

Fairwork AI Ratings 2024/5
Who Powers AI?
Assessing Fairness
in the AI Supply Chain
Humans in the Loop as a Case Study

2024



GPAI

THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP
ON ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

This report was planned prior to the integration of the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI) and the Organisation for Economic and Development (OECD) mid-2024. Consequently, the report was not subject to approval by GPAI and OECD members and should not be considered to reflect their position.

Acknowledgements

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GPAI would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of colleagues at the French National Institute for Research in Digital Science and Technology (Inria) and GPAI's FoW Working Group. We are grateful, in particular, for the support of Marie-Fleur Simmet, Edouard Havis and Aurelie Simard (Inria), Lucia Velasco (FoW Working Group Co-Chair and Project Co-Lead) and Alexandre Shee (FoW Working Group Co-Chair).

Citation

Fairwork. (2025). *Fairwork AI ratings 2024/5 Who powers AI? Assessing fairness in the AI supply chain Humans in the Loop as a case study*. Global Partnership on AI. Oxford: United Kingdom.

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of two complementary research projects conducted by Fairwork: an evaluation of Humans in the Loop (HITL) - an impact-outsourcing company that provides data annotation and live monitoring services for companies developing and deploying artificial intelligence (AI) - and a complementary contextual analysis of the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) landscape for data work.¹

The third in a series and presented as part of Fairwork's engagement with the Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence (GPAI), the report contributes to a burgeoning body of research on the conditions of data workers within AI supply chains. The report begins by outlining the Fairwork project and the Fairwork AI Principles. Rooted in emphasising the importance of decent conditions for those doing the labour that powers many of the seemingly autonomous tools and services that furnish our lives in the contemporary digital age, the Fairwork AI Principles offer a benchmark for basic minimum standards of workplace fairness. This section is followed by an exploration of the BPO landscape for data work, based on a compilation of a database of relevant companies, and an overview of the methodology employed by Fairwork to evaluate working conditions within BPOs in AI supply chains. The report then turns to HITL and presents an analysis on the working conditions that the company facilitates. We conclude by underlining the changes to policies and practices that HITL made in response to our research, before discussing pathways of change towards a fairer future of work in the AI supply chain.

As an award-winning social enterprise and a certified B-Corp, HITL seeks to “connect refugees to ethical data labelling work”.² The company does so by directly contracting workers in its home country of Bulgaria and subcontracting workers via partnerships with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and small enterprises, operating primarily in Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This business model renders the evaluation of HITL against the Fairwork AI Principles particularly complex. Of particular importance is how HITL ensures that all workers, including those who are subcontracted through partnering institutions, are subject to the working conditions that are centrally established by the company. As our analysis underlines, this requires reliable monitoring mechanisms – which was not sufficiently evident when the fieldwork began in 2024, leading to additional challenges for subcontracted workers, particularly those living and working in crisis zones.

Following constructive dialogue with the Fairwork research team, HITL has made 14 changes to address some of the challenges identified during the research and improve conditions for workers across its network. In addition to existing HITL policies and practices, the changes led to the company receiving 6 out of 10 for its adherence to the Fairwork AI Principles.

These changes were made possible by HITL's active engagement with Fairwork, including the company's willingness to put the research team in contact with subcontracting partners to facilitate requests for evidence and the recruitment of workers from diverse geographies. The research team also extends special thanks to the workers who shared their stories and experiences with us and the subcontracting partners who participated in meetings and shared evidence. This is especially significant given the challenges that workers and subcontractors operating amidst conflict face.

Through an analysis of the policies, practices and changes that underpin the score provided to HITL, as well as some of the outstanding challenges facing workers, this report offers insights that are relevant for diverse stakeholders operating across AI supply chains. It seeks to demonstrate that



despite significant obstacles within the context of the complex and opaque AI supply chains, fairer data work is not merely an illusion but a concrete possibility that can and should be worked towards. It is our hope that this report – and the score – can serve as an accountability mechanism for data workers and worker advocacy groups across the network.

The Fairwork Project: Elevating Ethical Labour Standards in AI Supply Chains

In recent years, the contributions of data workers to the production of seemingly autonomous AI tools, products and services have gained increased recognition thanks to worker activism, media exposés and academic research.³ This activity has highlighted both the critical importance of data work and the precarious conditions under which it is conducted, including low pay and wage theft, severe mental health risks – especially with relation to content moderation – and high levels of atomization and precarity. Recent regulatory developments that may help draw attention to and address some of the issues that data workers face include the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D), which mandates greater transparency and accountability in digital and AI-driven supply chains.⁴

To support attempts to improve working conditions, the Fairwork project has designed two sets of principles to benchmark fair work, which are applicable to data work: the Fairwork Cloudwork Principles and the Fairwork AI Principles. The first set are used to evaluate labour conditions on Cloudwork platforms; that is, digital labour platforms through which remote work is conducted. The latter set of principles are used to evaluate labour conditions at companies that deploy or develop AI. This includes data work Business Process Outsourcing companies (BPOs), of which Humans in the Loop is an example. Organised around five principles of fair work – Fair Pay, Fair Conditions, Fair Contracts, Fair Management and Fair Representation – the Fairwork Principles were developed as basic minimum standards of fairness in the workplace and are used as a framework to evaluate working conditions at individual companies.

Following the development of the Fairwork Cloudwork Principles in 2020, the Fairwork AI Principles were developed via a global, multi-stakeholder consultation, including government representatives, regulators, international bodies, corporations, trade unions and other experts. Adapted to actualise the priorities of workers, uncovered via empirical case-study research, the development of the Fairwork AI Principles was supported by GPAI: the Global Partnership on AI (Fairwork 2022).⁵ These principles are presented in summarised form below. They can be found in full in the appendix.



The Fairwork AI Principles

Fair Pay

Workers, irrespective of their employment classification or contract type, should earn a decent income, and they are paid on time and in-full.

Fair Conditions

Companies should have policies in place to protect workers from foundational risks arising from the processes of work and should take proactive measures to protect and promote the health and safety of workers.

Fair Contracts

Terms and conditions should be accessible, readable and comprehensible. The party contracting with the worker must be subject to local law and must be identified in the contract. Regardless of the workers' employment status, the contract is free of clauses which unreasonably exclude liability on the part of the service user and/or the company. The employer should make reasonable adjustments in wages and conditions between workers in different contractual arrangements.

Fair Management

There should be a documented process which guarantees that the employer will not discriminate, and that workers have the right to appeal decisions affecting them. There must be a clear channel of communication for workers to appeal management decisions. Where AI systems are involved in work, employers must create explainability mechanisms such as transparency reports, and workers must be able to appeal decisions made by AI systems. Management should avoid excessive surveillance and should strive for data minimisation.

Fair Representation

Companies should provide a documented process through which worker voice can be expressed. Irrespective of their employment classification or contract type, workers should have the right to organise in collective bodies, and companies should be prepared to cooperate and negotiate with them.

The Fairwork AI Principles facilitate independent evaluations of working conditions, offering insights for policymakers, workers, companies and consumers. By pointing to best practice, the evaluations demonstrate paths for improvement. Conversely, by pointing to poor practice, they underline the need for regulation to compel change. To date, the Fairwork AI Principles have been used to evaluate working conditions at Sama, a data annotation BPO with delivery centres located in Kenya and Uganda, via a formal scoring, and at UK-based Amazon warehouses, as a framework for analysis, without a formal scoring.⁶ The principles also underpin the evaluation of Humans in the Loop presented in this report. In the next section, we provide some background on data work BPOs and discuss a supplementary research exercise conducted by Fairwork alongside the evaluation of HITL.



Data Work BPOs: What, When, Where?

BPOs constitute a key institution for the delivery of data work; that is, the hidden forms of human labour that play a critical role in the production of seemingly automated AI systems, and the facilitation of our lives online.⁷ Examples of forms of data work include the collection, curation, annotation and evaluation of different forms of audio, visual and written data as well as content moderation.

Broadly described as “a form of outsourcing that involves contracting a third-party service provider to carry out specific parts of a company’s operations”, BPOs emerged in response to deregulation and increasing competitive pressures within national economies, with firms initially outsourcing service work to lower wage areas within the same country.⁸ However, with the rise of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the early 2000s, it became possible for firms to not only outsource service work, but also to offshore it altogether; shifting production from high-cost to low-cost locations to save on labour costs.⁹ Furthermore, with most of the world’s population now connected to the Internet, BPOs can service clients in high-income countries with the labour of those physically located in low-and middle-income countries.¹⁰ This affordance has contributed to the creation of a global division of labour within AI supply chains, with data workers, often located far away from centres of the global digital economy, largely excluded from the rewards that their labour facilitates.

Despite a vast body of literature on the BPO sector, only in the past few years has research begun to emerge about BPOs that provide data work services.¹¹ In an attempt to make sense of “the messy empirical reality” of this evolving field, Muldoon et al. (2024) articulate a six-part typology for “AI data work” institutions. By categorising institutions in relation to three key questions – the nature of employment (i.e., are workers crowdsourced or employed as geographically tethered workers); the type of work (i.e., are a variety of services offered, or simply data work for AI development); and the nature of the relationship to the end client (i.e., is the institution an outsourced external partner, or an internal element of the company) – they identify two different types of BPO: generalist BPOs and AI data work BPOs. The first refers to BPOs that offer a wide range of services from finance to HR to all manner of specialised front and back-office functions. The latter refers to those specialising in services to support AI development. Broadly, BPOs are distinguished from platforms by way of the model and nature of employment, with both generalist BPOs and AI data work BPOs understood as institutions that employ geographically tethered workers who work within the physical premises of the institution.

In conjunction with the evaluation of HITL which we present in this report, the research team sought to map data work BPOs by compiling a list of relevant companies and categorising them according to key information. This exercise was informed by an attempt to identify companies that would be suitable for evaluation with the Fairwork AI Principles. However, it also yielded useful insights about history and geography of the BPO data work market.

Identifying Data Work BPOs

To identify relevant BPOs globally, we have drawn upon a combination of databases, B2B marketplaces and relevant websites (including CrunchBase Pro, Clutch.io and LinkedIn¹²). The databases and websites were searched using a collection of key terms.¹³ The initial review yielded over 750 companies. Those companies were then manually checked by multiple members of the research team to certify relevance. Inactive companies were removed, followed by companies that did not seem to provide AI data work or content moderation services conducted by human workers.



Companies that explicitly operated according to a Cloudwork model were excluded, as were those that offered annotation and/or content moderation services via undisclosed partnerships, as a key aim of this exercise was to get a sense of the geographies of service delivery. However, contrary to the typology established by Muldoon et al (2024), companies that offered remote work opportunities, outside of the physical premises of the institution, were included, given research which has highlighted the existence of remote work set ups in data work BPOs.¹⁴ To gather information about companies, their websites and company blog posts were examined as well as any databases or professional services websites that featured the companies, such as Crunchbase, LinkedIn and Clutch. In addition, the 'People' tab of company LinkedIn pages were checked to ascertain whether workers with relevant job titles (e.g., annotator, AI evaluator) had listed the company on their profile.

The database of companies identified via online search was supplemented with companies we knew to be relevant as a result of past fieldwork and conversations with stakeholders. In total, 116 relevant BPOs were identified, and a brief analysis was conducted to get an overall sense of some of the temporal and geographic trends of data work BPOs.

General Characteristics of the Landscape of BPO Data Work

In relation to services provided, we identified a higher proportion of Generalist BPOs (65%) as compared to BPOs that appeared to exclusively provide data services to support AI development (35%). The density of BPOs providing annotation services exclusively (60%) outstripped those providing content moderation services exclusively (13%), with just over a quarter offering both (27%). Temporally, a small number of the 116 companies we identified were founded in the 1980s (two) and 1990s (six). These were all Generalist BPOs that have since pivoted towards data annotation and/or content moderation. Examples include Hitech BPO (founded 1992), Appen (1996) and Alorica (1999). A steady increase in the number of relevant BPOs occurred in the first decade of the 2000s (19 BPOs founded) followed by a significant proliferation in the 2010s (57 BPOs founded). This trend seems set to continue, with 29 relevant BPOs founded in the 2020s, thus far.¹⁵ This reflects the general expansion of the data collection and labelling industry, with the global market size estimated at \$3.77 billion in 2024, growing from an estimated \$2.22 billion in 2022.¹⁶

Understanding geographic patterns required a multi-level analysis, as although some BPOs are clearly rooted in one location, others may be headquartered in one place with service delivery in one, or multiple other locations. This information is not always readily available.¹⁷ Our analysis broadly illustrated that the majority of BPOs are headquartered in the Global North (55%) as compared to the Global South (45%). In each area, there is a clear national leader, with 56% of those headquartered in the Global North based in the USA and 51% of those in the Global South based in India.¹⁸ For the vast majority (83%) of those headquartered in the Global South, there was no distinction between company headquarters and the location of service delivery.¹⁹ The reverse was true of those headquartered in the Global North, with 67% appearing to operate delivery stations in locations distinct from the company headquarters – the vast majority of which were in the Global South. Overall, the workforce of the 116 BPOs we identified appears to be concentrated in the Global South, with 94% of companies locating some or all their delivery within that region, and 80% doing so exclusively. At a country level, India emerged as the clear lead for the location of service delivery, with 46% of the BPOs identified that listed delivery locations hiring workers based in the country. This was followed by the Philippines (19% of companies), Colombia (14% of companies), the USA and Egypt (10% respectively). There are, of course, caveats. Notably, for Generalist BPOs that offer a wide variety services beyond AI data work and content moderation, it was impossible to discern which services took place in which locations. Nevertheless, the above offers a general insight into the geographic



patterns of data work BPOs, furnishing existing evidence that data work is by and large outsourced to workers in the Global South.²⁰

We also sought to determine whether service delivery was on-location, hybrid, or remote. For companies that did not clearly explain their models of service delivery on their websites, job listings were examined to see if they indicated where they wanted workers to be located. Of the approximately three-quarters of BPOs (72%) that gave an indication of this, the majority signalled that work was conducted at least in part on site (87%), with a small minority seemingly to offer exclusively remote work. For companies with headquarters in the Global North, visa sponsorship was never included as an offering. In contrast with highly paid technologist roles at companies based in the Global North, which often sponsor visas to bring in foreign workers, it seems that data work BPOs do not actively seek to hire foreign workers.²¹ While this is not to say that these companies never hire migrant workers, this does make clear the need to interrogate the varied rationales for having different models of service delivery, and to analyse the geographic regions where these firms are seeking labour.

A final factor we considered was the significance of BPOs explicitly adopting an impact sourcing model. Of the 116 companies we included in our database, 19 (16%) self-identified as “impact sourcing” or “ethical outsourcing” organisations that seek to provide work to underprivileged communities. In such cases, the human labour of specific groups – women, refugees, youth, people living in the Global South, people with disabilities – is marketed as a selling point in relation to delivering social good through AI development. Academic research has highlighted how the discursive practices of impact sourcing may mask precarious working conditions, intrusive surveillance, and wage theft that workers engaged in global data flows are subjected to in the name of technological progress.²² This reinforces the importance of securing fair labour standards for data workers.

Data is Scarce: What do the omissions hide?

This analysis of the landscape of BPO data work is partial; based only on publicly available company websites and databases, as well as insights from ongoing case studies. As has already been noted, information about the labour-sourcing model for many companies was not always available, meaning that the research team had to make certain interpretations. Additionally, while information about the existence of larger BPOs is generally available online, this is not necessarily the case for smaller providers embedded in local networks in the Global South. Furthermore, it is unclear whether such information is up to date. Finally, while some information relating to the lead firms contracting services from BPOs was encountered, much of this information is classified as proprietary and confidential. This underlines the difficulty of mapping data work, as the relations between different stakeholders are not clearly defined or traceable. The limitations outlined here reinforce an often-emphasised point in the literature on data work and content moderation: that much of the labour sitting behind contemporary technological products and services, including AI and algorithmically organised social media platforms, is actively rendered invisible.¹⁷ This contributes to socio-technical imaginaries of total automation, whilst simultaneously foreclosing space for accountability.

In addition to the difficulties of obtaining company data, this exercise reinforced the complexity of the landscape of BPO data work, and the conceptual messiness which complicates attempts to clearly demarcate between different institutional types, with several of the companies we identified not fitting neatly into clear categorisations.²³ This is exemplified by the evaluation of HITL in relation to the complexity of its business model. Before turning to that, the following section of the report reflects on the Fairwork methodology used to evaluate data work BPOs.



Methodology Overview: How Does Fairwork Score BPOs?

To evaluate companies, Fairwork adopts a three-fold methodology consisting of desk research, management meetings and the analysis of evidence provided, and worker interviews and/or surveys, depending on the size of the workforce. Each element is used to gather data on the thresholds listed under the Fairwork AI Principles.

Desk Research

Each evaluation begins with desk research to gain as much insight as possible into a company, identify points of contact with management – where not already established –, develop suitable research instruments, and design strategies to recruit workers. For each company, a wide range of documents including contracts, terms and conditions, and published policies and procedures are also analysed.

Management Interviews

The second element of the Fairwork methodology entails approaching company management for evidence. Members of company management are invited to meetings with the research team, in which the principles are explained in depth. Members of company management are also invited to submit evidence to demonstrate relevant policies and practices. Depending on the nature of the engagement, management may also be sent written questions pertaining to the principles. The aim is to gain insight into the operation and business model of the company while also opening a dialogue through which the company may agree to implement changes based on the principles. If company managers do not agree to participate in interviews or submit evidence, data collection is limited to desk research and worker interviews/surveys.

Worker Interviews and Surveys

The third element of the methodology is collecting data directly from workers. Data is obtained via interviews and/or surveys to gather granular data on workers' lived experiences of work at the company. These interviews do not aim to build a representative sample but instead seek to understand the process of work and the ways it is managed. This enables the research team to assess whether policies and practices highlighted by management are in place and, if so, whether they are effective.

Workers are recruited using a variety of methods, with the exact design adapted for each evaluation. Recruitment is undertaken generally via lists provided by the companies evaluated, on-site/in person outreach, and online outreach. Where possible, unions, worker groups and other relevant stakeholders are also consulted to assist with the dissemination of calls for participation. Surveys and the interview questions are structured according to the thresholds within the Fairwork AI Principles. Survey length differs depending on the nature of work and the size of the workforce, while interviews are generally fixed at approximately one hour. Workers are compensated at a rate above the hourly living wage in each respective country. Participation is kept fully confidential.²⁴

Putting it all together



This threefold methodology allows the research team to cross-check claims made by companies, while allowing for the collection of both positive and negative evidence from multiple sources. The score given to a company based on the evaluation draws on all forms of evidence collected. Points are only awarded if clear evidence exists for each threshold.

Providing a score

Each Fairwork Principle is broken down into two sub-principles; the first sub-principle can be awarded independently, while the second can only be awarded if the first has also been satisfied. Each company receives a score out of 10, with a possible of two points per principle. Companies are only given a point when they can satisfactorily demonstrate their implementation of the sub-principle. Failing to achieve a point does not necessarily mean that a company does not comply with the principle in question. It simply indicates that Fairwork was not able to evidence its compliance.

The scoring involves a series of stages. First, the research team collates the evidence and assigns preliminary scores. The collated evidence is then sent to reviewers for scoring. Once the reviewers have assigned their scores, all participants meet to discuss the evidence and decide on a provisional score. The scores and their justifications are sent to the company for review. Companies are then given the opportunity to submit further evidence to earn points that they were initially not awarded. The final scores are then decided by the research team.

Background: Humans in the Loop

HITL is a B-Corp accredited BPO and social enterprise that provides data collection, data annotation, model validation and live monitoring services for companies building and training machine learning models.²⁵ Following the concept “give work not aid”, which was pioneered by Leilah Janah, founder and former CEO of Sama, HITL was established to provide “work opportunities to those who need them the most as an alternative to the reliance on humanitarian aid”.²⁶

Offering services across six industries – Medical, Geospatial, Automotive, Industrial, Agricultural and Retail – HITL has fed into a wide variety of AI applications including robotic surgery, colonoscopy monitoring, medical diagnostic systems, smart city surveillance and facial recognition technologies, optical waste sorting solutions and in-flight decision-making systems, among others.²⁷ It lists major tech companies, public research institutions and universities as clients, with notable names including HP, Oracle, UCL, Daedalean and INRAe (the National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment, France).²⁸

HITL was founded in Bulgaria in 2017. Comprised of a for-profit company and a not-for-profit foundation, its stated vision is to “help secure livelihoods through the global digital economy”.²⁹ Utilising an impact sourcing model, the company distributes work to people who have been impacted by conflict – including refugees, people living in conflict zones, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers. It does so by directly contracting annotators (henceforth referred to as workers and annotators interchangeably³⁰) in Bulgaria and subcontracting workers through partnerships with local and international NGOs and small enterprises that assign tasks to workers within their network, who



are primarily based in countries in Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.³¹ Workers are engaged as freelancers on a project-by-project basis, with projects conducted both on-location and remotely depending on the subcontractor and the availability of office space. Moreover, HITL operates a complex organisation model that complicates the definition of “AI data work BPOs” outlined in the Editorial. In addition to its impact sourcing model, HITL provides free training in English language and digital skills via the HITL Foundation. The analysis presented in this report pertains to the operations of HITL the company, and not the HITL Foundation.

To date, HITL has distributed work in Kenya, Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Colombia, Philippines, Venezuela, Yemen, Iraq, Uganda, Malaysia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Turkey, and Ukraine. During the period of research undertaken by Fairwork, the number of active partnerships was in flux, with four partnerships at project completion, based in Syria, Afghanistan, Kenya and Lebanon. During the time one active partnership ended, and a small number of freelancers were contracted by HITL outside of official partnerships – with the company taking over from a dissolved company. Neither were considered as part of this research.

Compared to larger AI data work BPOs³², HITL is small in terms of the number of workers engaged, with data viewed by Fairwork indicating an average of 125 active workers performing annotation or live monitoring projects, per quarter.³³ The vast majority of workers were based in Syria, followed by Bulgaria.³⁴ This reflects historic labour sourcing patterns in the company, with 58% of HITL’s workers in 2023 based in Syria.³⁵

The Application of the Fairwork Methodology to Humans in the Loop

Members of the Fairwork research team met members of the HITL managerial team at a workshop facilitated by PAI (Partnership on Artificial Intelligence) and Fairwork, in New York in June 2024.³⁶ Following that encounter, HITL agreed to participate in an evaluation. The research took place between June 2024 and May 2025.

Fairwork’s assessment of HITL broadly followed the standard Fairwork methodology. However, HITL’s business model, which combines directly contracted-and-subcontracted workers via partner organisations, made scoring complex, as it required an inquiry into partner organisations, and an assessment of whether and how HITL ensures that working conditions at partner organisations conform to the standards established by central management. As such, the standard methodology was supplemented with some additional steps.

Specifically, it was necessary to broaden data collection to encompass HITL’s operations in Bulgaria, over which it has direct oversight, and the operations of the partner organisations through which projects are subcontracted. Meetings were therefore held with managers at partner organisations (as well as with HITL’s management) to obtain evidence from these organisations, including data on demographics of their workforce, the projects received from HITL, and internal policies and practices.³⁷ According to evidence provided to Fairwork during the evaluation period, one partner was employing a large number of workers (between 46 and 71 per quarter in 2024 according to data viewed as part of the evaluation), while others provided HITL projects to a very small number of workers.



To collect worker evidence, and to facilitate the participation of workers from all partners in our research, an online survey was designed and translated into English, Arabic, Dari, Russian, and Ukrainian. A call to participate in this survey was shared with HITL to be circulated across its subcontracting network, with partners and HITL disseminating the call to their workers. In compliance with best practices in research ethics, HITL and partners were not provided with the survey link itself. Rather, the call included a link to a secure landing page. The call stressed that participation was voluntary and confidential, and provided workers with the option of expressing interest in either a short online survey, or a longer online interview. Those interested were instructed to share biographical information on the landing page, including their preferred contact information. Workers were then contacted by the research team.

In total, 19 survey responses were received and six in-depth interviews were conducted. Workers that participated were reimbursed for their participation at a rate above the hourly living wage in each respective country, where possible – with some exceptions due to international sanctions (e.g. Syria). In cases where participants could not be reimbursed, this was explicitly noted beforehand. Though the call to participate was shared with all HITL’s active partner organisations, the research team was unable to recruit workers from every partner organisation. The exact list of locations from which workers were recruited for this research will not be disclosed, to project their anonymity.

In addition, it was not logistically possible to collect evidence from every partner organisation, as many of them operate in crisis-affected geographies where escalation of violence (and suspension of operations) is an imminent reality. Such, we suspect, was the case in Beirut, for example, where meetings with HITL’s Lebanon partner, Anera, stalled. The list of partners to which HITL subcontracts work is also subject to change. In light of such challenges, and the complexity of HITLs organisational model, we wanted to ensure that our analysis took into account not only of the conditions of directly contracted workers, but also the conditions of those receiving projects via partners. This meant putting the proof of burden on HITL and focusing extensively on the monitoring mechanisms they employed to ensure partner compliance with central HITL policies and practices.

To this end, a key stipulation listed under Fairwork Principle 3 was critical to the evaluation of HITL, namely:





















“In the case of subcontracting arrangements, where part or all of the work is subcontracted to other companies, management implements a reliable mechanism to monitor and ensure that the subcontractor is living up to the standards expected from the company itself regarding working conditions.”

The initial analysis did not yield sufficient evidence of adherence to this principle. Moreover, as we discuss below, policies implemented by HITL were not necessarily being operationalised, with HITL lacking oversight into conditions in different nodes of its subcontracting network, resulting in varying working conditions and additional layers of difficulty for some subcontracted workers. However, as we later discuss in this report, HITL was able to address these issues by making significant updates to its policies.



The Results: Humans In the Loop Score 2024/25

Humans In the Loop

Principle	First point	Second point	Total
 Principle 1: Fair Pay	 Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs	 Ensures workers earn at least a local living wage after costs	 2
 Principle 2: Fair Conditions	 Mitigates task-specific risks	 Provides a safety net	 1
 Principle 3: Fair Contracts	 Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions	 Ensures that no unfair contract terms are imposed	 1
 Principle 4: Fair Management	 Provides due process for decisions affecting workers	 Provides equity in the management process	 2
 Principle 5: Fair Representation	 Assures freedom of association and the expression of collective worker voice	 Supports democratic governance	 -

Humans In The Loop's total score



Explaining the Scores

Fair Pay

The first point (1.1) stipulates that workers must earn at least the local minimum wage for all hours worked, regardless of their employment status or contract type, and that workers are paid on time and in full. The second point (1.2), which can only be awarded if the first has already been attained, stipulates that workers are paid at least the local living wage. HITL has been awarded both points for fair pay.

Workers completing tasks for HITL are paid according to two different payment models depending on the nature of the tasks: piece-rate for data annotation projects and hourly for live monitoring projects. When the research began in 2024, there was a minimum wage policy of at least 4 EUR per hour, applied across both payment structures. In the case of piece-rate work, a payment formula is used to align the price per unit with the hourly wage structure, with partner organisations conducting short trials, including workers, to ascertain an average annotation time per unit.



The minimum wage policy was, however, complicated by the fact that subcontracted workers in certain locations could lose significant proportions of their expected earnings, due to deductions for fees relating to banking, currency conversion and taxation. As one worker noted: “Well, it is a problem because the original payment that we received is not 3 euros. It is [meant to be], I think, 4.23 Euros. A portion goes for things like transaction fees and stuff like that; we’re losing about 25% of the total amount”. This was reinforced by another who noted: “The annotation payment when it reaches the annotator is always low, maybe due to deductions”. This reflects the additional difficulties faced by subcontracted workers living in conflict zones that are subject to international sanctions.

In March 2025, HITL increased the minimum rate of payment to at least 5 EUR per hour, with higher hourly rates depending on difficulty and, in the case of medical annotation projects, expertise. This is higher than the living wage figure in all the countries in which HITL operates.³⁸ Changes were also introduced to address the deductions. Specifically, in November 2024, the company introduced a Random Quarterly Audit Process. This entails reaching out to a minimum of 10% of workers per quarter to ask them directly how much money they received in the previous month for HITL projects. The first audit, conducted in Q4 2024, reinforced the significance of deductions, demonstrating that workers in certain locations could be losing up to 40% of their expected earnings. In relation to this, HITL has added a clause to its subcontracting agreement stipulating that no more than 10% of individual worker earnings can be deducted by partner organisations to cover conversion, bank and other related fees, with subcontractors paid 20% of the total project cost, on top of the fee sent to workers. The possibility that up to 10% of individual earnings can be deducted for conversion, bank and other related fees has also been added to forms provided to workers at the start of projects, to ensure that workers are properly informed of this and, thus of their expected earnings. Finally, HITL has also agreed to obtain data, via quarterly surveys distributed to workers, on time spent on ‘re-works’ (that is, where workers are required to re-do annotation tasks as they do not match the required quality standards) and whether the actual hourly rate received reflects the hourly rate stipulated in forms provided to workers at the start of the project. Though ‘re-works’ were not raised as an issue by workers that participated in this research, this is important to ensure that the minimum wage policy outlined by HITL is reflected in practice. The changes outlined in this section were critical to awarding HITL both points for fair pay.

Fair Conditions

Data work may be accompanied by a series of risks including strain, exhaustion, and exposure to traumatic content, particularly in the case of content moderation. The first point (2.1) stipulates that the employer must show they are aware of task-specific risks and take steps to mitigate them. The second point (2.2), which can only be awarded if the first has already been attained, stipulates that workers are compensated for loss of income due to inability to work. In addition, the employer must minimise the risk of sickness and injury, via a meaningful contribution to the health care costs of workers, in cases where core medical treatment is not provided by a public system. HITL has been awarded the first point (2.1) for fair conditions.

Risks for HITL workers are minimised by the prohibition of certain kinds of potentially traumatic data annotation work, including projects for companies in the military and defense sectors, as well as those developing weapons such as killer drones or other technologies whose purpose is to cause injury. Furthermore, workers do not engage in content moderation projects, or those involving data of an explicit nature. While content moderation is not firmly prohibited, HITL mandates that clients agree to a clause which ensures that workers are not exposed to violent or overtly sexual images, without their



explicit consent. The research did not yield evidence that HITL has engaged in content moderation projects to date, with workers focusing instead on data collection, data annotation, model validation, live monitoring and edge-case handling.

Worker evidence pointed to potential challenges associated with live-monitoring projects, specifically with regards to the monitoring of human subjects in care settings, which comes with a significant amount of responsibility. However, HITL has been granted the first point for fair conditions as there was sufficient evidence of steps taken to mitigate risks, by way of a Safeguarding Policy that subcontractors must adhere to and implement. In relation to the health and safety of annotators, this stipulates that all reasonable precautions should be taken to ensure the safety and welfare of workers.

Upon initial evaluation, there was insufficient evidence that workers were informed of the Safeguarding Policy and thus of the conditions that they can expect in the workplace. As of March 2025, this has been rectified by way of a clause in the Subcontracting Agreement which mandates that partner organisations provide the Safeguarding Policy to workers directly. Furthermore, HITL also introduced the stipulation that all workers must be informed of their safeguarding rights via the provision of health, safety and safeguarding training from either HITL, or an in-house alternative.

As emphasised in the background section of this report, HITL employs workers on a freelance, project-by-project basis. This freelance model does not grant workers any form of paid time off; with workers paid only for the tasks, projects or hours completed. As such, there was insufficient evidence to grant the second point. HITL does, however, have a Health Insurance Fund that workers and supervisors can apply for to contribute to medical treatments (for themselves and their children under the age of 18 years old, for a sum equal to their total earnings in 12 months, up to a maximum of 1533 EUR). This is a positive practice in the context of freelance data work, where workers are generally provided little to no support for their health, let alone their healthcare costs. However, there is insufficient evidence that all workers can access this, as funds are allocated on a first come first served basis.

Fair Contracts

The first point (3.1) stipulates workers must sign a contract and/or give informed consent to terms and conditions upon signing up, and for each subsequent extension. The contract or terms and conditions must be easily accessible to workers and the party employing the worker must be identified and subject to the law of the place in which the worker works. The second point (3.2) stipulates that the employer must provide secure employment and also that, in the case of subcontracting agreements, the company implements a reliable mechanism to monitor and ensure that subcontractors are living up to the standards expected from the company itself regarding working conditions. As with the other principles, the second point is only awarded if the first has already been attained. HITL has been awarded the first point (3.1) for fair contracts.

The research conducted for this study revealed that while directly contracted workers based in Bulgaria received both a civil contract and a document outlining the terms and conditions of each project (a 'Worker Acknowledgement Form', or WAF) this was not necessarily the case for all subcontracted workers – as, although the provision an acknowledge form to workers was stipulated in the Subcontractor Agreement, there was no monitoring mechanism in place to ensure that this clause actually translated to practice. As such, subcontracted workers were not necessarily informed of the terms and conditions of each project.



During our evaluation, HITL put in place a process to address this issue, introducing the stipulation that signed WAFs will be collected from partner organisations upon project completion, as well as from workers directly via the Random Quarterly Audit. The WAFs provided by partner organisations must align with a template created by HITL, including information such as project payment structure, project duration, quality and productivity targets and workers expectations, as well as a link to the Safeguarding Policy, a feedback email to enable workers to directly contact HITL and a stipulation that strikes for missed work or delayed tasks will not be applied if workers can present documented evidence for reasons such as health conditions, disabilities, pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, or other extenuating circumstances. In addition, subcontracting partners must follow the laws of the country that they are working in. This pre-existing stipulation, combined with the changes outlined provided sufficient evidence for the first principle of fair contracts to be awarded.

In contrast, there was insufficient evidence to grant the second point. Offering projects on a freelance, project-by-project basis, HITL does not offer secure employment to workers performing data annotation or live monitoring tasks, with data collected by Fairwork – and wider research featuring HITL workers³⁹ – suggesting that the lack of job stability is significant challenge for workers. However, it is notable that HITL is striving to ensure that at least 1% of freelance workers transition into “core” team roles (which come with employment benefits) by 2028, by way of prioritising freelance annotators, ahead of external applications, for open positions. The company also has a paid internship scheme for core team positions that is open to annotators.

As highlighted in the methodological section of this report, a reliable mechanism to monitor and ensure that subcontractors are living up to the standards expected from the company itself regarding working conditions is critical for HITL. HITL had certain mechanisms in place upon when the evaluation began in 2024 – including a quarterly feedback form, which includes a free-text section, that workers can use to express concerns, as well as a forum comprised of workers from each location where work is conducted (the ‘Beneficiary Advisory Board’ or BAB, discussed below in *fair representation*). However, the mechanisms did not appear to be sufficient, with HITL acknowledging challenges in relation to implementation and adherence of clauses embedded in their Subcontractor Agreement.

In response, HITL updated the Subcontractor Agreement (March 2025) to codify expectations regarding working conditions. This includes the extension of Worker Acknowledgement Forms – with the HITL feedback email to enable workers to reach HITL management directly with concerns or feedback; adherence to the Random Quarterly Audit; the commitment to not deduct more than 10% of individual worker earnings for conversion rates and fees; the addition of a Safeguarding section to mandate the provision of the Safeguarding Policy and training to workers; and the provision of HITL emails for all workers to ensure there is an effective channel of communication between the worker and HITL management. By close of research, this agreement had been signed by all the subcontracting partners active at the time of the evaluation. Furthermore, although HITL was not awarded a point for the provision of secure employment, such changes were critical to the evaluation process overall, allowing us to award points for other Fairwork Principles.

Fair Management

The first point (4.1) stipulates that workers are treated fairly. Workers must not be subjected to de-personalised bullying or mobbing to ensure organisational goals are met, and policies must be in place to prevent any form of harassment and discrimination. Workers must have the right to appeal dismissals and disciplinary measures and must not be disadvantaged for doing so, or for voicing concerns. The second point for this principle (4.2) relates to the datafication of work in the context of



AI systems and automated managerial processes. To be granted this point, a company must have clear and effective systems for data management, explanations, and appeals. HITL has been awarded both points for fair management.

The prohibition of all forms of exploitation, abuse, harassment, bullying and unfair discrimination is codified in HITL's Safeguarding Policy and the Code of Conduct. This entails a confidentiality clause to prevent victimisation of those who raise concerns about serious malpractice. It is also notable that HITL is committed to the promotion of gender equality by aspiring to provide projects to equal proportion of male and female annotators in all active locations in which it is contracting and subcontracting work.

Worker evidence did not contradict the Safeguarding Policy or the Code of Conduct. However, given the externalization of subcontracted workers and the logistical distance between workers and HITL management, it is imperative that workers can report infringements to HITL directly. When fieldwork began in 2024 this was not the case, with some subcontracted workers prevented from doing so. For example, when asked what should change to improve their conditions in the survey administered by Fairwork, one worker noted: "I would very much like to be provided with contact information for the company directly without any barriers to submit complaints or suggestions in the future." Moving forward, HITL has committed to rectifying this via the provision of the HITL feedback email in the Worker Acknowledgment Forms provided to workers by subcontractors. In addition, the details of all subcontracted workers must now be passed over to HITL for a formal onboarding, including the creation of a HITL worker email. These changes ensure that all workers are able to directly contact HITL's leadership team to raise issues or seek assistance. Critically, HITL has also committed to re-activate their feedback, complaints and response mechanism which mandates that annotator feedback is collected, categorised according to sensitivity, escalated and responded to in a timely manner.

HITL mandates that subcontractors provide workers with access to a clear process to appeal non-payment, low ratings or corrections. When our evaluation began in 2024, workers could receive a 'strike' if they declared their availability for work and later withdrew it – with three strikes resulting in no offer of work for six months. As of April 2025, HITL has altered this policy to facilitate a greater level of consideration for circumstances that may affect workers ability to conduct tasks. Specifically, a clause has been added to the Worker Acknowledgement Forms, stipulating that 'strikes' will not apply in the case of personal emergencies or circumstances leading to missed work or delayed task submissions, if workers can present documented evidence for reasons such as health conditions, disabilities, pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, or other extenuating circumstances.

HITL mandates GDPR compliance across its operations and those of its subcontractors. As such, the principle of data minimisation is applied when collecting personal data. The platforms that workers use for annotation projects provide data on performance analytics (quality and productivity), with no evidence of excessive surveillance.

Fair Representation

Freedom of association is a fundamental right for all workers, which is enshrined in the constitution of the International Labour Organisation, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right to organise, to exercise collective expression and, importantly, be listened to is a critical prerequisite for fair working conditions. Companies that assure both freedom of association and the expression of collective worker voice are granted the first point (1.1). Those that support democratic governance



via either a cooperative model, a formally recognised union, or the ability to undertake collective bargaining, are granted the second point (2.1). The evaluation did not yield sufficient evidence to award HITL either of the points for fair representation.

HITL has a forum-style mechanism in place to facilitate the expression of worker voice. Called the Beneficiary Advisory Board (BAB), this is comprised of one representative from each country within which the company operates. Representatives elected to BAB must be proficient in English and have worked for at least 6 months on HITL projects. The stated aim of the mechanism is to: “provide feedback from our community, give [HITL] insights on needs and gaps to be addressed, and keep the organization accountable to our beneficiaries”.⁴⁰ Each month representatives are assigned one paid ‘mission’ and required to attend a one-hour online meeting – moderated by a staff member of HITL, with management joining once per quarter. The BAB allows worker representatives to table concerns that matter to them and their fellow workers, therefore constituting an important part of the monitoring mechanism. However, worker evidence demonstrated that subcontracted workers in certain locations were not aware of the BAB, thus negating its effectiveness as a mechanism for the expression of worker voice.

Moving forwards, HITL has agreed to add an additional page to the ‘Impact’ section of its website, called ‘Worker Representation’ with details about BAB, its members and its purpose. HITL has also added a clause to the Safeguarding Policy stipulating that each location and partner has a BAB member and that all workers should be made aware that they can report concerns via this mechanism. Currently, selection for the BAB is based on applications that submitted to HITL which are assessed by a “core” staff member. HITL has emphasised that the BAB is a practice that the company will seek to further develop via the replacement of the application process with the implementation of democratic elections for representatives. However, this change was not implemented in this round of scoring, with HITL citing that current representatives have fixed length positions on the BAB until February 2026.

The BAB is a positive initiative in a sector where worker representation is scarce, and atomisation is rife. However, 5.1 was not awarded, as there was not sufficient evidence of a clearly communicated willingness to recognise, and bargain with, a collective, independent body of workers or trade union.

Moving Forward: A Summary of the Changes Implemented by Humans in the Loop

During the course of their engagement with Fairwork, HITL has made the following 14 changes to company policies and practices:

Fair Pay

- + Increased the minimum payment for annotation and live monitoring tasks from 4 EUR to 5 EUR, per hour. Increasing pay was already an intention prior to the company’s engagement with Fairwork but came to realisation a couple of months into Fairwork’s dialogue with HITL.

- + Acknowledging that not all workers necessarily receive the stipulated hourly wage, due to deductions including taxes and conversion fees, and reworks, HITL has:



- Introduced a Random Quarterly Audit Process, as of November 2024. This entails reaching out to a minimum of 10% of workers that completed projects in the previous month to ask them how much they received for HITL projects in that month. If discrepancies are identified as part of that process, they will be addressed in the next quarterly partner meetings, with information from the audit used to adjust pricing models and subcontracting agreements, and to find alternative methods of payment.
- Following the first Random Quarterly Audit, added clauses to the Subcontractor Agreement (updated March 2025) stipulating that: a) no more than 10% of individual worker earnings can be deducted by partner organisations to cover “conversion, bank and other related fees”; b) partner organisations must provide clear and detailed information about the reasons for deductions from individual worker earnings and; c) they must promptly address discrepancies and cooperate to ensure swift resolution of issues relating to deductions from individual worker earnings.
- Added questions to the pre-existing quarterly surveys (as of April 2025) that are distributed to workers to collect data on the number of re-works required in the previous project and ask whether the remuneration received met payment expectations as laid out in the Worker Acknowledgement Forms.

Fair Conditions

+ Updated the HITL Safeguarding Policy (as of March 2025) to stipulate that all annotators are provided with guidance on their safeguarding rights and responsibilities via the HITL Health, Safety and Safeguarding training or an alternative in-house training provided by the partner organisation which covers, at a minimum: a) the HITL Safeguarding Policy, b) what constitutes safeguarding, c) obligation to report (any suspicion, concern of knowledge of cases of exploitation and/or abuse), and d) who to report to. This training must be provided in the native language of the annotator.

+ Clauses have been added to the Subcontracting Agreement to ensure that partner organisations: a) ensure that the safeguarding training mentioned above is completed by workers, and additionally, that b) partner organisations provide all active annotators for the current year with a copy of the updated HITL Safeguarding Policy 2025. This process must be applied consistently for new annotators.

+ A clause has been added to the Worker Acknowledgment Form which stipulates that warnings or strikes will not apply in cases of personal emergencies or circumstances leading to missed work or delayed task submissions, provided that annotators can present documented evidence for reasons such as health conditions, disabilities, pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, or other extenuating circumstances (e.g., death in the family).

Fair Contracts

+ Implemented a process to ensure that Worker Acknowledgement Forms aligned with a template provided by HITL (detailing number of tasks completed, payment structure, information about the duration of the project, the quality standards, the data security and protection requirements, a link to the HITL Safeguarding Policy, and an email to contract HITL directly in the case of feedback or concerns) are distributed to all subcontracted workers engaged via partner organisations. This entails issuing a directive to partner organisations that WAFs must be signed by workers before commencing a project; collecting signed WAFs after project completion and cross-checking details on the WAFs against project deployment details; with payment issued to partner organisations only after any



discrepancies identified or concerns raised by annotators have been addressed. The need to distribute WAFs and the process to ensure compliance is also stipulated in the Subcontractor Agreement.

- + Agreed to include the collection of Worker Acknowledgement Forms in the Random Quarterly Audit, to add a further level of assurance that forms are being distributed and received by workers.

- + Updated the Subcontracting Agreement to codify changes to policies and practices. This was signed by all partner organisations by close of research.

Fair Management

- + Mandated that the details of all new annotators at partner organisations are provided to HITL for proper onboarding, including the creation of HITL annotator emails. Additionally, all workers will now receive the HITL newsletter, ensuring they receive the relevant updates and communication. Previously, this was not the case for all workers.

Fair Representation

- + Codified the commitment to ensuring that each location and partner has a Beneficiary Advisory Board member (BAB) and that all annotators in the location are aware that they can report concerns via the BAB, via the addition of a clause to the Safeguarding Policy that HITL and all partner organisations must adhere to.

- + Agreed to add a page to the HITL website which details the Beneficiary Advisory Board (what it is, what it does, who the members are) to ensure that workers are aware of the mechanism.

- + Agreed to initiate a democratic election process for the next round of Beneficiary Advisory Board representatives when the current term ends in January/February 2026.

Pathways of Change

As investment in AI accelerates and more aspects of everyday life migrate to digital platforms, the demand for meticulous data annotation and rigorous content moderation will only intensify. Automation will play a part, yet the bulk of this work remains in the hands of skilled humans—and that is unlikely to change any time soon.⁴¹ Whether labelling data for machine-learning models or policing harmful content on social media and e-commerce sites, workers undertake mission-critical tasks that merit visibility, fair remuneration, and safe, dignified conditions in which risks are minimized, and collective representation is respected.

Because much of this labour takes place in regions with weak regulation, data workers often endure precarious employment and poor working environments. Their contributions are frequently hidden in opaque supply chains, erased from narratives of technological progress, or dismissed as a reservoir of cheap, replaceable labour. Yet this outcome is not inevitable. Regulatory moves such as the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CS3D) are beginning to demand transparency and accountability in digital and AI-enabled production networks, just as in agriculture or manufacturing. Companies themselves also possess considerable scope to shape the jobs they create; some already



prioritise workers' well-being and can choose to set higher standards across their supply chains.

Fairwork commends Humans in the Loop for volunteering to be evaluated, collaborating with researchers to identify shortcomings, and acting on recommendations aligned with the Fairwork AI Principles to improve policies and working conditions. Nevertheless, meaningful change will require a broad coalition spanning workers, businesses, and legislators. To that end, Fairwork has launched the Fairwork Certification. By aligning their procurement practices with our five principles of fair work, organisations can steer the platform economy towards higher labour standards.

Fairwork Certification

Fairwork has launched a certification scheme to encourage lead/apex firms in supply chains to embed Fairwork standards into their supplier agreements and procurement policies, via a supply chain audit and certification scheme. Why is this important?

- **Regulatory Preparedness:** Proactively align with emerging labour laws and global standards to mitigate legal and ethical risks before they impact compliance or reputation.
- **Transparency and Trust:** Demonstrate responsible labour practices, building credibility with customers, investors, and regulators, and positioning your organisation as a leader in ethical AI.
- **Resilient Workforce:** Ensure fair wages, job security, and decent working conditions to attract and retain skilled data workers, creating a stable and productive AI supply chain.
- **Sustainable Commitment:** Adopt Fairwork's flexible, continuous-improvement model to embed lasting fair labour standards in your organisation.

Evaluation Model

Fairwork's structured, four-phase evaluation model helps companies identify risks, implement improvements, and embed fair labour practices throughout their AI supply chains. We offer both audit-only assessments and certification pathways tailored to your organisational goals and desired level of engagement.

- **Discovery & Risk Assessment** – The process starts with collaboration between Fairwork and the lead firm to align supplier agreements, contracts, codes of conduct, and audit procedures. We map the supply chain to identify data-enrichment locations, conduct worker interviews and document reviews to detect risks, and carry out a comprehensive audit based on the Fairwork Principles.
- **Action Planning** – Once risks are identified, Fairwork helps companies prioritise them by severity and impact. Together, we develop tailored remediation plans, establish clear metrics for tracking progress, and ensure accountability. To date, our work has led to over 350 positive changes in company practices across 40 countries, significantly improving working conditions.
- **Implementation & Training** – Companies deploy ethical sourcing and labour protection strategies at this stage. Fairwork facilitates training for suppliers and internal teams, embedding effective due diligence practices into operational and procurement processes.
- **Monitoring & Reporting** – Fairwork works closely with companies to track initiatives and evaluate progress. Follow-up audits, conducted 1-2 years after initial implementation, assess adherence to Fairwork Principles and effectiveness of remediation measures. Transparent, research-backed reports document outcomes, supporting regulatory compliance and accountability.



Certification

Companies pursuing Fairwork Certification commit to all four evaluation phases, unlike the audit-only option, which covers just Discovery & Risk Assessment and Action Planning. Lead firms earn the Fairwork Onboard certification during Discovery & Risk Assessment, indicating their initial commitment to fair labour practices. By meeting expectations in follow-up audits, firms maintain their Fairwork affiliation and achieve the Fairwork Endorsed certification, recognising their sustained commitment to fair and responsible supply chains.

Appendix

Fairwork AI Principles

1. Fair Pay

1.1 Pays at least the local minimum wage (one point)

To achieve this point, the employer takes appropriate steps to ensure ALL of the following:

- Workers, regardless of their employment status or contract type, must earn the local minimum wage⁴² or the wage set by collective sectoral agreement (whichever is higher) for all hours worked.⁴³
- Workers, regardless of their employment status or contract type, are paid on time and in-full.

1.2 Pays at least the local living wage (one point)

Minimum wage can be insufficient to ensure workers and their dependents a basic but decent standard of living. The living wage exists to set the benchmark of what is required to enable this decent standard of living.⁴⁴ To achieve this point, the employer takes appropriate steps to ensure the following:

- Workers, regardless of their employment status or contract type, must earn at least the living wage, or the wage set by collective sectoral agreement (whichever is higher) for all hours worked.

2. Fair Conditions

2.1 Ensures safe working conditions (one point)

Workers face several risks in the course of their work, including strain, exhaustion, and exposure to traumatic content. They have a right to protection from these risks.⁴⁵ Employers must show they are aware of task specific risks and take steps to mitigate them.

To achieve this point, the employer must satisfy ALL of the following:

- Implement policies and practices that protect workers' safety from task specific risks. This should, at a minimum, account for well-evidenced risks such as:



- High job strain, which can lead to a range of negative health impacts including cardiovascular disease and mental health disorders.
- Secondary traumatic stress, which can be associated with repeated exposure to traumatic content.
- Muscular skeletal injuries, which may emerge as a result of unsuitable equipment, excessive workload or perverse incentivisation in physical jobs.
- Risks related to a specific job are flagged to workers before they accept the job (such as indicating that they might be exposed to violent content.)
- The employer places a maximum limit on standard working time that meets either the applicable national regulation or, in cases where there is no applicable national regulation, the ILO standard of 40 hours a week.⁴⁶
- Workers are entitled to take breaks during working time that is defined under the applicable national regulation, or in cases where there is no applicable national regulation, is equivalent to a minimum of one hour for every eight hours worked.
- If the work arrangements require workers to work in shifts, workers are given the option to choose their shifts, and reasonable accommodations are made for workers with additional needs due to health, safety and other personal reasons (such as pregnancy, care requirements, disability and other health conditions.)

2.2 Ensures paid leave, and a safety net (one point)

Workers are vulnerable to the possibility of losing their income as the result of unexpected or external circumstances, such as sickness or injury. Most countries provide a social safety net to ensure workers don't experience sudden poverty due to circumstances outside their control. However, not all workers might qualify for the social safety protections due to their own personal circumstances (e.g. visa status, residency status). In recognition of the fact that most workers are dependent on income they earn from the work, employers must ensure that workers are compensated for loss of income due to inability to work. In addition, employers must minimise the risk of sickness and injury.

To achieve this point, the employer must ensure ALL of the following:

- Workers have access to paid time-off (such as bereavement, parental, sick and annual leave.)
- Where core medical treatment is not provided by a public system, such as a national healthcare scheme, the employer makes a meaningful provision to the health care costs of its workers.

3. Fair Contracts

3.1 Provides decent contracts (one point)

Employment on temporary contracts can have significant negative effects on job satisfaction, wellbeing and health. Short-term contracts, such as those lasting one to three months or with no guaranteed working hours, place workers in precarious positions and are likely to exacerbate these negative effects.

To achieve this point, the employer must meet ALL of the following:



- Workers must sign a contract and/or give informed consent to terms of conditions upon signing up, and for each subsequent contract extension.
- The contract or terms and conditions is presented in full, in clear and comprehensible language that all workers could be expected to understand.
- The contract or terms and conditions are easily accessible to workers in paper and/or electronic form. If these conditions differ for different contract types, reasonable steps are taken to inform workers about the differences in contract types.
- The party employing the worker must be identified in the contract or terms and conditions, and subject to the law of the place in which the worker works.
- Workers working on long-term projects that exceed the probation time are provided with the option to sign an employment contract lasting at a minimum the same length of time as the project.
- The contracts or terms and conditions do not include clauses that revert prevailing legal frameworks in the countries where workers work.

3.2 Provides secure employment (one point)

Whilst fixed-term employment may be suitable for some workers' circumstances, secure employment is a fundamental improvement of working conditions for many others.

To achieve this point, the employer must meet ALL of the following:

- Workers with three years or more of consistent short-term employment should be provided with the option to move onto permanent contracts if they so desire.
- The employer should make reasonable adjustments in wages and conditions between both: fixed-term and permanent employees and outsourced workers; and any outsourced or indirectly employed workers and directly employed workers. Workers who are outsourced or indirectly employed should be compensated for additional costs incurred, including visa/work permits and their extensions, insurance, pensions, and other social security premiums.
- In cases of justified redundancy or contract non-renewal, the employer should provide workers with severance allowance commensurate with tenure at the company and retraining opportunities. In cases where the redundancies are being made because reasons of an economic, technological, structural or similar nature, workers or their representatives are consulted, and steps are taken to minimise the resulting redundancies.⁴⁷
- If desired, workers should be able to invite worker representatives to their end of contract meetings with the relevant HR departments.
- In the case of subcontracting arrangements, where part or all of the work is subcontracted to other companies, management implements a reliable mechanism to monitor and ensure that the subcontractor is living up to the standards expected from the company itself regarding working conditions.

4. Fair Management

4.1 Treats workers fairly (one point)

The employment relation is an unequal one, with managers being afforded significant legal and economic sources of power not available to most workers. The interests of these two groups may



diverge, leading to sometimes opposed immediate interests in the workplace. This dynamic can lead to unfair management practices.

To achieve this point, the employer must meet ALL of the following:

- Management should refrain from deploying any form of depersonalised bullying or mobbing in order to ensure organisational goals are met.⁴⁸
- There is a policy in place which guarantees that any form of harassment in the workplace will not be tolerated.
- There is a policy in place which guarantees that the employer will not discriminate against persons on the grounds of racial, ethnic, social or minority background, caste, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, language, gender, gender identity, sex, sexual orientation, disability, age, geographical location, or any other status.
- Workers should have the right to appeal dismissals and other disciplinary measures.
- Workers are not disadvantaged for voicing concerns or appealing disciplinary actions.

4.2 Creates clear and effective systems for data management, explanations, and appeals (one point)

Contemporary workplaces are increasingly defined by data. The use of AI systems and automated management processes exacerbates both the incentives for employers to gather data from the work process and diminishes the importance of workers' existing rights to receive explanations, appeal decisions, and access/own their data.

To achieve this point, the employer must meet ALL of the following:

- Where AI systems are involved in work, employers must create explainability mechanisms such as transparency reports or question and answer processes that allow workers to understand both the model behaviour of the system as a whole and specific decisions.⁴⁹
- Workers must be able to appeal decisions made by AI systems through a multi-stakeholder process that reflects collective worker voice, and successful appeals to lead not only that specific decision being revised but also wider revisions of decision-making process.⁵⁰
- Management avoids excessive surveillance in the workplace and avoids use of invasive technologies.
- Workers must not be subject to excessive data collection practices and should be informed about the data that is being collected about them. Employers must apply the principle of data minimisation (collecting the minimum amount of personal data required to fulfil a legitimate purpose) in their collection processes.

Fair Representation

5.1 Assures freedom of association and the expression of worker voice (one point)

Freedom of association is a fundamental right for all workers, and enshrined in the constitution of the International Labour Organisation, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right for workers to organise, collectively express their wishes – and importantly – be listened to, is an important prerequisite for fair working conditions.



To achieve this point, the employer must satisfy ALL of the following:

- There is a documented mechanism for the expression of collective worker voice that allows ALL workers, regardless of contract type or duration to participate in collective groups without risks.⁵¹
- There is a formal, written statement of willingness to recognise, and bargain with, a collective, independent body of workers or trade union, that is clearly communicated to all workers, and available on the company webpage.⁵²
- Freedom of association is not inhibited, and workers are not disadvantaged in any way for communicating their concerns, wishes and demands to the company management, or expressing willingness to form independent collective bodies of representation.

5.2 Supports democratic governance (one point)

To realise fair representation, workers must have a say in the conditions of their work. This could be through a democratically governed cooperative model, a formally recognised union, or the ability to undertake collective bargaining with the employer.

To achieve this point, the employers must satisfy at least ONE of the following:

- Workers play a meaningful role in governing the company.
- In a written document available, the company publicly and formally recognises an independent collective body of workers, an elected works council, or trade union, and takes meaningful steps towards signing a collective bargaining agreement. This recognition is not exclusive and, when the legal framework allows, the company should recognise any significant collective body seeking representation.⁵³

Endnotes

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² Humans in the Loop. Home Page. Available at: <https://humansintheloop.org> (Accessed: 12 May 2025).

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⁶ Cant, C et al. (2023). *Fairwork AI Ratings 2023: The Workers Behind AI at Sama*. Available at: https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2023/12/Fairwork-AI-Ratings-2023_final.pdf (Accessed: 28 November 2024); Ustek-Spilda, F. et al. (2023). *Fairwork Amazon Report 2024: Transformation of the Warehouse Sector through AI*. Available at: https://fair.work/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2024/06/Fairwork-Amazon-Report_June24-2.pdf (Accessed: 28 November 2024).

⁷ Muldoon, J., Graham, M., and Cant, C. (2024). *Feeding the Machine: The Hidden Human Labour Powering AI*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books; Muldoon, J. et al. (2024) 'A Typology of Artificial Intelligence Data Work', *Big Data and Society*, 11(1) pp. 1-13. Available at: DOI: 10.1177/20539517241232632.

⁸ Miceli, M., and Posada, J. (2022). 'The data-production Dispositif', *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction*, 6(CSCW2), 1-37. Available at: DOI: 10.48550/arXiv.2205.11963; Mann, L. and Graham, M. (2016). 'The Domestic Turn: Business Process Outsourcing and the Growing Automation of Kenyan Organisations', *The Journal of Development Studies*, 52(4), 530–548. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2015.1126251>

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¹² CrunchBase. Available at: <https://www.crunchbase.com>; LinkedIn (no date). Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/home>; Clutch (no date). Available at: <https://clutch.co>. The research team was granted access to CrunchBase Pro via the University of Oxford.

¹³ Terms were as follows: data preparation, dataset preparation, data cleaning, data cleaning services, data labelling, dataset labelling, data labelling services, data annotation, data annotation services, dataset annotation, image classification, video classification, image segmentation, video segmentation, image tagging, video tagging, image summarisation, video summarisation, content moderation, content moderation services, sentiment analysis, sentiment tagging, sentiment detection.

¹⁴ Miceli, Schuessler, Yang (2020); Shestakofsky (2024).

¹⁵ For three of the BPOs identified no founding date could be found.

¹⁶ Grand View Research cited in Muldoon et al. (2024) A typology of artificial intelligence data work (p. 2); Grand View Research. (2024). *Data Collection And Labeling Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Data Type (Text, Image/Video, Audio), By Vertical (Automotive, Government, Healthcare, BFSI, Retail & E-commerce), By Region, And Segment Forecasts, 2025 – 2030*. Available at: <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/data-collection-labeling-market> (Accessed: 10 Dec 2024).

¹⁷ An example is Sama, which is headquartered in the US, with delivery stations in Eastern Africa.

¹⁸ Information about the location of the service delivery could be identified for 101 of the 116 companies. In 5 of those 101 cases, delivery was remote within a specific country (or, countries). In 30 there appeared to be multiple service delivery locations. The identification of countries as either 'Global North' or 'Global South' was based on the World Population Review. See: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/global-south-countries>.



¹⁹ This includes a small number (3) of BPOs where production appears to be based in the country of the HQ, as well as additional service delivery areas.

²⁰ ILO. (2021). World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2021. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/publications/world-employment-and-social-outlook-trends-2021> (Accessed: 24 November 2024); Datta, N. et al. (2023). Working without borders: The promise and peril of online gig work. Report, Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/ebc4a7e2-85c6-467b-8713-e2d77e954c6c> (Accessed: November 2024); Tubaro et al. (2024). 'Where does AI come from? A global case study across Europe, Africa, and Latin America', *New Political Economy*, 1–14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2025.2462137>

²¹ Gonzalez, M. F. (2021). Precarity for the global talent: The impact of visa policies on high-skilled immigrants' work in the United States. *International Migration*, 60, 193–207. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12870>

²² Arora, A. et al. (2023). 'Risk and the Future of AI: Algorithmic bias, data colonialism, and marginalization', *Information and Organization*, 33(3), 1–7. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2023.100478> (Accessed: February 10 2025); Colón Vargas, N. (2024) 'Exploiting the margin: How capitalism fuels AI at the expense of minoritized groups', *AI Ethics*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-024-00502-w> (Accessed: March 10 2025); Muldoon et al (2023).

²³ Tubaro et al. (2024). 'Where does AI come from?' (p. 24).

²⁴ In instances where the company reaches out to its workers to participate in the survey or interviews, participants are extended a landing page (administered by Fairwork), where they provide their personal email address. Fairwork, then, reaches out to each participant with either the survey link, or an invitation to join us for an interview.

²⁵ B-Corp. (2023). *Humans in the Loop*. Available at: <https://www.bcorporation.net/en-us/find-a-b-corp/company/humans-in-the-loop/> (Accessed: 9 August 2024); Humans in the Loop (2025) *5 Things You Need to Know About Live Monitoring in Data Annotation*. Available at: <https://humansintheloop.org/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-live-monitoring-in-data-annotation/> (Accessed: 3 March 2025).

²⁶ Humans in the Loop. *About Us*. (Accessed: 8 May 2025).

²⁷ Humans in the Loop (2023) *Success Stories*. Available at: <https://humansintheloop.org/resources/success-stories/> (Accessed: 10 April 2025).

²⁸ Valbuena, T. (2023). Humans in the Loop: the future of humans and AI. Available at: https://www.zebra.com/content/dam/zebra_dam/en/presentation/customer-facing/zebra-devcon2023-presentation-customer-facing-humans-in-the-loop-the-future-of-humans-and-ai-tess-valbuena-en-us.pdf (Accessed: 10 October 2024); B Lab Global (2023) Humans in the Loop: Disclosure Report. Available at: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/blab-impact-published-production/67wlTcmgothD1mSiO3sf6SOYZF5EeCK7> (Accessed: 16 Oct 2024).

²⁹ Humans-in-the-Loop. (2023). *Impact Report 2023*. Available at: <https://humansintheloop.org/resources/whitepapers-and-reports/impact-report-2023/> (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

³⁰ Humans in the Loop also has a "core" team of employees. The analysis presented in this report relates exclusively to the workers performing data annotation and live monitoring tasks. Those workers are referred to, by Humans in the Loop, as annotators. In this report, the terms workers and annotators are used interchangeably.

³¹ Humans in the Loop. *Impact*. Available at: <https://humansintheloop.org/impact/> (Accessed: 11 August 2024).

³² Examples include Sama, which at the time of Fairwork's evaluation in 2023, employed between 2000 and 4000 workers in its East African delivery stations.

³³ This average reflects data on worker numbers pertaining to Q1, Q2 and Q3 of 2024, viewed by Fairwork as part of the research.

³⁴ This is according to data on worker numbers, split across geographic regions provided by Humans in the Loop to Fairwork as part of the evaluation.

³⁵ Humans in the Loop. *Impact*. Available at: <https://humansintheloop.org/impact/> (Accessed 16 May 2025)

³⁶ Partnership on AI (no date). Available at: <https://partnershiponai.org> (Accessed: 1 April 2025).

³⁷ Information regarding HITL partners was not initially available on HITL website. HITL recently updated their website, giving more transparency to the expansive network they operate through.

³⁸ The minimum wage figures (converted to Euros) used in our assessment are as follows: Bulgaria, 3.32 EUR/hour (Feb 2025); Lebanon, 181 EUR/month or approximately 1 EUR/hour (April 2025); Syria, 13 EUR/month or approximately 0.08 EUR/hour (April 2025); Afghanistan, 69.50 EUR/month or approximately 0.45 EUR/hour (April 2025); Kenya, 0.96 EUR/hour (Jan 2025). All figures obtained from Wage indicator,



www.wageindicator.org. The living wage figures (converted to Euros, valid as of March 2025) used in our assessment are as follows: Bulgaria, 751.74 EUR/month or approximately 4.70 EUR/hour; Lebanon, 2.80 EUR/hour; Syria, 1.80 EUR/hour; Kenya, 2.52 EUR/hour. All data comes from Living Wage Indicator (based on publicly available data acquired through desk research), except for Bulgaria, where data is obtained through the Confederation of Independent Trade Unions in Bulgaria (KNSB), obtained from the KNSB web site: <https://knsb-bg.org/index.php/2025/01/23/1474-lv-e-netnata-zaplata-za-izdrazhka-za-edin-rabotesth-kam-kraya-na-2024-g/> No living wage figure was determined for Afghanistan.

³⁹ al-Hammada, R. (2024). *If I Had Another Job, I Would Not Accept Data Annotation Tasks: How Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Train AI* [Coordination by M. Miceli, A. Dinika, K. Kauffman, C. Salim Wagner, & L. Sachenbacher]. Available at: <https://data-workers.org/Roukaya> (Accessed: 10 December 2024).

⁴⁰ This quote is taken from a policy document shared with Fairwork by HITL.

⁴¹ Tubaro, P., & Casilli, A. (2019). 'Micro-work, artificial intelligence and the automotive industry', *Journal of Industrial and Business Economics*, 46(3), 333–345. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40812-019-00121-1>

⁴² The ILO defines minimum wage as the “minimum amount of remuneration that an employer is required to pay wage earners for the work performed during a given period, which cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract.” Minimum wage laws protect workers from unduly low pay and help them attain a minimum standard of living. The ILO’s Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970 C135 sets the conditions and requirements of establishing minimum wages and calls upon all ratifying countries to act in accordance. Minimum wage laws exist in more than 90 per cent of the ILO member states.

⁴³ This means not only that the rate of pay agreed with workers reaches that statutory level, but also that workers are accurately compensated for all hours worked. Underpayment (also known as ‘wage theft’) is a pervasive problem, with evidence suggesting that huge sums of value go unpaid due to unpaid overtime, and incomplete/inaccurate wage payments.

⁴⁴ Where a living wage does not exist, Fairwork will use the Global Living Wage Coalition’s Anker Methodology to estimate one.

⁴⁵ The ILO recognises health and safety at work as a fundamental right. Where the company directly engages the worker, the starting point is the ILO’s Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (C155). This stipulates that employers shall be required “so far as is reasonably practicable, the workplaces, machinery, equipment and processes under their control are safe and without risk to health”, and that “where necessary, adequate protective clothing and protective equipment [should be provided] to prevent, so far as is reasonably practicable, risk of accidents or of adverse effects on health.”

⁴⁶ As endorsed by the ILO’s Forty-Hour Week Convention, 1935 (No.47) and the Reduction of Hours of Work Recommendation, 1962 (No.116)

⁴⁷ The ILO Termination of Employment Convention, 1982 (No. 158) defines worker representative consultation as sufficient when the employer provides “the workers’ representatives concerned in good time with relevant information including the reasons for the terminations contemplated, the number and categories of workers likely to be affected and the period over which the terminations are intended to be carried out” and gives “in accordance with national law and practice, the workers’ representatives concerned, as early as possible, an opportunity for consultation on measures to be taken to avert or to minimise the terminations and measures to mitigate the adverse effects of any terminations on the workers concerned such as finding alternative employment.”

⁴⁸ Depersonalized bullying is a form of workplace mistreatment where employees are unfairly treated not because of who they are, but because of the organization’s system or structure, constitutes a situation where harmful behaviour, like intimidation or aggression, are applied impersonally across the workforce by supervisors or managers in the name of achieving company goals.

⁴⁹ Workers have a right to understand how the use of AI impacts their work and working conditions. Organisations must respect this right and provide detailed, understandable resources to allow workers to exercise it.

⁵⁰ The automation of decision making can lead to reductions in accountability and fairness. But building in human oversight into a decision-making loop does not solve this problem. Instead, the subjects of those decisions need to be empowered to challenge them, and a renewed emphasis should be placed on the liability of those stakeholders who direct the development and deployment of AI systems in the workplace.

⁵¹ A mechanism for the expression of collective worker voice will allow workers to participate in the setting of agendas so as to be able to table issues that most concern them. This mechanism can be in physical or virtual form (e.g. online meetings) and should involve meaningful interaction (e.g. not surveys). It should also allow for ALL workers to participate in regular meetings with the management.

⁵² For example, “[the company] will support any effort by its workers to collectively organise or form a trade union. Collective bargaining through trade unions can often bring about more favourable working conditions.”



⁵³ If workers choose to seek representation from an independent collective body of workers or union that is not readily recognized by the company, the company should then be open to adopt multiple channels of representation, when the legal framework allows, or seek ways to implement workers' queries to its communication with the existing representative body.