Transitions & Futures

Discussion paper

Ethical Trading Initiative
For workers' rights. For better business.

Future World of Work
Social Dialogue & interplay with technology

This discussion paper, drafted by the ETI secretariat, builds upon ETI member events in early 2021 on [social dialogue and labour standards](#) in times of crises. It aims structure initial discussions on our Future World of Work pathway and provides context for navigating digital and technological changes through Social Dialogue.

Context and background

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to global supply chains with an emerging trend towards using digital and technological solutions for social auditing, capturing worker voice and adjustments to grievance mechanisms. This trend has grown rapidly and substantially with a rush to harness big data needed for supply chain solutions.

The July 2021 Global Deal's thematic brief on [*A business case for social dialogue: How workplace representation and collective bargaining deliver better business performance*](#) validates much of ETI's discussions so far and provides deeper understanding to how social dialogue can facilitate a just transition to digital and technological solutions. The brief highlights:

- Workplaces are likely to change because of digitisation and artificial intelligence
- Implications for new tasks and changing jobs
- Preparation for these developments to prevent adverse effects

Social dialogue is intrinsically linked and embedded in freedom of association, collective bargaining, and worker representation. Drawing on the discussion and feedback from our February 2021 event, it is evident that technology-based solutions cannot replace real and meaningful dialogue. if not part of an overall consultation strategy, these solutions can become a barrier and hindrance to meaningful dialogue and consultation between workers and managers.

Equally important is the impact on workers in the supply chain when technology and digitisation of work processes replace manual processes. The additional factors of worker data and surveillance also needs careful consideration.

### Social dialogue in a technological & digital age

Technological or digital solutions have however enhanced capturing worker voice and improved managing global online grievance mechanisms and delivering training with suppliers and the wider supply chain 'eco-system' of auditors, NGOs and labour organisations. Big data, algorithm and cloud solutions have also improved the ability to map

multiple audit reports over several geographies, affording us open access to, for example, global comparative wage data and trace provenance of materials or produce. This however, can be hindered if access to technology is weak or non-existent and training for suppliers or auditors is lacking.

Social dialogue in focus

The phases of social dialogue are mapped out in ETI's briefing [Social Dialogue and Worker Consultation (December 2020)](#) . The paper outlines the recommended phases, including a new phase on preparation, where asking the right questions
can help determine whether tech-based solutions will hinder or
support worker representation. The phases include:

- **Preparation** (building trust and asking the right people the right questions)
- **Dialogue** (facilitating a two-way discussion, establishing a common understanding)
- **Consultation** (working together to solve to collective challenges)
- **Negotiation** (reaching a formal agreement on solutions)
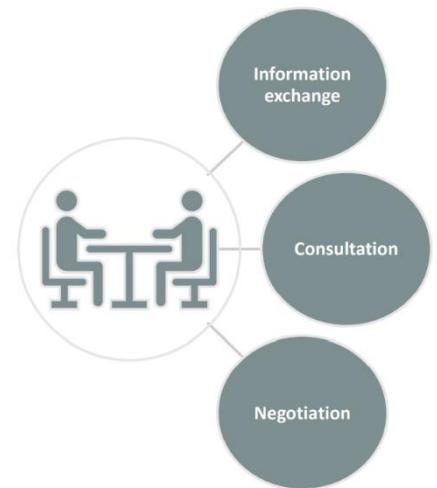
Opportunities for technological or digital solutions

Technological or digital solutions are good for awareness
raising, training and can help facilitate 'preparation' before 'dialogue' takes place with worker elected representatives. They can also meet a companies need to hear from workers in extensive supply chains and varied geographies and can provide an access point where local no representative exists or a workplace is not unionised. Language and literacy should be given careful consideration.

Data collected and used ethically, can also provide global information that supports due diligence mapping, transparency and management data for decision making and potentially highlights trends and future risks.

Limitations of technological or digital solutions

Capturing cultural nuances through these methods is challenging. Issues around access to technology, the robustness of the technology itself and limits of coded questions in capturing nuanced data.
In terms of the role and responsibility of an independently elected trade union or worker representative, a one-way technological solution could be seen to undermine the accepted processes and structures that support industrial relations.

Wider considerations need to include ownership of the application, who has access to the data and worker consent to their data being captured. Especially in circumstances where

workers may fear speaking out due to risks or reprisals that might jeopardize their safety, livelihood or right to remain.

There are several efficiencies to be gained in using technology and or digital solutions to capture 'voice', but they cannot replace the 'human' engagement, representation and negotiating function of elected worker representatives. It is important to remember that trust, relationships, and communication are often best developed face-to-face.

> *Critically, the nature of technological solutions to capturing worker opinions is that it is* **one way**, *is not a collective voice and therefore would not constitute 'dialogue' between parties.*

Meeting social dialogue criteria

There are several questions to consider when approaching the use of technological solutions for social dialogue:

- Can digital solutions support, encourage, and enhance worker and employer dialogue in the workplace?
- How are collective concerns captured, analysed, fed back, and acted upon?
- Is the trade union or elected worker body involved in the preparation phase to contribute to the development of questions used?
- Can the tech-based approach to learning or capturing information be supported by a blended learning initiative or collective response?
- To ensure dialogue and consultation, is there a consultative body, elected trade union or worker representative in place to work with managers to assess the collected data, map patterns and discuss plausible solutions?
- Can your digital consultation findings be embedded through negotiation with elected representatives in a formal or collective bargaining agreement?
- Can this form the basis for ongoing implementation and monitoring of progress against agreed solutions and remedy?

Navigating change through social dialogue

Engaging in meaningful dialogue with workers through their workplace representatives helps alleviate fear that their jobs will be replaced by technological solutions. Workplace representation is an untapped resource to navigate upgrades to new technology and introducing new mechanised or digital processes. It can also provide the context for discussions on related consultation through industrial relations and input on requirements for retraining or upskilling of workers.

Workplaces with trade union or elected representative forums are ideal for worker participation in finding credible solutions and ideas for navigating change. One-way data gathering tools cannot replace two-way social dialogue. As such they need to be adjusted in a fashion that considers each phase of social dialogue.