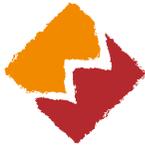


Worker and Management Perceptions of the Impact of Better Work Lesotho

June 2015



BETTER WORK

This research brief presents the results of a comparison of worker and management perceptions about the impact of the Better Work programme in Lesotho (BWL). The aim of the comparison is to establish whether, and to what degree, there is agreement between workers and managers on the issues on which BWL has had an impact, and whether this impact is sustainable. The impact of BWL on compliance with labour standards is measured by comparing direct feedback from workers/ management at the outset of BWL (2011/2012) with their feedback two years later (2013/2014). The findings are remarkable in the level of agreement between workers and managers on the main areas of positive impact. Furthermore, both workers and managers perceive that participation in BWL has been beneficial and want BWL to continue. In particular, both see a need for more training.

I. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

A. Workers and managers agree strongly on improvements in some compliance areas

According to both workers and managers, there have been significant improvements in OSH since the implementation of BWL. This is the result of OSH-related training and awareness-raising, as well as the proximity of BWL to factories for follow-up visits on recommendations about the distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other OSH matters.

Workers and managers agree that there have been significant improvements in the area of Communication and Relations, with relations between supervisors and workers a key area. Workers attribute improvements largely to the Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs), which serve as a forum for easily raising and resolving workplace issues.

There is some evidence from both workers and managers, especially supervisors, to indicate that improvements in communication and relations are leading to improvements in productivity and quality.

B. Workers and managers vary in their perceptions about the degree of improvement in supervisor relations

Because relations between supervisors and workers were identified as a highly contentious issue in the baseline research, BWL focused attention on training supervisors in skills with regard to communicating with and treating workers. Managers attribute strong improvements in supervisor relations to this training. Workers have seen improvement but were less positive than managers, and attribute improvements to the PICCs, which create a forum for workers and managers to discuss issues openly.

C. Different tiers of management agree that there has been a positive impact on productivity but vary in their perceptions about the degree of improvement

Some senior managers speculate that productivity might have improved due to workers' increased satisfaction at work, while middle managers believe that BWL has had a positive impact on productivity. Supervisors, however, were very sure that BWL had led to improvements in productivity, mainly because of better communication and relations on the shop floor.

D. BWL has impacted positively on workers beyond the factory

Workers report that what they have learnt from BWL training courses has led to improvements at home. They report being better able to budget their salaries, and practice better health and safety, for example.

Workers also report that they now communicate more openly with their spouses, which relates to managing their finances, dealing with interpersonal conflict, etc.

Due to improvements in communication and relations at work, workers feel less stressed when they arrive home, which has led to improvement in communication and relations within the family, including spouses, children and with other family members as well. As a result, they are more relaxed when they return to work.

II. RESEARCH APPROACH

Unlike much of the literature on corporate social responsibility and the monitoring of codes of conduct, where the voices of workers have generally not been heard, in this study hundreds of workers were involved with focus group discussions and worker surveys. The focus groups, held away from the factories, yielded deep and insightful feedback about workers’ perceptions of labour standards compliance. Mirroring this in-depth research on workers was a large number of interviews with managers at different levels, from supervisors to the managing director.

Table 1: Management research sample at baseline and impact assessment

	2011	2014
Firms involved	10	7
Interviews per firm	1-2	6-8
Interviewees	Senior managers	Senior managers, Middle managers, Supervisors

The research therefore spanned the different nationalities, cultures and languages of managers from the bottom of the hierarchy to the top. Earlier research had indicated that this mix of cultures and languages posed a critical challenge for the successful implementation of the BWL programme in Lesotho.

The earlier research allowed for a comparison of workers perceptions in 2011/12 with their perceptions in 2013/14. The perceptions of managers could be compared in the same way. One can therefore establish whether each group has perceived BWL to have made an improvement or not. The common framework against which worker and management perspectives were compared is that of the Better Work compliance clusters. As these touch on core labour standards¹ and basic working conditions², they encompass areas of work in which both workers and management might perceive improvements. There are also, however, some areas that are unique to management (e.g. profitability or buyer orders) and some areas that are unique to workers (e.g. improvements in communication between husbands and wives when talking about the impact of BWL).

The researchers also compared the perspectives of workers regarding improvements with those of managers. At one extreme, full agreement between workers and managers on positive improvements to a set of compliance issues would be a strong endorsement of the BWL programme and could indicate whether the improvement was sustainable or not. At the other extreme, full agreement between workers and managers that there have been no improvements with regard

to a set of compliance issues would indicate the failure of BWL to have any impact. Disagreement about the degree of improvement could be assessed by the extent to which workers or managers perceived there to be persistent problems in a particular area. Similarly there could be disagreement on the areas of improvement. In these cases the research points to a more complex scenario that would need careful analysis to determine why BWL is working in some areas and not others, or why workers and management perceive the improvements differently.

III. FINDINGS

Both workers and managers identified several areas of improvement since BWL was implemented, as well as areas in need of further improvement. In some areas, the improvements far outweighed any persistent problems. In other areas, the improvements were more modest, or the persistent problems outweighed any improvement. The figure below illustrates workers’ feedback about improvements and persistent problems since BWL.

Figure 1: Improvements (green) vs. Persistent Problem (orange) in 2013

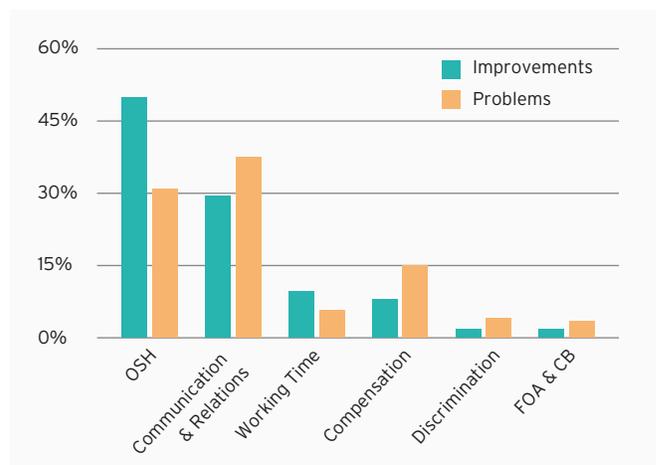
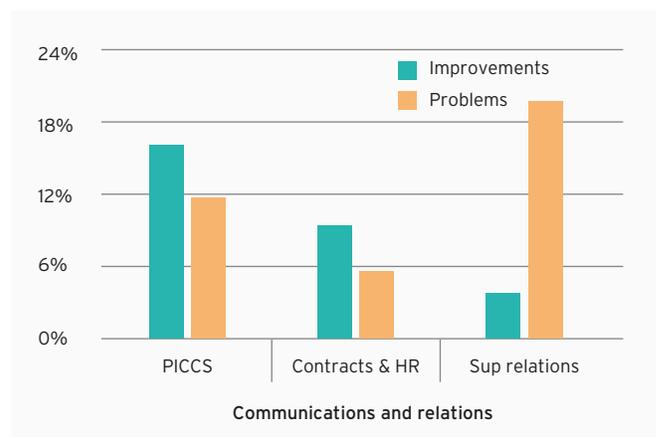


Figure 2: A closer look at Communication and Relations



¹ These include: (1) Child Labour, (2) Forced Labour, (3) Discrimination, and (4) Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining.
² These include: (1) Compensation, (2) Occupational Health and Safety, (3) Contracts and Human Resources, and (4) Working Time.

A. Occupational health and safety is an area of significant improvement on which both workers and management strongly agree

Both workers and managers highlighted the major strides that have been made with regard to compliance with OSH standards. In 2011 workers reported that this was the main non-compliance issue in the workplace. Management interviews reinforced this perspective. BWL therefore focused on improving OSH compliance as a priority. This included training workers on health and safety practices, fire safety, first aid,³ and emergency preparedness. It also included training managers on safe practices, the importance of keeping exit doors unlocked, maintaining clear aisles, having an evacuation plan and so on. Both workers and managers mentioned the noticeable improvements that this made. Even in cases where firms had OSH committees and OSH policies in place, managers noted that these had been ineffective until BWL was implemented at the factory.

"We are very proud of BW. The problem we used to have is that it was a struggle for us to get PPE. The fire extinguishers were expired all the time. First aid box was always open, not locked, and empty. There was no toilet paper in the toilets, nor soap. Since BW, all [these things]...are in order now."

B. Communication and Relations is another area of significant improvement on which both workers and management agree, although to differing degrees

The baseline research that was conducted in 2011 found that supervisors had a critical impact on compliance. Foreign supervisors had a management style that led to conflict with workers, whereas the lack of skills and abuse of power by local supervisors led to mistreatment of workers and underpinned instances of non-compliance in a wide range of areas, including OSH. This was one of the reasons why BWL subsequently focused attention on supervisors and their relations with workers, namely through Supervisory Skills Training (SST).

Furthermore, with the establishment of Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs) workers report that they now have a much more accessible avenue for raising and resolving workplace issues - whether regarding supervisor relations, OSH, or otherwise. By opening up this communication channel, workers are speaking more with their supervisors, are able to resolve their problems, and are feeling better about their work. This has even impacted on their home lives, because they are finding work less stressful, and they communicate better with family members, which has improved relationships.

Workers highlighted the persistence of problems with regard to supervisor relations to a greater extent than managers.

Although workers perceived improvements in communication with supervisors - largely due to the PICCs - they still experience problems with regard to favouritism, poorly trained supervisors, verbal abuse, etc. In other words they are subject to the side effects of more systemic issues. Managers identified the persistence of some problems but this was outweighed for them by improvements, particularly as a result of BWL supervisor training.

Systemic barriers to improvement related in part to the absence of formal selection/promotion procedures for supervisors at factories. Workers believed that supervisors were selected simply on their ability to be hard on workers, without any consideration of the skills they might possess. Some managers also bemoaned the arbitrary way in which supervisors were selected. The second barrier is that many of the foreign supervisors are appointed on three-year contracts. With each batch of new recruits, the problems between supervisors and workers start again - for example, language barriers, cultural differences, misunderstandings - and training must be repeated. Third, misconduct by foreign supervisors is not dealt with through the formal disciplinary process. Instead, factory managers deal with such instances informally and the outcome is never known. It is therefore hardly surprising that the abuse of workers has continued for so long.

"BW has helped me open communication channels between me, my supervisors, and my managers. Because when I have a problem, I'm free to go to the office and discuss them."

"The most significant improvement from BWL is communication with workers through all levels of management. We learnt that we cannot be aggressive with them. And workers have also learnt to communicate better with management. This has been achieved by shortening the chain of communication from senior managers to workers and by improving the communication of Chinese supervisors with workers."

C. Improvements in communication and relations appear to be leading to better productivity and quality

Some senior managers speculated that because workers were happier at work productivity and quality had probably improved, but they did not have data to support their view. Middle managers, however, believed more firmly that BWL had had a positive impact on productivity and quality. Supervisors were the most convinced that BWL had impacted positively on productivity and quality. The explanation for this strengthening perception as one moves down the management hierarchy is the distance of more senior managers from the shop floor. Supervisors were best placed to see how the improvement in communication and relations on the factory floor had led to closer cooperation to solve

³ BWL did not conduct first aid training. But when BWL raised lack of workers trained in first aid as a non-compliance issue, factories took action and got workers trained through the Red Cross or other organisations.

problems, fewer mistakes, and a reduction in interruptions caused by arguments.

Workers' feedback echoes this observation. In the baseline research, workers said that they were more likely to make mistakes with their work because they were afraid to approach their supervisors, but that this had begun to change slightly after the implementation of BWL. They also thought they would be more productive if they felt more comfortable at work, which they report they are, in particular because of the PICCs.

D. The positive impact of improvements at work on workers' home lives

The focus groups with workers indicate that the impact of BWL has been felt beyond the workplace in the homes of workers. Workers have, through BWL training, acquired communication skills that they have transferred to their households. This has led to better communication about budgeting and the easier resolution of conflicts. Workers also report that they have been able to transfer the knowledge gained from BWL training on OSH to their homes and thereby improve the health and safety of their families.

“Even at home, I think Better Work has really improved our lives. We now share responsibilities. Even our community is more clean because we apply whatever we learn from the BW trainings. For example, as we both are working, if I arrive home early, I cook, I clean the house. She finds everything in a good space. I do laundry also. We help each other. [Before BW] I did it seldomly. Now I do it often.”

“BW has taught us to be open with each other, man and wife. Now, they are able to put down their salary and discuss a way forward to build their family. Whereas in the olden days, a man would just give his wife R50 and the wife would not even care to ask where's the rest of the money.”

which improvements have been made in Communication and Relations, whereas this came up less often in the management interviews.

Agreement overall on these positive impacts serves as a strong endorsement of the BWL programme. The question is whether a momentum has been created at firms that would make these improvements sustainable. The persistence of certain problems indicates that the improvements are not yet sustainable. In order to achieve sustainable improvements in compliance there need to be effective management systems in place. Without such systems factories will repeat the old problem of ad-hoc fixes that used to result from pre-arranged buyer audits, for which managers could prepare. Systemic problems, under OSH and with regard to supervisors, must also be addressed before compliance becomes self-sustaining. A key factor will be technical skills training for local supervisors, which would form the basis for a systematic selection procedure for promotion into the position, and reduce the reliance on foreign supervisors. When that happens BWL training for supervisors, supported by proper grievance handling mechanisms and a management culture that promotes a respectful workplace environment, should end the problem of poor supervisor-worker relations and many other issues underpinning non-compliance.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Workers and managers agree that there have been significant improvements in certain areas of compliance, in particular OSH, as well as Communication and Relations. Both workers and managers agree strongly about major improvements in OSH, but differ in the degree to which they think there have been improvements in Communication and Relations. While managers perceive strong improvements in relations between workers and supervisors, workers perceive that the improvements have been moderate, and report many persistent problems with the issue of supervisor relations. Furthermore, workers allude to the PICCs as the key mechanism through

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