ key information, including through e-training. Digital technologies make it easier to roll-out effective internal communication channels across whole workforces, particularly those with dispersed or remote workers. Strong workforce communication and worker voice systems have in turn been shown to have a positive effect on business performance and productivity, through a more motivated workforce with higher levels of employee engagement.

For technology solutions to be effective, however, a set of enabling conditions need to be in place. **Section 3** sets out ‘what’ these conditions are, covering considerations at the investor level, such as the degree of influence an investor may have with a company to ensure any labour issues are addressed. This is a function of alignment of interest between investor and investee – in terms of commercial priorities, management aims and financial goals – and leverage over management, depending on the nature of the investment and factors such as the strength of personal relationships. At the company level, key considerations include: the current management attitude towards the workforce; the human resource capacity to address findings; and the maturity of existing employee engagement systems.

**Section 4** outlines ‘how’ investors and companies can design and deploy worker voice technologies. It summarises the main categories of technology – computers, mobiles and social media methods – and how to choose between different delivery options, based on the context. When deciding which technology to use, investors and companies should choose the technology that best meets the needs of workers and companies in the given context, based on levels of literacy and mobile penetration, alongside cost considerations. Fortunately, the range of technologies on offer is constantly evolving, and the current diversity of service – and different ways in which technology can be deployed – makes it possible to ‘work around’ most accessibility challenges.

The report ends with a brief **conclusion**, setting out a five-step process for investors to follow to support the effective use of worker voice technology in companies. It summarises the experience of using technology to date, both by investors and in a global supply chain context, where technology-facilitated worker engagement has helped collect data, triangulate and verify information obtained through non-digital methods, as well as pinpointing labour issues that warrant further investigation or follow-up action. Ultimately, by improving visibility of workers’ perspectives, investors and management can take better informed decisions about how to improve the job quality of workers, and therefore improve company performance and development outcomes for workers.



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## Foreword

To improve people's lives, access not only to a job, but to a good quality job, is vital. It's also fundamental to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8, Decent work and economic growth.

At CDC, we invest to create inclusive, sustainable and productive employment and decent work for all. One of the ways we do this is by helping employers to create a more motivated workforce by identifying, for example, opportunities to improve employee relations. We know that businesses can establish a thriving workforce by engaging with and listening to their workers. This allows businesses to understand directly from workers what challenges they face, and helps businesses support workers to overcome these barriers.

Effective workforce communications can, in turn, lead to business growth. Research shows that engaging with workers, and starting to address their concerns, drives business performance in terms of increased productivity as well as reduced staff turnover and absenteeism. For businesses and investors, listening to workers' perspectives also enables potential issues to be uncovered early; so that labour issues can be addressed in a timely way.

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in workforce communications, as it facilitates engagement at greater scale and speed with workforces that may be remote and hard to reach with in-person surveys. It is cost effective, and the anonymity offered by technology-enabled communication can also give people the confidence to share concerns that might otherwise remain hidden due to fear of retribution.

COVID-19 has only accelerated uptake and reliance on technology, as normal channels of communication have been cut off or restricted due to shifts to remote and flexible working. For deskless workers, remote working is often not an option, but COVID required rapid changes to working arrangements. This included measures to protect health and safety, which needed to be communicated accurately and at scale.

We've made worker engagement and protection a core part of the support we're offering to investees in response to the pandemic. We hope that through this guidance note, investors and companies can explore further the benefits of listening to workers directly.



**Liz Lloyd**

Chief Impact Officer, CDC Group plc

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## Introduction

This report examines how digital technologies can be used to improve information flows between management and workers, at the same time as generating deeper insights into working conditions for investors – particularly impact and development finance investors in emerging and frontier markets.

Many of the experiences are drawn from the use of so-called ‘worker voice’ initiatives in global supply chains (see Box 1 for a discussion of worker voice definitions). In some ways, the investor role is analogous to that of global brands, as they both source from or invest in parts of the world where there may be little or no unionisation and weak or unenforced labour laws; and therefore require greater visibility and assurance of working conditions.<sup>1</sup>

However, investors have a different set of incentives and capacities compared to buyers in a supply chain dynamic. Where a buyer-supplier relationship can be more transactional, an investor has a stronger alignment of interest with company management, and can be actively involved in the governance and decision-making structures of a company. To date, the investor perspective has mainly been included in literature as a potential funder of technology service providers, but not as a user of these technologies. This report seeks to address that gap, and to raise awareness among investors of potential technologies which have been used for some time by brands sourcing from often-similar markets.

The question of how technology can be used to enhance workforce communications and worker voice is timely for investors and investees alike. COVID-19 has underscored the need for clear channels to engage and communicate with workers, with a host of new labour-related issues for businesses to contend with, ranging from managing dispersed ‘white-collar’ workers in their homes, to protecting the health and safety of onsite ‘blue-collar’ workers. Before the pandemic, there was already a growing interest in using technology to support worker communications. This has only increased with the restrictions on travel and movement that have been imposed in many countries, inhibiting the ability of investors to conduct physical diligence and monitoring activities within their portfolios at a time of heightened risks of labour abuse in many parts of the world.

Annex 1 sets out the full research framework and methodology.

The rest of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 asks ‘why’ use technology, summarising the potential benefits of using technology to engage directly with workers.
- Section 2 outlines ‘where’ in the investment process investors can consider technology-supported solutions.
- Section 3 describes ‘what’ enabling conditions should be in place to support the effective use of technology.
- Section 4 shows ‘how’ to use worker voice technologies, providing an overview of the different services and technology options available to investors and companies.
- A brief conclusion sets out the five key steps an investor can take when approaching worker voice technology.

### Box 1: What is ‘worker voice’?

While ‘worker voice’ is a term that has been widely used in the fields of human resources, industrial relations and, more recently, supply chain sustainability, there are different interpretations as to what the term means in practice.<sup>2</sup> While worker voice has historically been conveyed to employers through trade unions and collective bargaining, union membership has declined over the past 30 years.

At the same time, new forms of employment and high levels of informality in many developing countries present challenges in workers being able to build their collective agency. Therefore, the shift to also include channels of indirect (for example, via worker representatives) and direct communication (such as suggestion boxes and feedback mechanisms) within the topic of ‘worker voice’, is a move that also reflects an increasing desire in the business community to find ways to better engage workers in order to improve their productivity – and by extension business performance.

This report focuses on using technology for direct communication with individual workers – recognising that such communication should not be a replacement for representative consultation and collective bargaining between workers and employers. Indeed, the anonymous use of such technology can enable workers to report concerns or challenges they have experienced when trying to join a trade union, which might otherwise go undetected.

Worker voice technologies have been defined as methods that gather “digital information from workers with regard to some aspect of working conditions, typically via telephone or computer – and understand how these aspects actually impact on workers’ lives” (Rende-Taylor & Shih, 2019).<sup>3</sup> In general, this report considers technologies that facilitate information sharing between workers, the companies that they work for, and organisations with a stake in such companies (such as investors and global brands).

## Why use digital communications to support worker voice?

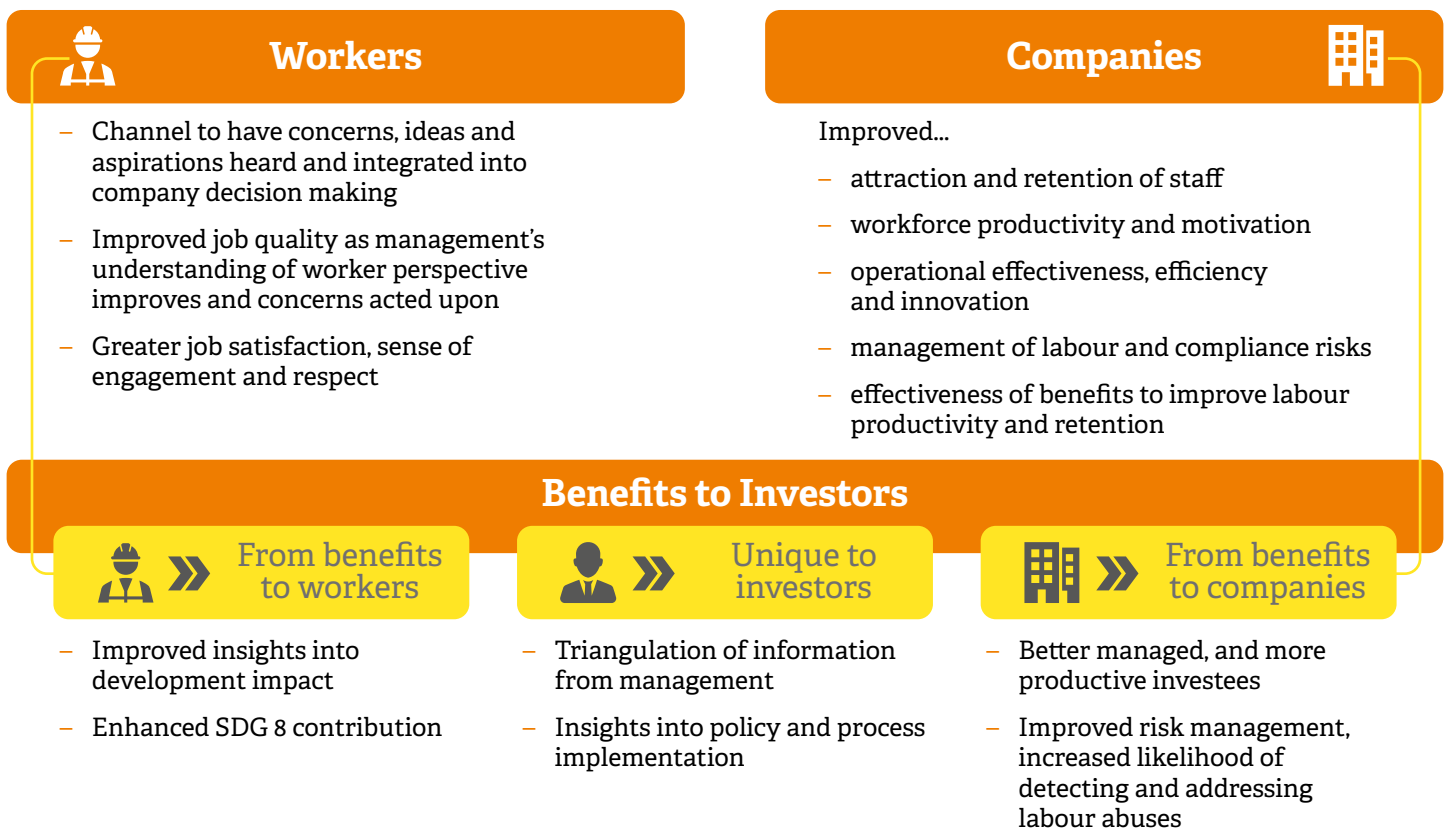
### 1.1 The importance of workforce communication and worker voice

The nature of employment in many emerging and frontier economies creates challenges for workforce communications. Many sectors, such as agriculture and construction, have long been characterised by their use of a large number of contractors and dispersed networks of suppliers. Increasingly, workers in more ‘modern’ sectors, such as retail, health and financial services, are also becoming detached – with workers contracted instead of being hired as employees (in ‘gig’ or platform work), or being disconnected either because of their employment status (often being employed through third parties) or location (project sites, for example). These practical – and sometimes contractual – barriers make it more difficult for management to engage regularly with their whole workforce.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of effective worker-management communication, it is less likely that businesses and their investors get insight into issues affecting worker wellbeing. Failure to establish and foster worker voice can result in a range of business costs and impacts, set out in Box 2. The consequences are realised as ‘stresses’ that play out over long time horizons to erode a company’s competitiveness or reputation, or as a shorter-term shocks – such as strikes – that cause disruptions to production processes.

By contrast, as Figure 1 outlines, developing effective internal communication channels, and ensuring the timely resolution of worker concerns, presents several positive benefits. Companies that take worker voice seriously can build worker trust, and increase the level of commitment and connection people have to their employer (‘engagement’), which in turn can lead to better business performance. Box 3 sets out potential benefits from improved worker involvement and communication.

Figure 1: Why worker voice?



*“No longer are engaged employees a nice to have; they are a must to have if an organisation wants to outperform its competitors”*

**South African Journal of Human Resource Management**

## Box 2: Strong worker voice systems can help mitigate business risks

The costs incurred by businesses as a result of a lack of worker engagement can be considered across the categories set out below. Strong worker voice mechanisms can 'signpost' potential issues to take early action, help prevent problems from escalating, or minimise their potential negative impacts.

- **Skills shortages, turnover and absenteeism:** Scarcity of talent can be a major growth bottleneck for companies in emerging markets. High staff turnover and absenteeism can have significant negative consequences, even for lower-wage workforces, due to the costs of recruitment and training. Engaging with workers, asking for their feedback and acting on their concerns, has been shown to [directly improve retention rates](#).<sup>5</sup>
- **Worker productivity:** Low levels of morale and job satisfaction can arise because of poor terms of employment, or bad working and living conditions. This can result in low quality output – with higher levels of product defects, rejections and returns, or poor customer service – which can in turn lead to customers being dissatisfied with sub-standard products and services. Studies have found employee satisfaction to have a [strong positive correlation with customer loyalty](#).<sup>6</sup>
- **Compliance:** Meeting legal and regulatory compliance standards reduces the risk of exposure to fines and other penalties levied by local authorities, along with the legal costs of addressing claims. It also mitigates the risk of losing business, particularly in terms of contracts with major and international customers, and can enhance a company's ability to attract investment from responsible and/or impact investors.
- **Reputational risk:** Without a mechanism to listen to and act on worker concerns, grievances may go unaddressed and risk escalating – potentially even challenging a businesses' social license to operate in the country and the local community. Undetected labour abuses in the portfolio of impact investors can create significant reputational risks.

## Box 3: Strong worker voice systems can also help harness business opportunities

Enhancing workforce communication and giving workers voice can lead to a number of concrete business benefits:

- **A motivated workforce:** Engaging and interacting with workers creates a sense of belonging, and [a greater willingness to contribute to achieving business objectives](#).<sup>7</sup> Constructive worker-management relationships where workers feel they are being treated fairly – and their needs are being met – can lead to productivity improvements. Meta-analyses have found that higher employee engagement is associated with [higher productivity and firm performance](#).<sup>8</sup>
- **Operational effectiveness and efficiency:** Strong internal communication between workers, business units and management, is a foundation of effective teamwork. Smooth information flows can help cascade organisational goals, mandates or messages throughout the workforce, giving workers clarity and helping them understand the relevance of their role in the wider organisational context (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2020).
- **Organisational innovation:** Business can also benefit from worker's ideas on process, product or policy improvements. As workers are often closer to the 'on-the-ground' reality, whereas management teams may be disconnected, such ideas can be an important source of information on gaps in management practices and opportunities for innovation (Ipieca, 2019).
- **Strategic alignment:** Worker voice can help to ensure company activities are aligned with their mission and strategy, and the expectations of the current and future investors (Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN), 2016). Potential investors may also seek to engage directly with the workforce to listen to how workers are being treated, and ask for employee engagement or satisfaction metrics as a 'barometer' of organisational culture and a proxy for the quality of company management.



## Case 1: Understanding employee needs in a remote working context

iMerit provides data labelling services and data enrichment for the unstructured datasets used by machine learning algorithms. Founded in 2012, iMerit has grown to become a global company. It is headquartered in Kolkata, with teams working across India, Bhutan and the US. iMerit was founded with the vision to bring a diverse pool of talent from underserved backgrounds into the digital workforce. More than 50 per cent of its workforce are women, which is a high proportion for a digital company. CDC invested in iMerit in February 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced iMerit to rapidly transition to remote working. The company provided support to workers to make the transition as smooth as possible, issuing dongles and laptops to most employees, as well as providing guidance on remote working. Of the delivery team workforce of 2,500, only 200 have been unable to work from home because of internet access constraints. Even so, working from home is not always easy. For many iMerit employees this is their first job, and they gain their digital skills while working – a process which would usually rely on in-person, peer-to-peer interactions to accelerate their learning. Many employees have also had to balance working with childcare and other household responsibilities.

iMerit was keen to understand the employee perspective on how to best to balance home-based and office-based work – including as lockdown restrictions began to ease and iMerit's delivery centres re-opened. Therefore, iMerit and CDC conducted an online worker survey, an exercise that concluded in December 2020. iMerit is using the results of the survey to understand their workforce's primary challenges when working remotely, their preferences in ways of working, and gender- and grade-disaggregated information that could feed into strategic planning. Some results confirmed the steps iMerit had already taken: nearly all employees felt the company had communicated clearly about how the business would operate during remote work, and virtually all employees felt well-prepared to succeed. Other results highlighted important information about how life had changed since working from home. For example, women reported they were taking more time to do tasks than before, and had higher rates of fatigue compared to their male counterparts (which may be linked to women having more care responsibilities). In terms of training, there was a clear request for intensive business English training, which iMerit has now set up with a partner non-governmental organisation (NGO).

According to Anirban Roychowdhury, Vice President of Human Resources at iMerit, “although 2020 posed a massive challenge for iMerit, we were able to turn on our heels pretty fast. However, with so much change, and so fast, we wanted to make sure our teams were comfortable in the new normal setting. This survey helped us to understand where we excelled and where we need to build on further. This will work as one of the stepping stones for our strategies for the upcoming year.”



## Case 2: Worker surveys to support workforce management and growth during COVID

LoadShare provides technology driven logistics services working with small and medium-sized enterprises in India's logistics sector, with a focus on some of the most underserved regions in India. CDC first invested in LoadShare in March 2018, and made a follow on co-investment in March 2020, through a fund managed by Stellaris Venture Partners. Stellaris' impact thesis for making the investment in LoadShare was based, in part, on a drive to create employment opportunities and to tackle some of the recurrent and intractable job quality challenges in the Indian labour market.

To-date, LoadShare has rolled out numerous initiatives aimed at improving communications and information flows for the approximately 6,000 independent contractors on its platform. This includes providing training and using Noticeboard, a mobile application to engage with dispersed blue-collar workforces (see Case 6 for more details on Noticeboard).

Attracting and retaining drivers is a key business growth bottleneck for a company like LoadShare. With a growing number of last-mile delivery platforms coming to market in India, competition for customers as well as drivers is increasing. COVID-19 has also had a severe impact on the labour market, with many workers vulnerable to income loss, layoffs and displacement. However, LoadShare has managed to retain most of its workforce by creating additional growth opportunities, e.g., delivering 'essentials' (FMCG, grocery). As lockdown restrictions ease and demand for services rises, LoadShare has ambitious growth plans – and wanted to engage directly with its current, previous and prospective workers to listen to their concerns, aspirations and COVID-related challenges, and further strengthen the proposition for the contractors and their partner ecosystem.

In late 2020, LoadShare and CDC therefore decided to undertake a telephone survey with a representative sample of workers, including prospective and exited workers. The results of the survey will be used by LoadShare to help ensure they are an attractive option for drivers looking for work – including by addressing any concerns about returning to work in a COVID-context - and identify what measures can be taken to improve worker retention.

### 1.2 The benefits of digital technologies

There are a growing number of opportunities to use technology to strengthen worker voice, especially as the use of digital devices is accelerating throughout the Global South. By 2025, 614 million people in Africa – half the continent – are expected to own a mobile phone. Almost two-thirds of these will be smartphones, compared to just under half in 2019. India is among the world's fastest growing markets for digital consumers, with more than half a billion internet subscribers.<sup>9</sup>

From using mobile phones to gather worker feedback, to apps that make it easier to exchange information between workers and management, digital solutions are now complementing paper-based or face-to-face methods – as shown in Case 3, below, to reach vulnerable workers, such as those in the construction industry.

Table 1 summarises the four main areas of potential value-add in using technology to support workforce communications and worker voice – scalability, anonymity, speed of insight and reach – compared to more traditional methods of engagement. Box 4 briefly summaries how these potential benefits have played out in the context of global supply chains.

**Table 1:** Potential benefits of using technology to engage with workers

<b>Scalability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Allows engagement with a larger number of workers on a more regular basis.</li><li>– At scale, technology can become a more cost-effective solution.</li></ul>
<b>Anonymity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Feedback provided via technology platforms can be designed to protect the anonymity of respondents.</li><li>– Encourages participation by those unable or unwilling to make use of grievance mechanisms because of trust or language barriers.</li></ul>
<b>Speed of insights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Generates faster insights by reducing the time lag between workers experiencing an issue and management or investors knowing about it.</li><li>– Useful in uncertain times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which requires businesses to engage rapidly and more frequently with their workforce.</li></ul>
<b>Reach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Traditional methods of engagement have physical limitations in how far they can access different types of workers (for example, casual or contract workers and geographically-dispersed workers).</li><li>– Technology can help overcome this and enable engagement with more vulnerable groups.</li></ul>



*“Instant and continuous insight is what makes technology paradigm shifting”*

**ELEVATE**

## Box 4: The experience of using worker voice technologies in global supply chains

In global supply chains, there is growing anecdotal evidence that direct engagement with workers – supported by technology – can uncover issues that have not been uncovered through traditional social audits. Independent monitoring organisation Electronics Watch has observed that using a combination of both technology and non-technology channels helps hear from “workers about health problems that may not be covered under codes of conduct ...[and] detect the heavy recruitment costs migrant workers sometimes incur and not just those that their suppliers report” (Electronics Watch, 2019). Many of these issues could be uncovered solely through face-to-face interviews, but in the words of Antoine Heuty, the Chief Executive Officer of digital stakeholder engagement company Ulula, technology offers “a larger sample and less ability to ‘game the system’”, meaning that there is a higher rate of issue identification.

One mobile survey provider claims that mobile surveys have eight times greater disclosure when asking sensitive questions on topics such as on sexual harassment or discrimination, when compared to hotlines and in-person interviews (BSR, 2018). Others, however, have found mixed success at uncovering issues such as forced labour (Rende-Taylor & Shih, 2019). While technology can mitigate some of the challenges of giving in-person feedback – such as protecting anonymity and reducing fears of retribution – new concerns emerge. Many workers, for example, may feel uncomfortable making a complaint using technology, as it is considered a much more impersonal and remote channel (Ergon Associates, 2017). This underlines the importance of technology as a complement to other communications channels, rather than as a replacement for them.

While technology can help to gather data to identify worker concerns or potential rights violations, it will only lead to improvements for workers if management is motivated to address them. The potential to resolve issues identified by worker voice technologies therefore depends on management’s willingness to act, and the extent to which companies can be influenced by buyers (or investors). Indeed, as most worker voice tools operate outside of the union structure – and often in countries and industries with low union membership rates – the lack of collective voice means that workers are not able to participate in meaningful dialogue to resolve the issues on a more equal footing with employers.

Antoine Heuty notes that often “technology only reflects the existing power structure” and users should avoid the trap of seeing “simple tech fix[es] to complex structural problems”.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore important for brands and investors to follow up on the results of worker surveys, and to use their influence to encourage management to address issues raised.

## Case 3: Engaging construction workers through mobile phones

The nature of construction sector employment creates challenges for workforce visibility. The large, fragmented workforces typically found on construction sites – coupled with high turnover rates – can make it harder to communicate effectively with workers. This is particularly difficult given the COVID-19 pandemic and fluidity of restrictions on business activities in many countries; meaning working arrangements may change at short notice. Contractors now need to roll-out training on new site procedures, including any adjustments to working hours. Because of limited human resource capacity, smaller contractors may face particular challenges when communicating changes, providing training and managing grievances (CDC, 2020).

Globally, many construction workers are migrant workers, compounding communication challenges – particularly where they are engaged through third parties – or where there are multiple language groups onsite, and where workers have low literacy levels. Even before the pandemic, technology solutions were emerging to help engage workers, and empower them to realise their rights. *Just Good Work* is a mobile platform first piloted in 2018 in Qatar. The app allows migrant jobseekers and workers to receive information about their recruitment, migration, and employment journeys. Businesses can communicate expectations and policies clearly to employees, and reduce onboarding time and costs through training, induction and orientation content.

Under a project for the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery (GFEMS), *Sattva* and a consortium of partners are piloting the use of mobile surveys to collect data from migrant workers in India’s construction sector, in order to better understand the vulnerability and risk profile of workers. Remote data collection methods are used to follow migrant workers throughout their journey from source locations in rural areas of India to destination workplaces (and often back again, as the work is usually seasonal).

Working with national NGO partners with a local presence, a baseline is conducted before migration. This is done in person, to lay the groundwork for later remote contact. According to *Sattva*, face-to-face contact also helps workers build trust that responses will remain confidential, and that the exercise is conducted with workers’ welfare as the top priority. Mobile surveys are then conducted at regular intervals, alongside an ‘inbound’ hotline that workers can call if they face problems. Contractors who hire the workers are not involved in data collection, nor do they see results, with *Sattva* emphasising that this ‘firewall’ is important to be able maintain trust among workers about the security of their data – and their own safety.

### 1.3 The use case for investors

For impact investors, the benefit of supporting enhanced engagement with workforces in their portfolios is three-fold. First, by enabling workers' voices to be heard, their concerns and aspirations can be understood and addressed more effectively. For impact investors, this provides data on development impact, as well as directly contributing to decent work outcomes in line with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). Second, by providing management with insights into workers' perspectives, surveys and other workforce communication solutions enable management to focus their resources on interventions that will be most effective at enhancing workforce morale and productivity. Finally, investors and management can gain insights into how effective company policies and processes to protect workers are.

For investors, gaining insights directly from workers in their portfolio has often been challenging during due diligence or monitoring, often due to contextual factors such as time or logistical constraints, lack of team expertise, language barriers, and difficulties in reaching casual or contracted workers. This can hinder investors' ability to uncover and manage labour issues.

As a result, development finance and impact investors are turning to the potential uses of technology to understand job quality across their portfolios. Worker surveys have often been used as part of impact assessment and portfolio monitoring activities, particularly in high-risk sectors, and investors are increasingly seeking to use technology-enabled methods of engagement. Finnfund, for example, is piloting a video-based employee survey (see Box 3) and CDC has supported investee companies to conduct online (Case 1) and mobile surveys of workers (see Cases 2 and 5).

Based on the literature review and interviews, we identified three primary communication channels where technology can be used by investors and businesses:

- **Collect:** Collecting data *from* workers.<sup>11</sup> Digital information flows from workers to companies, and/or investors or third parties acting on their behalf. The 'collecting' is usually done via telephone surveys, which can be one-off or periodic.
- **Connect:** Making connections *with* and *between* workers. Digital information flows two ways, from workers to management and back again; or from workers to workers. It allows for a continuous exchange of ideas and constant, open-ended communications. This is typically associated with team or organisational communications, such as internal or externally hosted communications channels or message boards.<sup>12</sup> In other cases, the information is exchanged on a platform to provide workers with better information about workplaces and recruiters.<sup>13</sup>
- **Convey:** Conveying key information to workers. Digital information flows from companies to workers. This can cover topics related to worker rights or working arrangements, and can also include training courses covering both job skills and broader wellbeing, and topics such as financial literacy. The 'convey' function is often integrated as part of platforms that also allow information to be 'collected' (often as part of a telephone survey) or to 'connect' workers with management (for example, a mobile app that has a messaging function and a resource for migrant workers to access local information or copies of their contract).

## Case 4: Piloting mobile video surveys to capture worker voice

In 2019, the Finnish development finance institution, Finnfund, launched a pilot project to use innovative methods to collect data on decent work and poverty impacts directly from the stakeholders (workers and local communities) of investee companies. In particular, Finnfund wanted to improve its ability to monitor and understand job quality by getting primary data directly from employees on labour risks and working conditions. This would help verify and triangulate company-reported data – in line with International Finance Corporation (IFC) Environmental and Social Performance Standards – but also explore ‘beyond compliance’ issues to get a more holistic and contextual sense of job quality. For example, employee surveys can be used to generate insights into whether salary levels were enough to support families and dependents in rural areas. Armed with such data, Finnfund’s investees can also improve their own systems and practices, making them better equipped to both meet international standards and realise the business benefits of a motivated workforce.

In the words of Anne Arvola, Development Impact Adviser at Finnfund, the rapid surveys provide an opportunity to “hear from workers about their lived experience”, complementing typical policy and process checks, on issues such as safety and health, to include a people-centric approach that listens to worker’s perspectives.

To run the pilot surveys, Finnfund has partnered with *Work Ahead*, a Helsinki-based technology start-up that helps enterprises survey workers in their supply chain, focusing on human rights, decent working conditions, and advancing sustainable development. Work Ahead uses a video-based survey which is anonymous, confidential and requires neither an internet connection nor literacy skills.

Finnfund is currently working with two investee companies in Africa to pilot the rapid surveys. An agri-business is implementing the worker survey, and a forestry company is piloting the community and out-grower surveys. The rationale for the agri-business to engage in the digital workforce communication exercise is three-fold: (1) to engage across a diverse cross-section of workers, given the company has several sites and operates in three local languages; (2) that the anonymous survey can provide the company (and Finnfund) with information on potentially sensitive labour issues; and (3) it will help the company to evaluate and design human resources and community corporate social responsibility activities.

Finnfund has also completed a worker survey of a company in its investment pipeline. This survey was run during the diligence phase by an environmental, social and governance (ESG) consultant using Work Ahead video surveys. This allowed the consultant to listen to the views of the whole of the company’s workforce, giving Finnfund a direct line of sight into worker views and experiences. The use of video surveys was especially useful in this context, as the company is based in a conflict-affected country where travel and security restrictions make in-person site visits by international staff particularly challenging.

Finnfund has worked with Work Ahead to build the surveys in such a way that they can be replicated. The aim is for participating companies to repeat the rapid survey in six or 12 months to capture time series change. Already one company participating in the pilot has expressed interest in continuing and expanding its use of the survey. The survey methodology has been designed in such a way to make it easy to implement, and requiring minimal effort or resources for the company to arrange.<sup>14</sup> As Anne Arvola notes, if Finnfund had “designed something that was very heavy, then it would not have been possible to be replicated or repeated”. As such, if the pilots prove successful, Finnfund plans to roll-out similar initiatives with standardised surveys for a wider set of portfolio companies.



Images: New Forests Company

## Case 5: Telephone surveys to verify development impact

Coscharis Farms is an integrated rice processor in South-Eastern Nigeria. The investment into Coscharis Farms is managed by Sahel Capital's Fund for Agricultural Finance in Nigeria (FAFIN). CDC invested into FAFIN in 2017. The impact thesis for investing in Coscharis Farms rested, in part, on increasing employment opportunities. Coscharis Farms provides jobs and vocational training opportunities through its farm, which is located in a state with a high percentage of arable land where agriculture is a driver of job creation.

In order to validate this impact thesis – and capture the effect of improvements in employment opportunities and working conditions – CDC carried out a telephone survey together with 60 Decibels (previously Acumen Lean Data), in partnership with FAFIN and Coscharis Farms.

The survey confirmed that Coscharis Farms creates new job opportunities and contributes significantly to workers' family incomes. However, many workers also reported facing challenges. Following the survey, CDC and FAFIN worked with Coscharis Farms to take steps to address some of the issues raised. This included:

- Offering more training opportunities and resources for staff to improve skills and productivity. Coscharis Farms implemented a performance appraisal process that includes an assessment of training needs and a focus on career development. Coscharis Farms has developed an out-grower and block farm programme to benefit smallholder farmers within the host communities.
- New policies to improve worker safety and better integrate the company in the host community. For example, setting up a committee and engaging an ESG manager and community liaison officer to help manage grievances in the community.
- Steps to improve communication between management and staff, including establishing regular 'town hall' meetings and departmental meetings as an opportunity for staff to share their views, and introducing a suggestion box.

The worker survey project highlighted the value of engaging and listening to worker voice as way of making both employees and contractors feel their opinion is valued. As one employee said: "I am happy that Coscharis wants to know how we feel working with them, they should keep doing [this]".

Read more in the CDC Insight paper: [\*What's the impact of modern rice farming in Nigeria?\*](#)





## 02

### **Where in the investment process can worker voice technologies be used?**

There are a number of ways that worker voice technologies can be used by investors. To avoid falling into the trap of 'technology for technology's sake', investors first need to set out what they are aiming to achieve in terms of specific information and communication challenges to be overcome. This section sets out four primary purposes across the investment process, which can be split into two categories.

- The first three are **'investor-driven'** initiatives, where an investor will likely take more of a leading role – working closely with companies and any fund managers. In order to 'collect' information on working conditions and workplace practices, investor-driven activities are most likely to use online or mobile (voice or text-messaging) surveys.
- The second category is usually resolved through **company-driven** initiatives, where companies are in the driving seat to develop their own systems and processes – with more behind-the-scenes support from the investor. In order to 'convey' information to workers and 'connect' with them on an ongoing basis, company-driven initiatives are likely to use online or app-based communication platforms.

In practice, worker engagement projects often seek to combine several of these purposes. For example, post-investment surveys generally work best when conducted in collaboration with management, seeking to strengthen their engagement with the workforce (Purpose 4), at the same time as providing both investors and management with improved insights into ESG compliance (Purpose 2). Depending on the length of the survey, it may also be possible to collect some development impact data at the same time (Purpose 3).

Ultimately, all worker engagement, whether initiated by investors, customers or management, should seek to enhance Purpose 4, empowering management to manage its workforce more effectively and be informed by worker perspectives.

#### **Purpose 1: Flag potential compliance issues during due diligence**

During the investment due diligence phase, worker voice technologies can be used by investors to triangulate data sources on key ESG risks and opportunities. Here, the use of technology such as a mobile surveys may help triangulate information generated by external consultants during an ESG assessment who may have limited time or capacity to speak to a broad cross-section of workers in person, particularly because of accessibility constraints during COVID. This verification can help prevent gaps between policy and practice, particularly in sectors or countries where the risks of labour abuse or non-compliance are higher.

However, investors should be cautious about using worker voice technologies before an investment is made. Not only are there feasibility issues (such as a lack of time to set up surveys and management reluctance to grant access to workers) but potential biases can be introduced when workers know that a future investment may be dependent on their answers.<sup>15</sup> Also, if the deal does not proceed past the diligence phase, investors will lack any leverage to address issues raised. This creates an ethical challenge. As technology allows engagement with a larger number of workers than is usually possible through 'traditional' methods, investors may raise workforce expectations of their concerns being addressed – but then not be able to take responsibility for whether or not they are.

To mitigate these challenges, light touch, standardised technology-enabled diligence surveys can be used to establish basic labour rights facts – asking more closed-ended (yes/no) questions such as whether a worker has seen their contract – rather than open-ended questions seeking to listen to worker concerns and obtain general feedback on working conditions.<sup>16</sup> Methods that allow worker voice technologies to be standardised and integrated into the work of ESG consultants conducting site visits – such as that outlined in the case of Finnfund in Box 3 – can also help streamline the process and manage expectations among workers of how the data will be used to effect change. Indeed, some ESG consultants are starting to incorporate tech-enabled worker surveys into their service offering.

Separately from using surveys during due diligence, an assessment of current workforce communications and worker voice practices can be integrated into standard diligence activities in order to inform discussions with management about how workforce engagement could be enhanced post-investment, as in Box 5. This is particularly important in businesses with large, vulnerable and/or fragmented workforces, or those that are struggling with high staff turnover and low productivity.

### Box 5: Assessing a company's workforce communication practices

At the due diligence phase, investors can focus on understanding a business' current practices on workforce communication and how they engage with workers. This can then be used to identify whether worker voice surveys, or other workforce communication initiatives, may be useful to develop post-investment. For investments in funds, the focus should be on the Fund Manager's capacity to assess worker voice systems in their own pipeline opportunities.

At present, however, topics related to workforce communications and engagement are not prominent in guidance, toolkits and methodologies related to ESG due diligence. Remediating this could involve:

- Asking simple questions at the diligence phase to ascertain whether, in what ways and how often, management gets structured feedback from workers, including those employed through third parties or on temporary contracts.
- In assessing ESG practices, investors – or third parties acting on their behalf – can interact with workers to understand not only whether their views are sought, but also whether this feedback is acted on. For example, asking “When was the last time you raised a suggestion to management, and was it acted on?”. Note that these responses should be kept confidential, including by ensuring a large enough group of workers are engaged with to protect identity, and only fed back to management in aggregate in order to protect workers from the risk of retribution.
- Gaps identified in a rapid diagnosis of a company's current 'systems in place' for worker voice can then inform ESG Action Plans (ESAP), and flag circumstances where technology-enabled worker voice initiatives are likely to be insightful for both management and investors (see Purpose 2 and Purpose 4).

Further guidance on assessing human resources (HR) management systems, of which workforce communication is one important element, can be found in CDC's [Human resources management assessment tool](#).

### Purpose 2: Listen directly to workers as part of ESG performance monitoring

During the post-investment phase, worker voice technologies can be used by investors to assess ongoing compliance, to monitor impact of changes implemented by investors and stay informed of any new labour-related risks and opportunities. There may be a strong rationale for investors to support the use of mobile surveys to engage directly with workers as part of the implementation of an ESAP if:

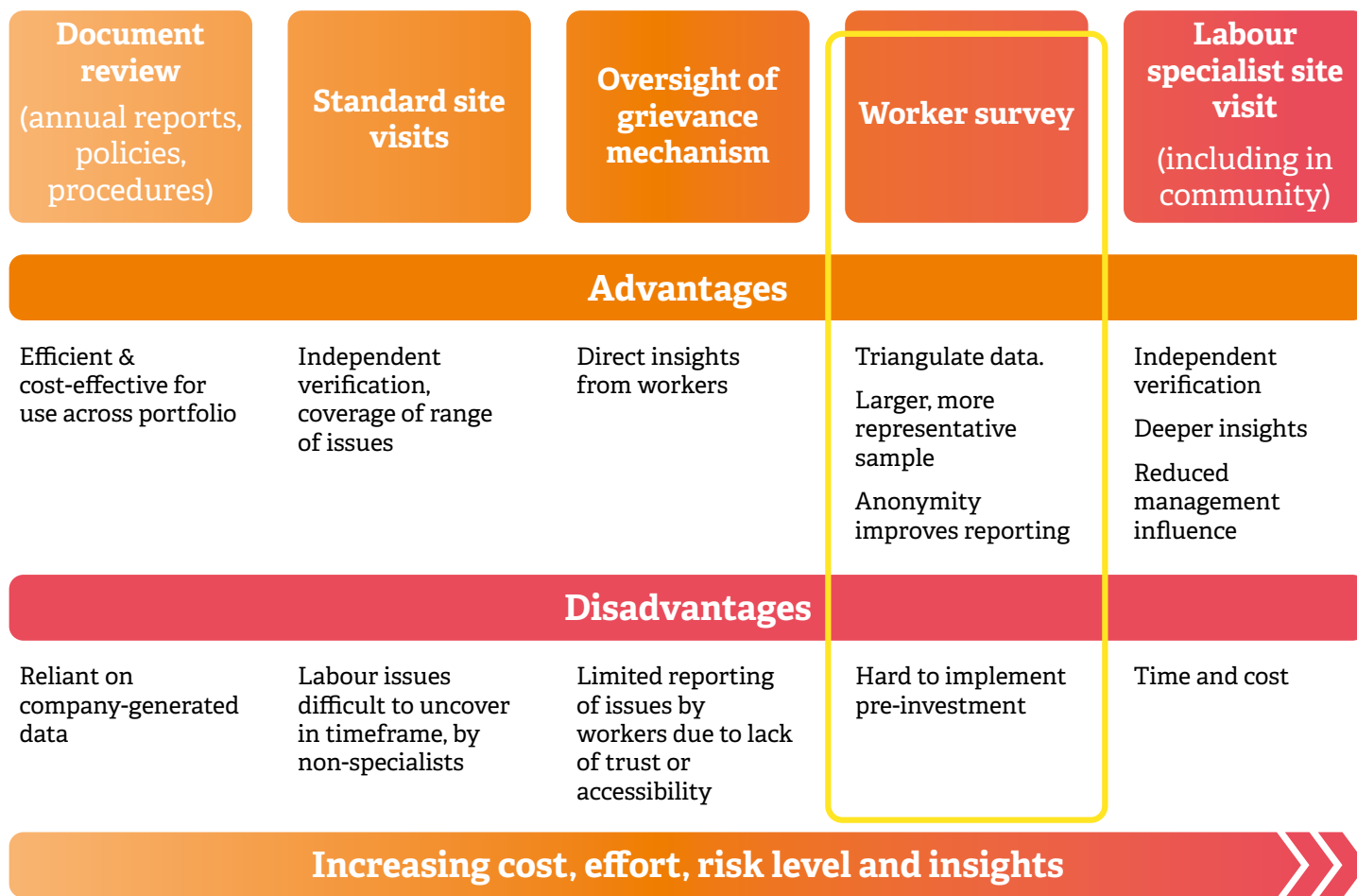
- There is a need to collect data from a broad and more representative section of the workforce (for example if the company has a large network of dispersed, contracted workers).
- Reaching particular groups of workers (such as migrants or casual labourers) that might be harder to identify, and whose identity can be protected with some worker voice technologies.
- Engagement needs to take place over multiple or remote locations, where in-person access can be expensive and logistically challenging.
- Cost, time or speed considerations make remote monitoring the only viable option to directly engage with, and listen to, worker concerns and feedback.

The above characteristics are common during the construction phase of infrastructure investments, and in logistics, facilities management, agribusiness and platform or 'gig' economy investments.

Worker voice technologies can be deployed in line with an investor's risk-based approach to monitoring portfolio ESG performance (see Box 6). Methods such as mobile surveys can be used to establish any major issues or trends that might warrant further investigation. The greater speed and 'scale potential' of technology allows for quicker diagnosis of hot spots (areas of risk in company supply chain or specific sites) or key issues being faced by groups of workers (such as delayed or withheld payments). Here, the aim is not to establish and address individual worker concerns – which is the function of a grievance mechanism – but to identify systemic labour issues. As such, technology-enabled worker surveys can be a useful part of the monitoring toolkit (see Figure 2), triangulating information from other sources such as site visits and document reviews.



**Figure 2:** How investors can use worker surveys as part of the monitoring toolkit



### Box 6: Oversight of ESG issues during the investment monitoring phase

The level of monitoring an investor will conduct with an investee will largely depend on the ESG risk, which is based on the sector and local context as well as project-specific aspects. However, some investments might be assessed as having a relatively low overall ESG risk level but still have higher labour risks, such as those with large blue-collar workforces. Examples can include investments in logistics, facilities management and the platform or ‘gig’ economy. The reverse is also true, and where a high ESG risk rating is driven by land acquisition, for example, there may not be high labour risks. An approach to deploying worker voice technology can therefore be prioritised by overall ESG risk rating, but consideration should always be given to the characteristics of each deal. Many worker voice technology solutions can also be used for engaging with other stakeholders, such as outgrowers or local community members.

Investments with medium or high labour risks are more likely to benefit from a systematic mechanism to listen directly to workers, and triangulate other sources of information (including ESG audits and monitoring reports) particularly where there are known issues related to labour and working conditions in a particular project, sector or country. Technology can lower the costs of this repeated worker engagement at scale, at the same time as generating anonymous and confidential insights. However, investors should be mindful that complex issues such as modern slavery are often difficult to identify, regardless of the approach used. For these highest-risk investments and topics, investors should not rely on technology alone, but ensure that digital methods are used to complement non-technology solutions.

Investments with low labour risk may not require in-depth monitoring and the use of technology to collect data on topics related to labour rights and compliance.

Irrespective of the risk rating, when specific workforce issues arise investors and companies may decide they need to listen directly to a large sample of affected workers. Such an approach can help to validate or provide empirical data of the extent of the issue, gain better visibility of potentially hidden concerns and inform approaches to resolving the issue. Technologies such as a mobile survey can be quick to deploy and play a value-added role in helping close the gap between an issue being identified and action being taken, thereby reducing the chance of a grievance escalating.

### Purpose 3: Establish evidence of development impact

Investors can also seek to 'collect' data directly from workers because there is a greater degree of scrutiny on the specific investment rationale (for example, an investment into a company where job creation is the main impact thesis).

Here, investors may gather worker-reported information on benefits associated with employment – related to poverty profiles, wages, career progression opportunities, diversity and inclusion, for example – which requires direct engagement with 'end-beneficiary' workers. During the diligence phase (bearing in mind the caveats outlined in Purpose 1) such data can be used to validate or refine the impact thesis, or provide a baseline to measure changes and future improvements. Post-investment, worker surveys can be used to help build investors' understanding on whether investee companies are achieving intended impact, in order to complement other [impact measurement tools](#).<sup>17</sup> The costs of mobile surveys are typically much lower than gathering in-person accounts; and the standardised question sets typically associated with mobile surveys can also help investors set benchmarks and more easily interpret impact performance. Box 7 sets out key considerations on how far to standardise approaches to surveying.

However, a survey focused on capturing development impacts – for example on poverty outcomes – should not assume workers do not face any labour risks or rights violations.<sup>18</sup> Workers may self-report high levels of job satisfaction and 'quality of life' improvements if there are few alternative income-earning opportunities available to them in the labour market – which can lead to the phenomenon of a 'subjectively good, objectively bad job' (that meets worker preferences, compared to alternatives or their previous position, but is still not decent or dignifying, and may not be compliant with labour rights standards). Surveys can be designed to cover topics related to both ESG compliance and development impact, reducing the risk of false positives.

#### Box 7: Deciding on the level of standardisation

Investors managing large multi-country portfolios will be constrained in terms of their own capacity and time availability – meaning technology may be a particularly attractive option because it can be deployed in a relatively standardised way. However, an overly standardised approach – with the same technologies (such as a text messaging survey) and set of questions used for multiple companies in a portfolio – risks being too 'top down', as a one-size-fits-all survey is unlikely to meet the needs of different company and worker contexts. Figure 3 summarises the main differences, strengths and weaknesses of the two extremes of a fully 'standardised' or 'bespoke' approach, recognising that, in reality most service providers offer a hybrid approach, including standard questions with some scope for tailoring.

**Figure 3:** Summary of differences between a standardised and a bespoke approach to designing worker surveys

	Standardised worker survey	Bespoke worker survey
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Largely standardised questions</li> <li>– Implemented proactively as part of scheduled monitoring</li> <li>– Can be used on a regular basis, and across portfolios</li> <li>– Comparison to benchmarks often possible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Questions can be tailored to specific circumstances and can include management and / or worker input</li> <li>– Survey implementation can be adapted, for example to allow for literacy and connectivity challenges</li> </ul>
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Time and cost efficient to roll out</li> <li>– Enables comparison between companies in a portfolio</li> <li>– Can generate benchmarks to help understand and interpret relative performance</li> <li>– 'Tried and tested' questions minimises risk of poor survey design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Can be used to build company capacity to manage worker relations (participatory)</li> <li>– Tailoring increases chances of gaining deeper insights</li> <li>– High degree of management engagement in the process more likely to result in behaviour change</li> </ul>
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Standardised approach does not allow for tailoring to specific circumstances</li> <li>– Questions may not be meaningful in the given company/worker context</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Higher cost and time input required</li> <li>– Risk of long surveys that try and address too many workforce management issues</li> </ul>

## Purpose 4: Support companies in their workforce management

This should be the ultimate objective of all of the previous purposes, even if the initial driver is to inform investor decision-making. Worker and investor interests are most likely to be served by partnering with management, supporting them to engage with their workforce more effectively, and helping them to understand the business case for addressing worker concerns, as outlined in Section 1.1.

During the ownership and monitoring phase, investors can support their investee companies to understand and address specific business challenges, such as high staff turnover or the ability to attract and retain skilled workers. It is easier to take a partnership approach with management once an investment is made, rather than during due diligence. If there are concerns about compliance and loss of leverage after an investment is made, the requirement to improve workforce engagement or undertake a worker survey – and develop a programme of activity to improve job quality – can be included in the ESAP.

Digital workforce communications can be both the method (for example, by running bespoke surveys to ‘collect’ data to understand the reasons for low staff morale) and part of the solution (for example, by putting in place platforms for more regular feedback from workers to listen to their concerns). This recognises that good engagement means being proactive in regularly communicating with workers on a broad array of issues that may not always surface through specific grievances.

Here, worker voice technologies can be used by companies to ‘convey’ messages to workers or ‘connect’ with them on an ongoing basis, enabling improved management understanding of workplace realities. Case 6 shows Noticeboard’s use of real-time communication to ‘connect’ management to front-line blue-collar workers. Companies can also use technology to ‘convey’ key information to workers, helping them receive accurate information directly from management, for example about the pay they are entitled to or to ensure they are aware of their rights. As shown in Case 7, ‘convey’ technologies can also be used to enable training to be rolled-out to a fragmented workforce at scale and at a reduced cost.

**Table 2:** How technologies can support aspects of workforce management

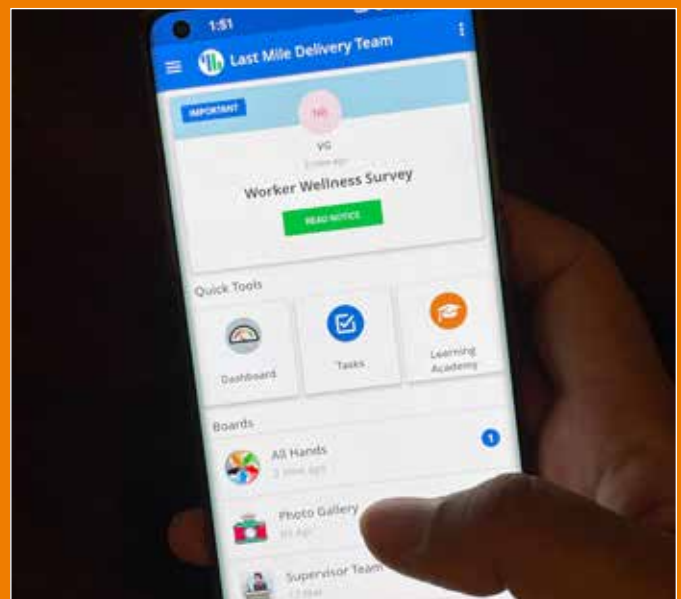
Information flow	Element of company workforce management	How technology could help
Collect	<b>Worker attraction and retention</b>	Worker surveys can help identify worker challenges and needs to enable effective design of interventions to improve the employee experience.
	<b>Grievances</b>	Can set up independent and secure grievance reporting mechanism. Can also establish less formal and complementary channel for suggestions to identify issues earlier.
Convey	<b>Contracts, rights, code of conduct, pay</b>	Can ensure workers have access to a copy of key documents such as pay slips and contracts in a format they understand (such as audio visual), and that cannot be doctored.
	<b>Notifications</b>	App-based communications can be used to efficiently communicate messages to large, fragmented workforces.
	<b>Training</b>	Can facilitate more rapid and larger scale training of a fragmented workforce.
Connect	<b>Collective bargaining</b>	Communication channels can be established among workers.
	<b>Productivity management</b>	App-based recording of task completion, performance rating and live reporting of challenges to enable efficient resolution.

## Case 6: Noticeboard

Noticeboard is an app-based platform used by businesses to manage, train and engage their dispersed field-based staff in India. CDC invested in Noticeboard in June 2017 through Stellaris Venture Partners.

The creation of Noticeboard was driven by a very operational business problem – the need to communicate effectively with logistics and warehouse staff. For office-based workers, platforms such as Slack have made it easier for management to communicate with their staff, but for workers that are ‘in the field’, communication channels were typically far less efficient or secure. In order to engage with workers, companies often relied on physical bulletin boards and staff huddles at the start of shifts, as well as WhatsApp groups. WhatsApp does provide a tech-based communication channel, but not one that is fit for the purpose of managing and facilitating information flows to and from large workforces.

Noticeboard is as a technology-driven solution for the approximately 300 million non-desk workers in India who are part of the formal economy but who do not have an email account. It began in the trucking and logistics sectors, but is now expanding into retail, hospitality and finance. Noticeboard has three main products: a core communications and engagement platform; a mobile learning and management system; and a compliance platform for digital checklists. Responding to the challenge of COVID-19, Noticeboard has also been working with CDC Plus<sup>19</sup>, CDC’s technical assistance facility, to provide a free version of the app to small organisations struggling to communicate with their workers, as well as free videos to explain COVID-related health and safety information to field staff in Indian dialects and languages.



## Case 7: BigBasket

Noticeboard is currently being used by another CDC investee – Supermarket Grocery Supplies – and its BigBasket brand, which is India’s leading online wholesale grocer. BigBasket uses Noticeboard’s mobile learning functionality to train drivers for their milk subscription service. Previously, training was delivered face-to-face, but this had limitations, not only in terms of scale (how many people a training team could reach in a single day) but independent milk delivery drivers work unusual hours for multiple employers, making in-person training a challenge to schedule.

Using Noticeboard, BigBasket drivers can now take a video-based induction training, as well as regular top-ups, at a time that fits around their working schedule. Noticeboard has also been able to better monitor whether training is effective – getting analytics on who has completed training and the level of engagement. Workers are also able to give immediate feedback on any parts of the training they do not understand. Integrated within BigBasket’s own app, the Noticeboard content is pre-loaded and can play without an internet connection.



## 03

### **What conditions should be in place for technology to be effective?**

This section sets out the key enabling conditions that need to be in place to support the effective use of technology. According to Dan Viederman, Managing Director of the Working Capital Fund, establishing an “accountability context” is crucial to ensure worker voice technologies have their desired effect - ultimately leading to issues not just being identified, but addressed. Here, two levels are considered: The investor and company context.

#### **3.1 Investor-level considerations**

Key considerations: Investor influence over follow-up actions; ability to mitigate the risk of negative impacts.

If workers do not see their concerns addressed, it can create a vicious cycle where workers feel their feedback is not being heard, which in turn leads to mistrust of technology solutions.<sup>20</sup> In these circumstances, engagement with no discernible follow-up action can be counterproductive.

Investors should, therefore, assess the likelihood that findings will be acted on by company management. Ideally, companies will be motivated to act once they realise the benefits of having an engaged workforce, as outlined in Box 3. This is likely where there is a high degree of alignment of interest between investor and investee in terms of commercial priorities, management aims and financial goals. For example, a company that wishes to expand rapidly, or needs to improve skills retention, may see improved workforce relations as key to delivering their commercial objectives.

Investors can also influence company decision-making because of the nature of their investment and their (legally binding) compliance requirements. The extent to which investors are able to achieve this will depend on their role (whether a lead arranger or anchor investor), size of the investment (for example, an ownership stake) and their ability to influence other investors. Investors can use ‘soft’ tactics, such as their personal relationships and rapport with management and company directors, to influence change. ‘Harder’ tactics, such as invoking legal agreements or board resolutions, are used as a last resort.

Investors also need to be aware of the potential for unintended negative outcomes resulting from the use of worker voice technologies. Some potential actions that investors can take to mitigate the likelihood of these outcomes occurring, or minimise their effect, are outlined in Table 3. Investors and companies also need to consider data privacy when designing any worker engagement (see Box 8).

**Table 3:** Examples of investor risk mitigation measures

Unintended outcomes	Mitigation measures
<p>Risk of ‘false negatives’, where the real issues affecting workers are not covered (e.g., because of poor survey design, with a limited set of questions not reflecting real worker concerns). This can misleadingly suggest good working conditions, and give the impression to companies and investors that there are no workforce issues needing to be addressed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Include general questions that are indicative of broader issues, without asking directly (e.g., if you had a concern, how confident do you feel that it would be addressed if you raised it with management? Do you feel safe at work? Have you ever observed behaviour that you were concerned about?).</li> <li>– Ensure some open-ended and ‘why’ questions are included in the survey to allow workers to raise concerns not covered elsewhere. For example, if asking a worker to rate how safe they feel in a workplace along a five-point scale from ‘very safe’ to ‘very unsafe’, follow up with an open question asking them ‘why/why not?’.</li> <li>– Where possible, allow for workers to be involved in the design of the survey.</li> <li>– Pilot surveys should feed preliminary results back to workers to check the most important topics are being covered.</li> </ul>
<p>Companies may seek to justify not recognising unions and/or collective bargaining on the basis that they are already engaging with workers. The very act of getting better at direct workforce engagement can therefore provide a reason for companies not to engage with collective voice, which is where real (worker-centric) change is most likely.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Work on a roadmap for companies to move from direct employee engagement (worker surveys) to representative participation (worker representatives) to collective representation (unionisation).</li> <li>– Consider how to involve trade unions and civil society organisations (CSOs) – including labour NGOs – in the exercise, and provide them with access to the aggregated data and insights from surveys, where possible.</li> <li>– Ask workers whether they feel able to join a union.</li> </ul>
<p>Worker voice mechanisms create tension between workers and management, particularly if issues are left unresolved or involve personal grievances and interpersonal tensions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Involve managers and supervisors in the scope of worker voice surveys to frame the exercise in a less adversarial manner (so it is not seen as management versus workers).</li> <li>– Ensure the findings and results of surveys are presented with sufficient aggregation so as to not allow for a ‘blame game’ between individuals, units or teams.</li> </ul>
<p>Workers suffer retaliation as a result of participating in the worker voice initiative (lack of data privacy). See also Box 8.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Ensure online measures (such as data security) are robust, as well as offline measures (such as governance and training) are in place (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020).</li> <li>– This can include, for example, training workers to not include specific identifiers that can point to individual workers (OECD, 2020).</li> </ul>
<p>Digitalising workforce communication may make it easier to reduce job quality, accelerating shifts from salaried to more precarious employment relationships. Intrusive monitoring can deprive staff of privacy and autonomy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Consider the level of alignment between the interests of the investor and company in terms of commercial priorities, and how these are reflected in HR policies and plans.</li> <li>– Where there are concerns about a lack of alignment, seek explicit commitment from the company about the job security of vulnerable workers, or those at risk of precarious employment – especially in higher-risk sectors (e.g., service or manufacturing sector jobs).</li> </ul>
<p>Workforce engagement captures the voice of workers in aggregate, but not the needs or concerns of particular groups of workers (e.g., for women).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Capture and report gender-disaggregated data.</li> <li>– Consider how the opportunity or tendency to provide voice is shaped by different worker characteristics (e.g., by gender, race, disability or employment status).</li> <li>– Include diversity considerations in the design, implementation and reporting on the survey – such as whether additional research tools like focus groups should be deployed with particular groups, (e.g., women, migrants) to ask questions that relate specifically to their experience.</li> <li>– Ensure sufficient response rates among all priority groups and consider different outreach methods to reach key groups if needed.</li> </ul>

## Box 8: Data privacy

With all forms of workforce engagement, data privacy is a key consideration. Technology-enabled communications can have built-in anonymity, but they can also create a permanent, and sometimes public, record of information relating to individuals. Data protection, therefore, needs to be carefully considered during the design phase.

Data privacy and data security are emerging and rapidly-evolving topics. There is no single global standard of good practice and local legislation varies between jurisdictions. All companies and service providers should ensure that – as a minimum – they comply with local legislation. The following principles should also be considered as emerging best practice.

### Anonymity

When collecting data at scale from a workforce, it is often relatively easy, to do so anonymously. This is important when large numbers of individuals are being asked to disclose personal or sensitive information, as it protects them from the risk of retribution and mitigates data privacy concerns.

In order to ensure anonymity, the following should be considered:

- What information is being collected, and could it be used to identify individuals? Any demographic data should have a legitimate purpose.
- Sample size and level of disaggregation – the number of individuals in a category should always be sufficient to ensure their identity is protected.
- Physical location of the data collection. As with in-person worker interviews and grievance mechanisms, ensure that participants are able to contribute in private, without being observed.

However, providing anonymity prevents specific issues from being addressed through engagement with the individuals involved. Mass engagement should therefore be complemented by grievance mechanisms (whether tech-enabled or not), which are designed for this purpose, and where an individual's identity may be protected but known by the person handling the grievance.

Where anonymity is not possible or desirable, for example in ongoing communications between management and workers, or in grievance mechanisms, data protection must be provided. Although data protection requirements vary significantly between jurisdictions, [the following principles, based on UK General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#), can be considered as a useful reference framework:

- **Lawfulness, fairness and transparency:** There must be lawful reasons for collecting the personal data, the use of the data must not be unduly detrimental or misleading and you must be open and honest about how the data are being used.
- **Purpose limitation:** The purpose for collecting the data should be clear and disclosed to the individuals.
- **Data minimisation:** Data should be adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary to fulfil the purpose.
- **Accuracy:** Reasonable steps should be taken to ensure personal data is accurate, including correcting or erasing data that is found to be incorrect or misleading.
- **Storage limitation:** Data should not be kept longer than it is needed.
- **Integrity and confidentiality (security):** Appropriate security measures should be in place to protect personal data.
- **Accountability:** Companies should take responsibility for the handling of personal data.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) [Employment Practices Code](#) and [Supplementary Guidance](#) are also useful reference documents.

### Legitimate interest versus informed consent

For instances where individuals have a genuine choice about whether to participate, and no negative consequences will be associated with non-participation, ensure participants understand the purpose of the engagement – and the ultimate use of the information they are sharing – and obtain explicit consent from participants for data to be used in the intended way.

In instances where there is limited choice, for example where information must be shared in order to access employment (much data collected by HR teams falls into this category), the key consideration is whether the business has a legitimate interest in collecting, processing and storing that data, whether it is being managed in a way that is reasonably expected, and that will not have a negative impact on the individual.



*Continued*

## Box 8: Data privacy (continued)

### Grievance mechanisms

Data security and confidentiality are particularly important in cases of sensitive and personally identifiable information, such as that collected through a grievance mechanism. Further guidance can be found in the following:

- Guidance on handling particularly sensitive information, such as that relating to GBVH, can be found in the guidance note: [Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment](#), published by CDC, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and IFC.
- EBRD's [Employee Grievance Mechanisms Guidance Note](#).

### Data ownership

This is a particularly important consideration when data are collected that relate to an individual's income or performance. It may be beneficial to workers to have access to this data to use as evidence of experience or income to access future job opportunities or financial services. However, companies are not always incentivised to make the data available in a format that individuals can use. Where performance is recorded, individuals should have the right to challenge or query anything they believe to be inaccurate.

Consideration should be given to who owns, holds or has access to the data once the relationship is over, either because the individual leaves the company, or because the contract with the service provider is ended.

### Data security

Consideration should be given to how data is stored, backed up and encrypted, including whether synonyms such as employee numbers can be used instead of names for personally identifiable information. Only those with a legitimate reason should have access to any personally identifiable data.

## 3.2 Company-level considerations

*Key issues: current management attitude towards workforce; human resource capacity to address findings; and existing employee engagement systems.*

There may be initial resistance or nervousness on the part of companies to introduce worker voice initiatives that give investors a direct 'line of sight' into their workforce.

Here, investors need to recognise that the challenge for companies may well be cultural. As explained by Ilona Mooney, founder of digital survey provider Work Ahead, in many cases they are "introducing the idea that worker's opinion is important. If [management] culture is to never ask workers' opinions, and an international partner comes along and asks how the workers are thinking – this can be a bit scary". Box 9 provides a tool to diagnose current worker voice systems, which can help gauge how significant the cultural challenge may be for a given company.

From an operational perspective, the attitudes and responsiveness of senior management, as well as operational line managers, will be critical for solutions that seek to 'connect' management to workers for ongoing, day-to-day workforce communications.<sup>21</sup> For initiatives that aim to 'collect' information and listen to worker concerns, company leadership can signal the importance of the exercise to lend it credibility; and put in place governance structures (at board level or in specific committees) to oversee the implementation of findings.

Those involved in HR operations will need to be involved from the outset to ensure clear and transparent communication with workers on the purpose of the exercise, and how results will be used and shared – whether to 'collect', 'connect' or 'convey' information. Table 4 summarises key enabling conditions from a company perspective and Box 8 outlines data privacy considerations.



*"It's not hard to do the technology, it's cultural change [in companies] that's hardest"*

**Ilona Mooney, Work Ahead**



**Table 4:** Company-level considerations

Enabling condition	Consideration
Management capacity and commitment	Alignment of interest with management (e.g., business case, leadership team ownership of worker issues, budget assignment).
HR function capacity and commitment	HR is seen as a strategic business function and is given the resources and authority to act on findings, manage workforce engagement and implement improvements. See also CDC's <a href="#">Human resources management assessment tool</a> .
Operational line manager capacity and commitment	The extent to which line managers are trained in effective management skills, and are responsive themselves to the technology platform to lead by example.
Existing worker voice systems	Existing channels for workforce representation and collective bargaining, and the existence and/or effectiveness of grievance mechanisms.

### Box 9: A worker voice diagnostic

A human resource management (HRM) perspective can provide a structured way of understanding current systems for worker voice in an organisation. Using a framework adapted from Wilkinson, et al., (2013), this involves asking a set of five questions:

1. To what degree are workers able to raise their concerns and influence decisions about various aspects of management? Are they simply informed of changes, consulted or do they actually make decisions?
2. At what level is feedback expressed (for example, task, departmental or organisation-wide)?
3. What range of topics are engaged on (from operational matters, such as work organisation or shift times, to more strategic matters that may impact on roles and responsibilities, for example major changes to the business)?
4. In what form does engagement currently take place (such as suggestion schemes, all-staff meetings etc.)?
5. Who is included in the scope of engagement, and are certain types of workers excluded, such as those on temporary contracts?

The following typology can then be used to identify whether there are any structural challenges in how companies engage with their workforce<sup>22</sup>:

1. No structures in place for voice. Example: *An owner/manager business where all decisions are highly centralised, and no employee feedback is sought at all.*
2. Voice structures exist and employees utilise them, but no one listens. Example: *A business has a suggestion box scheme, but management does not regularly read, review or act on what employees write.*
3. Voice structures exist, employees use them, and concerns are heard by management but are ignored. Example: *A business has a well-attended 'town hall' style meeting where management regularly engage with workers – but worker concerns are not acted on.*
4. Structures are in place, but voices are de-legitimised. Example: *A business with a large contingent workforce openly invites suggestions from workers, but workers fear the consequences of giving negative feedback for fear of reprisals – and because of their lack of job security.*
5. Effective structures exist for listening to the views of workers, and the views are considered and acted on as an important element of business decision-making. Communication with workers is regular and two-way.



## 04

### **How can worker voice technologies be designed and deployed?**

This section describes ‘how’ to use worker voice technologies, setting out the different categories of technology and how investors can choose between different delivery options, based on the worker situation.

#### **4.1 Types of technology**

There are three broad categories of technology that variously allow workers to take surveys and provide feedback (‘collect’ information), access critical information (‘convey’ information) or to communicate between colleagues and with management (‘connect’ people): computers, mobiles and social media<sup>23</sup>. These are summarised in Table 5, setting out the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of different options.<sup>24</sup>

When deciding which technology to use, investors and companies should choose the type of technology that best meets the needs of workers and management in the given context, based on levels of literacy and mobile penetration – alongside speed and cost considerations. It is important to choose an appropriate approach that is accessible to the target group, considering the relative effectiveness, efficacy, equity and ethics of each potential approach – as summarised in Box 10.








Lessons from the use of worker voice technologies to date have highlighted that the ‘reach’ potential of worker voice technologies is also not automatic, particularly for vulnerable workers. A study in the Antitrafficking Review (2020) found that in some surveys, women have been underrepresented because of a lack of confidence with technology. Organisations should note that the workers they most want to reach through digital technology may sometimes be the least likely to be empowered to respond.

Fortunately, the range of technologies on offer are constantly evolving to facilitate access to a broader range of stakeholders, for example options that do not require stakeholders to have a mobile or internet connection. Given the diversity of service offerings, and different ways in which technology can be deployed, investors will likely be able to navigate most accessibility challenges. As Case 4 on Finnfund’s use of Work Ahead surveys shows, there are even options for illiterate workers and those who are offline and do not own a mobile phone.

Whichever option is chosen, technology should be implemented with adequate safeguards. To aid in this effort, technology service providers together with global brands, employers, NGOs, industry leaders, and experts have developed the Worker Engagement Support by Technology (WEST) Principles, summarised in Annex 2. The WEST Principles are a set of guidelines aimed at maximising the impact of technology-driven efforts to engage workers, and they provide a useful framework for how technology should be designed and executed, which all investors should aim to adhere to.

Sometimes, however, it may be appropriate to rely on traditional methods to reach out to workers. In-person surveys, for example, while more time-consuming and expensive, can overcome challenges of low mobile phone penetration, and allow for ‘observation’ as an additional data collection method – for example to see the working environment (and whether or not staff have been given, and are using, personal protective equipment), not only to ask about it.<sup>25</sup> Case 8 sets out the cultural reasons why a CDC-supported survey in Ghana decided to use in-person rather than mobile surveys.

**Table 5:** Categories of worker voice technology<sup>26</sup>

Enabling condition	Summary	Pros	Cons
<b>Computer-based</b> 	<p>Online platforms and e-mail surveys.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Very cost-effective - typically free or very low cost to administer.</li> <li>– Quick to deploy.</li> <li>– Works best in ‘white-collar’ environments, (e.g., financial services)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Computer ownership among many target groups is likely to be low.</li> <li>– Response rates for web surveys are low.</li> </ul>
<b>Mobile – phone calls</b> 	<p>Computer-aided telephone interviews (CATI) where interviewers call, run through a pre-scripted questionnaire and enter responses into a computer. Interactive Voice Response (IVR) is a pre-recorded automated phone survey in which people can enter their answers using the keypad or respond vocally.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Higher response rates.</li> <li>– Works well in low literacy contexts.</li> <li>– Can be conducted in local languages.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– CATI surveys are typically 3-5 times more expensive than short message service (SMS) surveys.</li> <li>– Requires high mobile penetration and network coverage, as well as worker contact information.</li> <li>– Vulnerable workers may be unwilling to discuss sensitive issues with a stranger on the phone.</li> <li>– Consider timing of calls to facilitate inclusion of workers who may not be available at certain times.</li> </ul>
<b>Mobile – video</b> 	<p>Pre-recorded interactive videos.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Can be pre-loaded onto a phone and does not require an internet connection</li> <li>– Cost-effective at scale</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Requires access to smartphone or tablet (can be provided by companies).</li> </ul>
<b>Mobile – message</b> 	<p>SMS text messages Unstructured supplementary data services (USSD) are automated conversations held via text message or through a smartphone menu.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Very cost-effective at scale.</li> <li>– Easy and quick to respond to.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Low response-rate, especially if users incur costs.</li> <li>– Allows for multiple-choice questions only.</li> <li>– Language/literacy barriers may exclude certain groups.</li> </ul>
<b>Mobile – apps</b> 	<p>Mobile applications (apps) are downloaded onto the worker’s phone.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Allows integration of multiple functions, including ongoing communications.</li> <li>– Can be an extension of or supplement to desktop solutions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Requires smartphones.</li> <li>– Low bandwidth/poor connections may make it difficult to download apps.</li> </ul>
<b>Mobile – chat</b> 	<p>Messaging apps can be used to send messages, make voice and video calls, or share images, documents and other media.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Very low cost.</li> <li>– Often already a common method of communication between workers and management, and among workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Hard to manage feedback data from workers at scale, as platforms are not designed to extract or analyse data.</li> <li>– Reliant on mobile penetration, literacy and language abilities.</li> <li>– Presents data privacy challenges.</li> </ul>
<b>Social media</b> 	<p>Allows workers to connect with each other and share information accessed via websites and apps.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Very low cost.</li> <li>– Many workers will already have social media accounts and be familiar with this method of communication.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– People may be less willing to interact as social media profiles make it easier to identify individuals.</li> <li>– Privacy issues may be a concern.</li> <li>– Reliant on mobile penetration, literacy and language abilities.</li> </ul>

## Box 10: Implementing worker voice technologies: a checklist

For each of the items below, check whether the technology provider is addressing the topic, and if not, try to mitigate the risk. If the risk cannot be mitigated, consider the degree of remaining risk and whether an alternative approach would have a higher chance of success.

### Effectiveness

*Are there potential biases or issues with the type of technology being used to communicate with workers that may lead to low quality data?*

- Do workers trust the technology being used?
- Are workers likely to respond honestly?
- Are adequate quality controls in place (such as to verify participant's responses)?
- Are workers already over-burdened with work-related communication or surveys?

### Efficacy

*Can the information be collected or exchanged within a reasonable time and cost?*

- Is there an adequate choice of technology service providers and tools?
- Does the company already have worker contact details?
- If not, it is likely to be challenging to get them (in a way that will be representative of the worker population) or can an approach be used that does not require contact details?
- Is the chosen technology accessible by workers (e.g., mobile ownership, network coverage, network charges for responding)?

### Equity

*Is the choice of technology helping to listen to, and understand, the needs of the most vulnerable workers – or simply the best connected?*

- Have differences related to how men and women have access to, or are comfortable using, technology been considered?
- Have differences in language, literacy and ownership of digital devices been considered, and will not disadvantage certain groups from participating or responding?
- Are worker profile details captured to allow for the analysis of data to pinpoint problems being faced by particular groups of workers – while taking care not to disaggregate data to such an extent that worker anonymity and confidentiality is breached (for example, if there is only one female supervisor in a particular factory; presenting gender-disaggregated data by worker type will make it easy to identify their responses)? See Box 8: Data Privacy.

### Ethics

*Are ethical standards and procedures in place and upheld in order to protect and safeguard workers?*

- Is the information strictly necessary and proportionate to collect (that is, relevant to making decisions)?
- Are questions phrased in a culturally appropriate way, especially when concerning potentially sensitive topics?<sup>27</sup>
- Are the privacy rights of workers safeguarded, including in how data is stored and analysed (in line with data protection rules)?
- Do workers understand and explicitly consent to the engagement, including on how their data will be used (informed consent)?

## 4.2 How voice technologies work in practice

Various types of service providers make up the 'market' for worker voice technology. These range from for-profit businesses and social enterprises to NGOs and community- and worker-led non-profits.<sup>28</sup> Many of these service providers have been backed by either commercial or more mission-driven venture funds.

Service providers use different entry points to engage with workers. Depending on the type of labour issue focused on, and the category of worker, service providers engage directly with a company, surveying workers onsite, or by first engaging with workers in a community and then providing aggregate data to 'clients' (companies, buyers and investors) to provide insights on market conditions across businesses, sectors and locations.<sup>29</sup>

The precise labour topics covered depends on the needs of each particular client and the worker context. Most commonly, however, the information exchanged focuses on the worker and management relationship, working conditions, and job satisfaction, also extending to feedback on the efficacy of training and grievance mechanisms.<sup>30</sup> A set of sample survey questions is included in Annex 3.

Increasingly, worker voice technology service providers are combining functionality to create offerings that solve a number of business challenges concurrently, such that workforce communications, onboarding and training and management of employment records are bundled together into a more commercially attractive package.

An overview of what a typical process looks like to run a mobile phone survey is set out in Box 11, as the most common type of technology currently being used to 'collect' information from workers.

### Case 8: In-person surveys of Sekaf suppliers

Sekaf is a Ghanaian company that manufactures and sells bulk shea butter as well as shea-based bath and beauty products under the TAMA<sup>®</sup> brand name. CDC is invested in Sekaf through Injaro Agricultural Capital Holdings.

Sekaf sources from shea nut collectors and shea butter processors in communities located around Tamale, most of whom are women living below the poverty line. In 2018, Sekaf was in the process of upgrading its processing capacity to allow for a fivefold increase in production. To support this increase, Sekaf needed to expand and strengthen its supplier base. It sought feedback from suppliers to understand the factors driving supplier acquisition and retention, and asked what it could do to further develop a relationship within supplier communities.

To answer these questions, CDC carried out research together with 60 Decibels (previously Acumen Lean Data). Given the scale of the Sekaf supply chain – sourcing from approximately 6,000 people across 17 communities – the initial idea was to run mobile surveys. But a number of challenges emerged – from feasibility issues (such as mobile ownership and network coverage), to concerns about data quality. Many Sekaf suppliers are from marginalised rural communities, and may not have felt comfortable giving feedback and discussing potentially sensitive issues with a stranger over the phone. As a consequence, in person surveys were conducted by a team of female enumerators to avoid any socio-cultural barriers.

### Box 11: A typical worker survey process

The most common technologies used to conduct worker surveys are computer-assisted telephone interviews (CATI) and SMS surveys. Neither of these technologies require workers to use a smartphone, and if SMS surveys are constructed using free-to-text USSD codes, then neither method requires workers to pay to respond.

Survey questions are usually a blend of 'tried and tested' questions drawn from a service provider's question bank, together with bespoke questions developed by the investor, company or other stakeholders. An approximation by one service provider, Ulula, is for surveys to contain an 80/20 split between off-the-shelf and tailored questions. This ratio can be adjusted, but a higher proportion of new questions will have cost implications, as new questions will need to be carefully piloted. SMS surveys are much shorter, at about eight to 15 questions maximum, making them quick to complete. Telephone interviews typically take no longer than 15 minutes.

The company works together with the service provider to 'recruit' respondents. This is often done by a company sharing contact numbers with the survey enumeration team (after obtaining any necessary permissions from workers under data protection regulations), ideally as a database of all worker contacts – from which a sample can be chosen. Sampling is either random or carried out intentionally to make sure particular groups (such as by sex or by employment status) are adequately represented. Sometimes businesses will put forward names and numbers of workers to be interviewed. In these instances, care should be taken that workers are not being 'handpicked' as this may result in only a partial, or inaccurately positive picture.

The digital tools are sometimes implemented after a 'physical outreach' phase, such as working with unions or workshops. This pre-engagement is useful to develop worker understanding and awareness of what the process is and what will happen after. It can also be used to inform key topics to cover and to give workers an opportunity to input into the design and testing of the surveys. In responding to the survey, worker feedback is collected anonymously, but a small number of tools allow the worker to choose whether they would like to be identified to management in order to resolve specific grievances.

## Conclusion

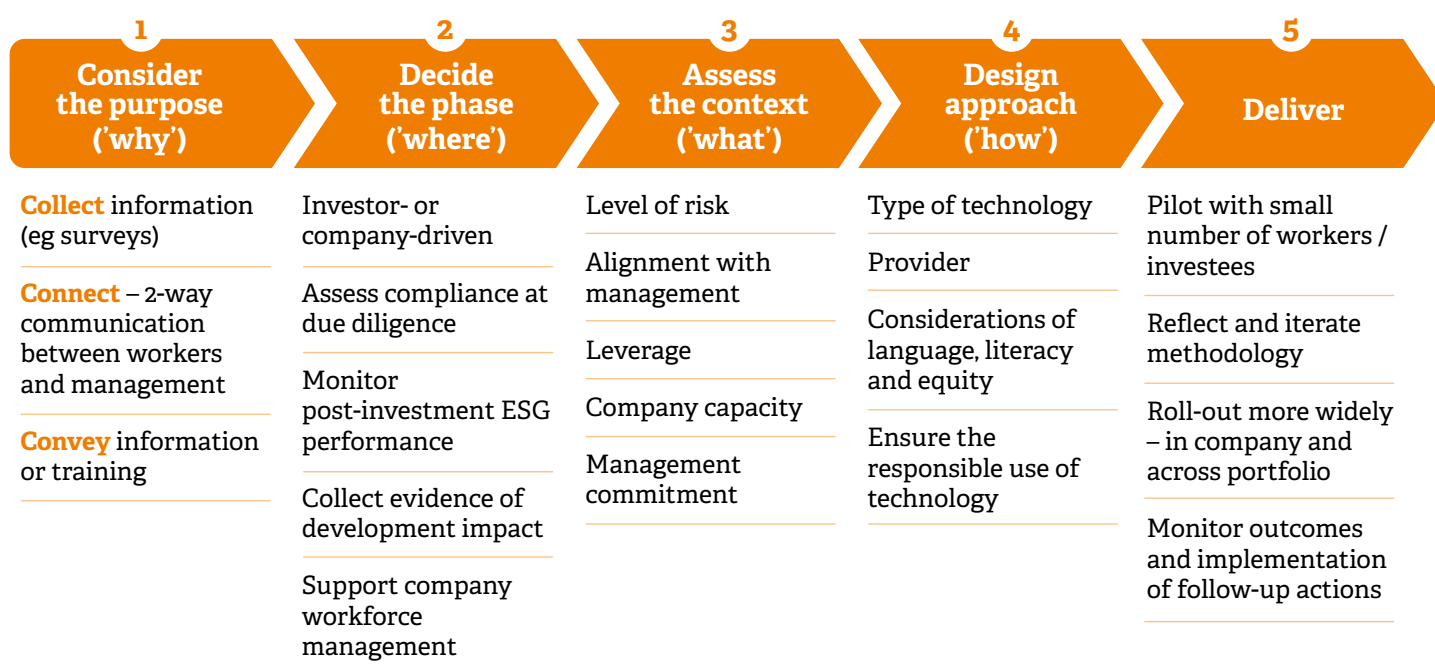
Digital technologies allow for a quicker and more cost-effective way to collect, connect and convey information to and from workers at scale, and with a greater ability to protect worker identity. This in turn allows investors and investees alike to engage with a greater number of workers on a more frequent basis – maximising the opportunities for labour issues to be identified and addressed. Businesses can use this information to improve workforce management in a way that is informed by workers themselves, and is therefore likely to be most effective at achieving corporate objectives such as reducing staff turnover, improving productivity and even enhancing customer loyalty. And, by putting better data on working conditions in the hands of responsible investors, worker voice technologies can enable investors to work with companies to encourage change – ultimately contributing to increased prospects of improved worker wellbeing.

Therefore, worker voice technologies are useful tools as part of investor efforts to promote decent work and job quality outcomes in their portfolios. As with most technology ‘solutions’, however, effectiveness is not determined by the tools themselves, but by how they are used. Figure 4 sets out a simple five step-process – which reflects the main logic of this report – to help investors maximise the potential benefits of using technology to support workforce communications and worker voice initiatives.

First, investors need to ask ‘why’ technology should be used – establishing the specific connect/collect/convey purpose and information needs; and then establish ‘where’ in the investment process engagement will be supported. Considerations should be given to ‘what’ enabling conditions are in place – at both the investor-level and company-level – ensuring there is sufficient alignment or leverage between investors and investees to respond to any issues raised. The question of ‘how’ to design technology-enabled engagement is contextual, with the final choice dependent on the worker situation and language, literacy and access barriers.

Finally, executing the initiative starts by piloting the technology with a small number of workers and/or investments, then reflecting on what worked well and what resulted from it – in terms of outcomes for both workers and companies. Learning from the pilots can then be internalised and decisions made about how such efforts can be repeated or built on, either within a company (to track change over time), or across companies (to understand portfolio risks or impacts). This way, technology can play a role in supporting investors and their investees to engage on a more regular basis with workers, and in providing the data and insights which can be the basis for taking meaningful action to improve worker satisfaction and, therefore, productivity.

**Figure 4:** Key investor steps in supporting the use of worker voice technologies



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## Annex 1. Research framework and methodology

This paper responds to a single core research question: *How can technology be used by investors and the companies they invest in to complement other forms of workforce communications and worker voice?*

Research took place over a period of three months between October and December 2020, through a combination of a literature review and semi-structured key informant interviews.

A total of 21 interviews were completed, covering the perspective of CDC and external stakeholders. Of these, seven were conducted with CDC teams including Development Impact, ESG Impact and Value Creation Strategies. Three investee companies in the CDC portfolio were interviewed. Regarding other stakeholders, three interviews were conducted with investors, four with multi-stakeholder initiatives, and five with worker voice technology service providers.<sup>31</sup>

Literature was sourced through general document searches, recommendations from CDC teams and interviewees, and a more targeted search for documents related to the work of individual service providers. Of the literature found through these searches, 69 documents were reviewed. These comprised a mix of reports by think tanks and NGOs, academic journals, media articles and case study documents. Each document was coded against key themes, and findings were identified against an analytical framework that corresponded to the headings of Sections 2 to 4 in this report.

In terms of research limitations, it is important to note that the use of technology to support workforce communications and worker voice is a vast and rapidly evolving field. Examples included in this report are not exhaustive and should be read as illustrative of the many different 'use cases' for such technology. While we selected interviewees to achieve a diversity of perspective, we found many insights and lessons were biased towards global supply chain-related discussions – as this is where there has been most experience. Investor experiences remain nascent but, to date, the greatest use of technology has been via mobile surveys. We also found a scarcity of data and concrete results on what exactly changed after using worker voice technologies – in terms of outcomes for both businesses and workers. Much of the available literature is either produced by service providers themselves or appears selective, with commercially-sensitive instances where technologies were used to detect (and potentially address) labour rights violations not routinely disclosed.

## Annex 2. Key resources on the responsible use of technology

WEST Principles (available at [westprinciples.org](https://westprinciples.org))

<b>Principle 1:</b> Start with Integrity & Purpose	<p><i>Define how engagement services the needs of workers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Include workers in the assessment, design, and implementation processes when feasible</li><li>– Determine the end use of engagement</li><li>– Set measurable goals for desired use, outcomes, and impact that benefit workers and respect their rights</li></ul> <p><i>Understand the existing landscapes for workers, employers, and local organisations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Align with existing government regulations, international norms, and worker representation and employer processes</li><li>– Recognise and support local, regional, and other geographic, linguistic, or cultural differences</li><li>– Consult with local organisations to assess and understand existing initiatives</li><li>– When possible, refer to credible third parties for validation of purpose and strategy</li></ul>
<b>Principle 2:</b> Use Worker-Centric & Inclusive Design	<p><i>Design for ease</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Design with frameworks and languages that workers understand</li><li>– When possible, use technology that is already being used by workers</li><li>– Test usability for workers and their environment</li><li>– Provide appropriate training and instructions</li></ul> <p><i>Design for accessibility</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Ensure that workers can participate of their own free will without fear of reprisal</li><li>– Ensure inclusivity regardless of age, literacy level, job role, race, sex, and religion, including avenues for reaching vulnerable populations</li><li>– Incorporate non-technical solutions when technology is not available</li></ul> <p><i>Design for multi-stakeholder ownership and a partnership approach</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Establish roles, responsibilities, and expectations</li><li>– Define time and resources needed</li><li>– Decide appropriate incentives</li></ul>
<b>Principle 3:</b> Build Trust With Workers	<p><i>Ensure informed consent for workers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Follow existing legal frameworks</li><li>– Communicate context for the engagement, including methodology and scope</li><li>– Provide voluntary participation channels</li></ul> <p><i>Protect anonymity of workers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Confirm anonymity, security, and confidentiality without risk of reproach or punishment</li><li>– Ensure the collection of, need for, and access to personally identifiable information is clearly defined to minimise risk</li></ul> <p><i>Earn trust over time</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Ensure worker safety and wellbeing comes before other interests</li><li>– Communicate to workers how data will be used and where it will be shared</li><li>– Share results and learnings in a transparent and timely manner with all participating parties</li></ul>
<b>Principle 4:</b> Facilitate Uptake & Ownership	<p><i>Build buy-in and a partnership approach with all relevant stakeholders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Get formal consent from those engaged inside and outside of the workplace</li><li>– Communicate purpose, goal outcomes, methodology, and scope</li><li>– Share updates, key findings, and aggregated results</li></ul> <p><i>Encourage employer engagement</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Motivate, encourage, and empower employers to determine their own purpose, goals, and outcomes</li><li>– Encourage other stakeholders to engage and collaborate with employers</li><li>– Empower employers to define data sharing approach with buyers, workers, and third parties</li></ul> <p><i>Communicate with all relevant stakeholders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>– Connect to broader programs and non-employer parties</li><li>– Collaborate and share resources to catalyse effective engagement</li></ul>



<p><b>Principle 5:</b> Manage Security &amp; Risk</p>	<p><i>Verify a safe and enabling environment for workers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Assess potential risks to worker security</li> <li>– Determine if technology is relevant for the engagement</li> </ul> <p><i>Mitigate risk points</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Identify inherent risks and identify who they will impact</li> <li>– Assess cyber and digital security risks throughout the chain of data-custody</li> <li>– Develop appropriate mitigation plans that include inputs from workers or their representatives</li> </ul> <p><i>Develop robust data management protocols to prevent the misuse of data</i></p>
<p><b>Principle 6:</b> Analyse Engagement &amp; Impact</p>	<p><i>Ensure integrity of data collected</i></p> <p><i>Measure credibility of results</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Establish metrics that enable robust evaluation</li> <li>– Leverage statistical methods for quantitative analysis</li> <li>– Standardise metrics to enable data comparison and expanded use of data</li> </ul> <p><i>Evaluate impacts for workers to inform possible follow-up actions</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Determine if needs of workers are being met, including possible unintended consequences and implications</li> <li>– Consider qualitative, contextual information collected from non-technology sources</li> <li>– Compare with available external data sources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Principle 7:</b> Inform Decisions &amp; System Changes</p>	<p><i>Use results to inform decisions that benefit workers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Communicate business value to all relevant stakeholders</li> <li>– Integrate results into business performance management systems</li> <li>– Use data and worker inputs to inform concrete next steps and follow-up actions</li> </ul> <p><i>Use data to build workers' knowledge</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Communicate results and changes directly to workers</li> <li>– Close the loop with workers by communicating relevant educational information</li> <li>– Repeat engagements to maximise learning</li> </ul> <p><i>Use data to identify opportunities for improved working conditions across industries</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Use quantitative data to support behaviour changes</li> <li>– Scale ongoing engagement to drive systemic change</li> </ul>
<p><b>Principle 8:</b> Collaborate &amp; Share Learnings</p>	<p><i>Be transparent with all stakeholders</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Articulate methodology and scope</li> <li>– Share findings and experiences in a way that is accessible, easy to comprehend, and actionable</li> </ul> <p><i>Foster data sharing and standardisation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Increase data-interoperability and comparability of key performance indicators</li> <li>– Publish anonymised data</li> </ul> <p><i>Promote Multi-stakeholder dialogue and learning</i></p>

### Other resources relevant to responsible design:

- A short interactive guide on [best practices for conducting phone surveys](#), produced by J-PAL.
- A handbook on [ethical standards and approaches for working with migrant workers and trafficked persons in the digital age](#), which includes a useful set of 'do no harm' guidelines.
- Guidelines designed to help practitioners [integrate best practices into technology-enabled programmes](#).

## Annex 3. Example survey questions

### Example survey questions organised by the five Strategic Goals on 'Quality Jobs' in GIIN's IRIS+ system.

#### Job security and stability

- Did you sign an employment contract with [employer]?
- Do you have a copy of the contract that you can read?
- Do you understand the conditions in your contract?
- What are your contractual working hours?
- When do you start work, when do you leave?
- How many hours do you get paid for each day?
- Do you work overtime on a regular basis?
- Are you entitled to paid time off?
- What was your previous employment?
- Do you have any other jobs?
- How do your working hours get logged/recorded?

#### Earnings and wealth

- Are you paid for overtime?
- Compared to job(s) you had before, is your current salary (and benefits) from [employer] better, worse or the same?
- How often do you get paid by [employer]?
- How do you generally get paid by [employer]?
- Do you have access to any savings/saving schemes?
- Are you satisfied with the income you receive?

#### Questions drawn from the Poverty Probability Index (PPI)

- Consider all the payments that you have earned from [employer] in the past 12 months. How many of these were paid in a timely manner?
- Do you receive any benefits from [employer] other than a wage, such as healthcare or access to a welfare fund?
- To your knowledge, do you receive the same benefits as other employees with similar responsibilities?

#### Health and wellbeing

- Are your supervisors communicating enough about safety at work?
- Do you think workers at your place of work take care of their safety well? For example, do they wear appropriate protection when needed, and follow safety guidelines?
- Do you know who is responsible for health and safety?
- Do you feel safe at work?
- Have you been informed about the risks attached to your job and how to reduce these risks?
- Have you seen an accident at work?
- Have you seen any changes since an accident?
- How many days do you normally work without a day off?
- How many days do you normally rest before starting work again?
- When was your last day of rest?
- Do you have all the safety equipment you need at work?
- How often do you feel stressed or unable to sleep because of work-related concerns?

#### Rights, respect and cooperation

- Do you know if the company has a policy against sexual harassment?
- Have you ever observed sexual harassment at your current workplace?
- Do you feel that you can share your honest thoughts with your manager?
- Do you believe that good suggestions or valid complaints from employees lead to changes?
- Are you a part of a worker's union?
- Do you feel able to join a union (and if not, why not)?
- If you had a work-related grievance, who is the first person you would speak to about it?
- How confident are you that a work-related grievance would be resolved?

#### Career progression and job skilling

- Do you have opportunities within the company to learn and grow professionally?
- Do you have access to the things you need to do your job well?
- When was the last time training was provided to you at work?
- Do you feel there is an opportunity to progress in your job? If not, why not?
- Do you feel that the training you received at the time of joining was adequate?
- Do you see a need to learn new skills to perform your current role?

#### Cross-cutting: Workplace relationships and work motivation

- Do you feel motivated to come to work every day?
- On a scale of 0-10, how likely are you to recommend your workplace as a place of work to a friend?
- How do you think your experience as an employee of [employer] compares to other employment opportunities?
- What could [employer] do to improve as an employer?
- How did you get to know about the job opportunity at [employer]?

## Annex 4. References

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## Notes

- 1 Issara Institute, 2017.
- 2 Some worker voice platforms “are now dropping the term ‘worker voice’ (because it implies a passive role) preferring instead ‘worker-engagement supported by technology’ – to not just listen to voice but act on findings and empower workers” (Blitz, Shih & Rende-Taylor, 2019). This report still uses the term ‘voice’, as it aligns with the language in existing frameworks used by investors and international organisations to describe and define job quality. However, we consider voice to be not just a passive exercise but to encompass an active role – where those doing the listening are committed to acting on and addressing worker concerns and feedback.
- 3 Worker voice technologies are also called ‘Worker reporting technologies’, ‘Worker Engagement Platforms’, ‘Worker Information Sharing Platforms’ or ‘Worker voice tools’.
- 4 For example, outsourced workers sometimes do not have a company e-mail address, so they cannot be part of internal communications channels.
- 5 National Bureau of Economic Research Expectations: Wage Hikes, and Worker Voice: Evidence from a Field Experiment (2019).
- 6 VOX EU: Employee wellbeing, productivity, and firm performance: Evidence from 1.8 million employees (2019).
- 7 CIPD: Employee Communication (2020).
- 8 Gallup: How Employee Engagement Drives Growth (2013).
- 9 According to the GSM Association, 2020 and McKinsey Global Institute, 2019.
- 10 Interview with Ulula, November 2020.
- 11 We define a worker as a “person carrying out activities on, or related to, the activities of a company or their business partners. This includes people employed directly or through third parties such as contractors, subcontractors, labour agencies and suppliers” (Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) & Ergon Associates, 2018).
- 12 Generic corporate communications platforms – for example Zoom - whose use has become ubiquitous in the context of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic are not included as they generally do not allow for deeper insights into working conditions.
- 13 There are worker voice technologies that seek to complement mechanisms for collective voice – as ways to connect with peers and raise campaigns (e.g., Organise in the UK, and United for Respect in the US), but these are not yet common in markets relevant to development finance investors.
- 14 Finnfund covered the full costs of the initial pilot. However, the core cost drivers are in developing the questionnaire and piloting it. Once the videos have been produced, the costs of repeating the survey are significantly lower.
- 15 If a worker knows that an investor is involved (and this involvement would have to be fully disclosed to workers to ensure adherence to ethical research practices), a worker may be less inclined to be honest about their job quality concerns, especially if they think the company’s future success (and therefore their jobs) are dependent on their responses. This echoes the Better Work experience of mobile surveys – where they find little reporting on key things that are known problems (such as excessive hours) because workers know the survey is conducted on behalf of a buyer.
- 16 Introductions to the survey should also clearly explain the topic and purpose of the engagement to workers, which can help expectations be managed.
- 17 CDC: [What we’ve learnt about measuring impact](#) (2019).
- 18 As this may result in company management being resistant to subsequent surveys to identify risks as they feel they have evidence that workers are happy.
- 19 CDC Plus is a technical assistance and support facility funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office from the British people.
- 20 Nishinaga & Natour, 2019.
- 21 Line managers and middle managers need to be ‘onside’ in terms of valuing worker voice, and this may involve additional management training, and measures to help managers embrace a new approach to productivity and team leadership.
- 22 Adapted from Dundon, et al., (2004)
- 23 Adapted from Nishinaga & Natour (2019). Artificial intelligence (AI) and blockchain technologies are important ‘emerging’ technologies, but are less about facilitating information sharing than they are a means of security, storing and analysing data more effectively – and are therefore not included in the scope of this report.
- 24 Based on Insight2Impact (2017); and Impact Management Project (2019)
- 25 Impact Management Project, 2019.
- 26 Based on Nishinaga & Natour (2019); Insight2Impact (2017); and BSR (2019)
- 27 For more guidance on research protocols and potential questions, see [Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment](#) and [Managing Risks Associated with Modern Slavery](#).
- 28 See [United for Respect](#) for an example of a worker-led non-profit which emerged out of the OUR Walmart campaign.
- 29 Antitrafficking Review, 2020.
- 30 BSR, 2019.
- 31 Thanks to the following organisations for agreeing to be interviewed for this study: Finnfund; Bridges Fund Management; the Ethical Trading Initiative; the ILO Better Work Programme; Humanity United; ELEVATE; Work Ahead; Ulula; Sattva; Open Society Foundation; 60 Decibels; the Impact Management Project; Noticeboard; BigBasket; and Ajua.



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