

Survival of mining industry depends on investment in workers

By [Joanne Doyle-Went](#)

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South Africa's economic prospects remain gloomy for the foreseeable future, with some including the International Monetary Fund predicting that the economy will barely avoid going into recession in 2017.



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The 2016 Invest in Africa Mining Indaba took place in this context, and naturally the question of survival in this tough economic climate was at the forefront.

While the talk at the indaba looked at how to improve exploration and extraction techniques, how to make the machines more efficient, we firmly believe that people are the most important asset for a mining company. Improving engagement with workers should be front-and-centre of any miner's strategy.

As mineral resources minister Mosebenzi Zwane said in his speech, "The manner in which workers are treated has a profound impact on productivity - an unhappy worker cannot be a productive worker. People must be treated with dignity and respect."

Lack of engagement

The evidence is that generally speaking, miners are not engaging their workers effectively. The seemingly never-ending series of strikes and lost productivity show that there is much work to be done.

Multiple studies into workforce engagement, including the Human Capital Trends by Deloitte, have shown that a highly-engaged workforce is happier, more productive, and more likely to stay at the company. These workers are included in the functioning of the company, and feel that they have a stake in its future. The cornerstone of workforce engagement is communication.

Our approach to bringing management and workers together in a miner is by closing the feedback loop. One-way communication will never make workers feel that they have any say in the company, and many communication systems are not set up with a worker-feedback component. Workers must be able to reach into their pockets and have a direct line to management, whatever their job.

This is something that any information worker currently enjoys. (Can you contact your boss via email? You're an information worker.) This includes traditionally non-information workers, and the large majority of mineworkers fall into this category. This is something we made possible through our digital workforce engagement tool, built in partnership with Wyzetalk to function on any mobile device. The tool also makes it possible to deliver some training and guidelines to workers in this innovative way.

Listening to feedback

This tool also allows the miner to demonstrate that it is taking worker feedback into account when formulating business strategy through a report-back system that shows every worker that their query or comment has been noted, and then responded to.

Miners must also have a holistic view of their workers and their needs. A company that only communicates about work will seem distant and uncaring, causing negativity and unhappiness. Communicating about health and safety, work schedules and so forth isn't enough.

The company must also demonstrate an interest in the well-being of its workers, and must be active in community development. More socially equitable environments will lead to better community stability and ensure that the workers can feel taken care of, and not exploited by their employers.

Backed by a highly-engaged, happy workforce that works collaboratively, any mining company can look at the future with more confidence. They will be secure in the knowledge that their most prized asset, the workforce, is pulling in one direction with them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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