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Does Engaging Commercial Customers in a Shared Social Mission Improve Impact Sourcing Service Provider (ISSP) Success? A Critically Appraised Topic

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EDITORIAL NOTE

In this article, "Does Engaging Commercial Customers in a Shared Social Mission Improve Impact Sourcing Service Provider (ISSP) Success?", author Michael Corbett critically examines the science behind the practice of engaging commercial customers in the social mission of social enterprises. The author takes a supply chain perspective. This research is particularly important for non-governmental and charitable organizations in an era where commercial organizations attach real value to their corporate responsibility for societal outcomes; sometimes achieving rewards from environmental, social and governance (ESG) investors. Corbett reports evidence in the research literature that such engagements do, in fact, strengthen the relationship between the companies and contributes positively to the success of a social enterprise. Corbett's article goes further to specify proven techniques in the research: building a foundation with local and regional customers and suppliers; and building strong relations with professional and industry associations, consultants, and economic development agencies.

Does Engaging Commercial Customers in a Shared Social Mission Improve Impact Sourcing Service Provider (ISSP) Success? A Critically Appraised Topic

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ABSTRACT

This topic paper examines whether engaging commercial customers through a shared social mission improves the success of social enterprises. It is based on an examination of a subset of the information technology and business process outsourcing (ITO/BPO) industries, known as impact sourcing service providers (ISSPs). ISSPs are social enterprises – B2R Technologies and Digital Divide Data are two examples – that provide call center, transaction processing, data entry, and other technology-enabled services for commercial customers from remote locations around the globe. What is unique about ISSPs is that they do this with a social mission of creating jobs and economic development in disadvantaged and marginalized communities. The analysis presented in this paper is based on an examination of academic research on ISSPs published in peer-reviewed journals from 2013 through 2022. The findings are that ISSPs that engage commercial customers through a shared social mission develop stronger bonds at both the personal and organizational levels. These bonds, in turn, strengthen the overall relationship between the companies and improve the ISSP's success. Although specific to the case of ISSPs and the outsourcing industry, these findings offer lessons that can inform other industries and other types of relationships between commercial and social enterprises.

RESEARCH QUESTION

For social enterprises, success is largely measured by the organization’s ability to advance an intended social mission. For ISSPs, the social mission is job creation and economic development in marginalized communities. The resulting review question for this topic paper is: *Does engaging commercial customers through a shared social mission improve the success of ISSPs?*

Table 1: PICOC Framework

PICOC Element	Description
Problem	Social enterprise success
Intervention	Engaging commercial customers through a shared social mission
Comparison	Not engaging commercial customers through a shared social mission
Outcome	Improved social enterprise success
Context	Impact sourcing service providers (ISSPs)

BACKGROUND

Marginalized communities around the world would benefit from access to jobs being created in today’s global digital economy. Information technology outsourcing (ITO) and business process outsourcing (BPO) service providers, like IBM, Accenture, Infosys, and thousands of other companies around the world, have created millions of jobs as they build global workforces in support of their customers. From remote centers, these companies provide a wide range of technology-enabled jobs, including software development and maintenance, call center operations, transaction processing, data entry, and other business services.

The term impact sourcing (IS) refers to leveraging this global digital economy to create jobs for individuals with otherwise limited opportunity for sustainable employment. New entrants and established service providers that operate with this social mission in mind are referred to as impact sourcing service providers (ISSPs) (Monitor Group, 2011). For example, Digital Divide Data was founded in 2001, and 87 percent of its employees are underserved youths in Kenya, Laos, and Cambodia. These employees provide remote digitally enabled services for regional and international customers (Digital Divide Data, 2022).

Early estimates were that more than half a million IS jobs existed in 2012 and that the number could grow to as much as 2.9 million by 2020 (Avasant, 2012). However, anecdotal data and recent research suggest that only a fraction of the anticipated jobs have materialized (Everest, 2022; Madon & Ranjini, 2019). Researchers consistently report a number of factors impeding job creation in marginalized communities, a key measure of success for ISSPs. The factors most frequently mentioned include conflicts between the commercial needs of companies and the social norms in the marginalized communities (Heeks et al., 2020; Malik & Nicholson, 2020); inadequate local infrastructure (Madon & Ranjini, 2019; Sandeep & Ravishankar, 2015); ineffective government support (Heeks et al., 2020; Madon & Ranjini, 2019; Manning, 2022); and challenges in attracting large commercial customer contracts (Accenture, 2012; Kannothra et al., 2018; Manning et al., 2017)

Although all these issues are important, perhaps the most essential is attracting large commercial customer support if ISSPs want to expand beyond niche market opportunities. Given the increased focus in corporations on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and related social programs (Rahdari et al., 2016), a natural assumption is that this task would be relatively easy. However, ISSPs have discovered that it is not so simple. A review of the available academic literature indicates that connecting an ISSP’s social mission to the social interests of its customers can be done but is more difficult

than initially thought (Kannothra et al., 2018; Manning, 2022; Manning et al., 2017). This topic paper offers actionable recommendations that ISSPs can use to improve their social impact and overall success.

SEARCH STRATEGY AND RESULTS

A literature review was conducted using the ABI/INFORM and Scopus databases. ABI/INFORM is a collection of thousands of journals, dissertations, and key business and economics periodicals. In this database, conducting a full text search of the keyword, “impact sourcing,” and limiting the results to peer-reviewed articles resulted in 63 articles. The second database, Scopus, is a curated research database with content from more than 25,000 active titles and 7,000 publishers. In this case, a keyword search of “impact sourcing” limited to title, abstract, and keywords identified another 29 articles, for a total of 92. After reviewing these articles to identify common terms, I conducted a second round of database searches. Using the same databases and the same selection limitations, I searched the keywords, “global supply chain” and “social,” where the terms “information technology,” “business process,” or “outsourcing” appeared within ten words. This search added 53 candidates, for a preliminary list of 145 articles.

Eliminating duplicates and off-topic articles resulted in 50 remaining articles. Next, taking into account that the first peer-reviewed paper on IS was published in 2013, I removed 17 earlier articles from consideration. In addition, I excluded 11 results that were not a valid source (e.g., a book chapter or teaching case study) and 9 that were not primary research. Thirteen articles remained. Of these, five reported findings specific to the alignment of the ISSP’s social mission with its customers. A diagram of the search strategy is shown in Figure 1. The five articles used for this review are shown in Table 2. Table 3 is a summary of the evaluation and overall assessment of the quality of each article.

Figure 1: Search Flowchart

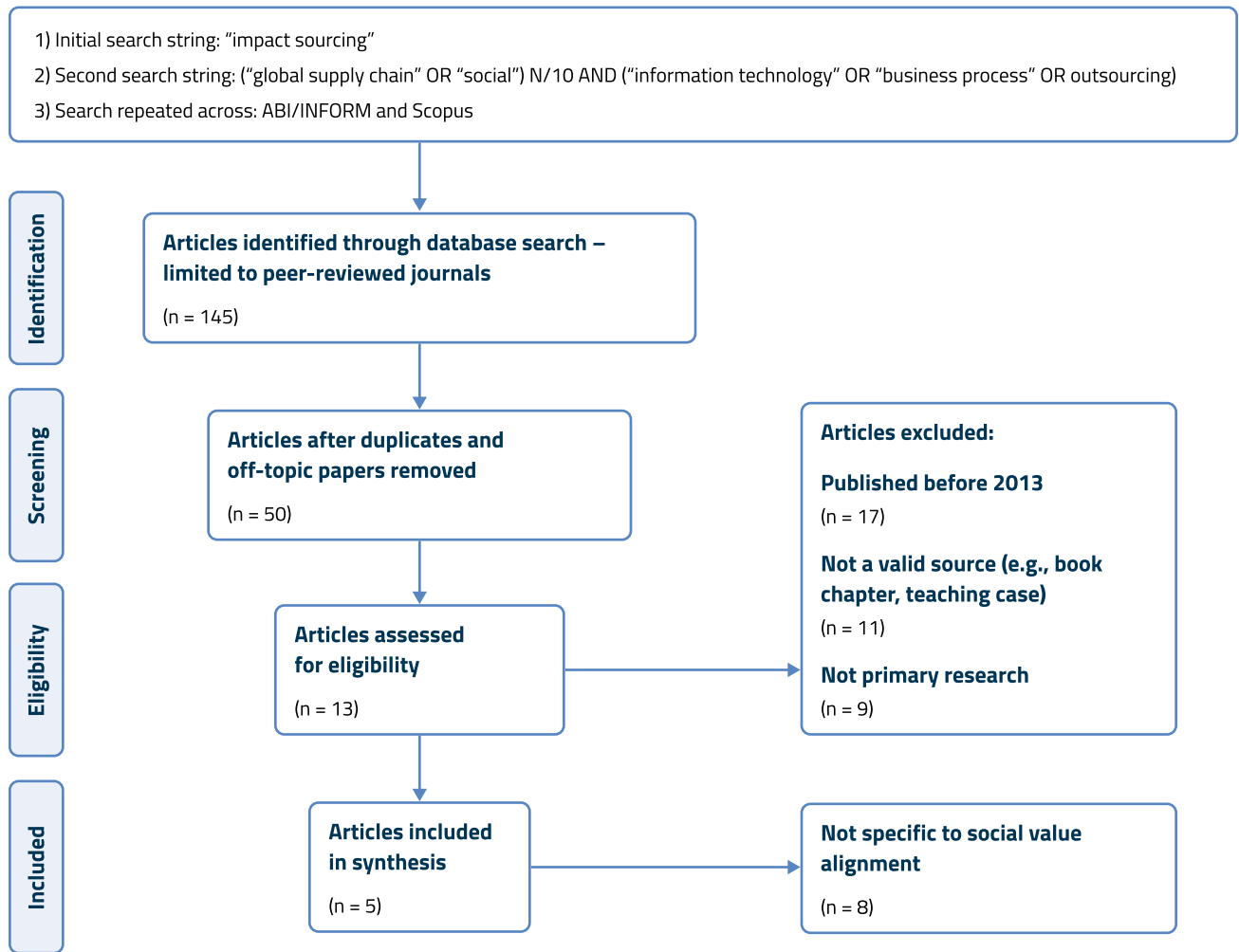


Table 2: Search Results

Study #	Article Reference
1	Kannothenra, C. G., Manning, S., & Haigh, N. 2018. How hybrids manage growth and social-business tensions in global supply chains: The case of impact sourcing. <i>Journal of Business Ethics</i> , 148(2): 271–290. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-017-3585-4
2	Khan, S., Lacity, M., & Carmel, E. 2018. Entrepreneurial impact sourcing: A conceptual framework of social and commercial institutional logics. <i>Information Systems Journal</i> , 28(3): 538–562. https://doi.org/10.1111/isj.12134
3	Manning, S. 2022. From mainstream to niche: How value regimes shift in emerging economy upgrading. <i>Research Policy</i> , 51(6): 104532. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RESPOL.2022.104532
4	Manning, S., Kannothenra, C. G., & Wissman-Weber, N. K. 2017. The strategic potential of community-based hybrid models: The case of global business services in Africa. <i>Global Strategy Journal</i> , 7(1): 125–149. https://doi.org/10.1002/gsj.1147
5	Nicholson, B., Babin, R., & Briggs, S. 2017. Exploring the effects of liminality on corporate social responsibility in inter-firm outsourcing relationships. <i>Journal of Information Technology</i> , 32: 47–61. https://doi.org/10.1057/jit.2015.24

Kannothra et al. (2018) was a qualitative study based on interviews and independent document reviews of 12 ISSPs in Kenya, India, South Africa, and the United States. The goal was to examine how organizations pursuing both commercial and social goals balance the inherent tensions of their dual mission. The authors found that these ISSPs adopted different strategies based on their customer type. Promotion of a shared social mission was common when ISSPs served local or regional customers. In contrast, a more commercial approach was adopted when working with global customers who often were neither aware nor concerned with the ISSP's local social considerations. In these cases, the social mission of the ISSP was not particularly relevant. Instead,

its track record and the certification of its business practices against industry standards provided confidence in its ability to meet the customers' commercial needs.

In Khan et al. (2018), the authors examined how the combination of commercial and social goals shape ISSPs. The research was based on a qualitative study of Liberty Source, a U.S.-based ISSP that employed military spouses to provide back-office outsourcing services. The findings showed that ISSPs like Liberty Source adopted either a predominantly commercial or social focus with customers, depending on which one afforded them the greatest legitimacy. In this case, the provider benefited from a shared social mission of supporting military

families with its U.S.-based customers. As a result, the ISSP has enjoyed significant marketplace success (Two Sigma, 2021).

Manning (2022) examined the key drivers of providers' approach to meeting customer needs in the context of economic development in emerging economies. This qualitative study was based on interviews and document reviews with industry experts, government actors, executives, and managers in Kenya and South Africa. The author found that in response to an initially low global marketplace demand, the ISSPs would reorient their focus to local and regional customers. Then, as the focal location became known as a hub for programs addressing the needs of disadvantaged

Table 3: Evaluation of Overall Validity

Study & Author(s)	Research Approach	Empirical Basis	Analysis Method	Overall Validity
1- Kannothra et al. (2018)	Qualitative: interviews & document reviews	38 interviews at 12 ISSPs in Kenya, India, South Africa, and the United States; additional document reviews	Inductive coding, category, and common theme development	High validity: conclusions follow from thematic analysis and are supported by extensive literature review
2 - Khan et al. (2018)	Qualitative: interviews & document reviews	15 in-depth interviews conducted and 100 pages of company literature reviewed	Research findings were mapped to conceptual framework anchored to four key dimensions of social and commercial logics	High validity: conceptual framework and case study analysis are logical and supported by extensive literature review
3 - Manning (2022)	Qualitative: interviews & document reviews	26 semi-structured interviews of about one hour with industry experts, government actors, executives and managers	Cross-tabulation of responses across cases, with special focus on the industry participants	High validity: extensive reporting of interviews, correlation of factors, supported by extensive literature review
4 – Manning et al. (2017)	Qualitative: interviews & document reviews	More than two dozen interviews with senior managers, employees, and policymakers	Using the practice of axial coding, similarities and differences across the cases are identified	High validity: interview reporting, analysis, and findings are discussed and supported by academic literature
5 – Nicholson et al. (2017)	Qualitative: interviews & document review	23 semi-structured interviews with relevant individuals in the provider and customer organizations	An intermediate approach, drawing on elements of grounded theory and direct application of theory to the data, is used	High validity: interviews, analysis, and reporting follow well-established practices and are supported by academic literature

communities, ISSPs were better able to win business by linking their companies to their prospective customers' social interests and CSR programs. Third-party organizations, such as consultants and business groups, supported ISSPs in this change from a regional and local focus to a broader one by making the social issues and ISSPs more visible on a global level.

Manning et al. (2017) examined ISSPs in the context of serving local, regional, and international customers in and from sub-Saharan Africa. The researchers found that the commoditized services sought by global customers were not conducive to ISSPs' success in this region. But they did find that more niche-oriented providers that could match their unique capabilities to a customer's business needs and social interests were successful. Again, the research showed the positive effect of third-party organizations in raising global awareness.

The final article examined the relationship between an ISSP and one of its primary customers. Nicholson et al. (2017) investigated how engaging the customer by emphasizing a shared focus on the support of two grade schools in Chennai and Noida, India, affected the relationship between the organizations. They found that having a common social mission increased communication across the organizations and resulted in stronger personal and professional ties. These ties were found to have practical benefits for addressing business issues and growing the relationship over time.

RESEARCH

Table 4 is a synthesis of the insights gained from a review of the five articles. The findings showed that ISSPs that engaged their commercial customers through shared social interests developed stronger relationships and achieved better social outcomes. My review of the articles identified three common approaches for accomplishing this type of relationship: (1) working with co-located customers, (2) promotion of ISSPs and their social mission by trusted third parties, and (3) linking the ISSP's social mission to its global customers' social interests and CSR program. I discuss each of these approaches in turn.

Customer co-location. In four of the five articles reviewed, greater ISSP success was found when the organizations worked with co-located customers – that is, customers with operations in the same country or geographic region as the ISSP. These customers were found to have a natural affinity and appreciation for the social issues the ISSP was seeking to address. Although ISSPs must still meet their customers' commercial needs, a sense of shared responsibility for achieving both the commercial and social goals of the organizations existed.

Specific examples of the opportunities derived from serving co-located customers were reported in four of the studies. Kannothra et al. (2018) identified two categories of co-located customers: (1) local businesses, government agencies, and non-governmental organizations; and (2) lead suppliers further up the supply chain serving larger domestic and international customers. Specific examples of ISSPs that enjoy deep, long-term relationships with both types of co-located customers were identified. In Khan et al. (2018), both the ISSP and its customers were based in the United States, and support of U.S. military spouses was a powerful, shared social mission. Studies focused on sub-Saharan Africa (Manning, 2022; Manning et al., 2017) offered similar examples. They also identified an additional category of co-located customer motivated by a shared social

mission: global corporations with newly established operations in the region.

Promotion by third parties. Third-party organizations, such as government agencies, business associations, consultants, and certification bodies, were found to be important for raising commercial customer awareness of the ISSP's capabilities and social mission. Early on, organizations such as Accenture, Avasant, and Monitor raised awareness of IS through marketplace studies and reports. The Rockefeller Foundation (<https://www.rockefellerfoundation.org/>) provided early funding for much of this work. Industry associations, such as, the Global Impact Sourcing Coalition (<https://gisc.bsr.org/>) and Business Process Enabling South Africa (<https://www.bpesa.org.za/>) served similar early roles in the industry's development. Such organizations can facilitate initial customer awareness of the ISSP and its social mission and can help showcase its capabilities. Three of the five articles (Kannothra et al., 2018; Manning, 2022; Manning et al., 2017) discussed examples of this type of support.

Linking to global customer CSR programs. Research showed that ISSPs improved their success when they were able to link their social mission to a global customer's social interests and CSR program. In the case study reported by Nicholson et al. (2017), the ISSP introduced its customer's executives to local schools in India. Support of these schools became a shared social program. When the customer's managers and executives traveled to India, their business trips included visits to the schools. Later, back at their U.K. headquarters, customer personnel shared these experiences at townhall-style meetings. The ISSP and its customer became partners in this social initiative, which, in turn, became part of the customer's CSR program. Manning (2022) reported that as global recognition for an ISSP's social mission grew, the ISSP was increasingly able to link its social mission to its customers' CSR program. Manning et al. (2017) reported a growing potential for ISSPs to link both their services and social missions to select global markets.

Table 4: Key Findings and Translation of the Collective Finding

Study & Author(s)	Category 1: ISSP and Customer Co-Located	Category 2: Third Parties Build Customer Awareness	Category 3: ISSP Integrates Its Social Mission into Global Customer Social Interests and CSR Program
1- Kanothra et al. (2018)	Local and regional customers have a shared awareness of social conditions and needs.	Certifying the workforce to globally recognized standards used to build customer awareness.	
2 - Khan et al. (2018)	U.S.-based provider engages U.S. customers by hiring U.S. military spouses.		
3 - Manning (2022)	ISSPs focus their businesses on local and regional customers.	Third-party organizations, such as governments and NGOs, position ISSPs for the local, regional, and global market.	As global recognition for social impact grew, ISSPs were increasingly able to link their social mission to global customers' social interests and CSR program.
4 – Manning et al. (2017)	As international companies entered the local market, ISSPs were able to link their social mission to them.	Global sponsors, including nonprofit and commercial organizations, promote ISSPs.	Niche providers were able to link their services and social mission to the needs of global customers.
5 – Nicholson et al. (2017)			A common social mission across the organizations resulted in stronger personal and professional ties.
Translation	ISSPs benefit from the shared social values and awareness found with co-located customers.	Third parties play an important role in raising awareness of the social mission and capabilities of ISSPs.	Linking an ISSP's social mission to its global customer's social interests and CSR program strengthens relationships and social outcomes.

CONCLUSION

ISSPs face a number of challenges in achieving their goal of job creation and economic development in marginalized communities. These challenges include culturally based community resistance, lack of consistent government support, and inadequate physical and technological infrastructure. However, the most significant challenge they face is winning larger commercial contracts from global corporations.

Through this review of the available academic literature, we see that when ISSPs are able to engage customers in a shared social mission, they are more successful. This shared social mission creates stronger

bonds between the companies at both the personal and the organizational levels. These bonds, in turn, lead to longer term, more successful business relationships. Shared awareness and support for the ISSP's social mission from its customers directly contribute to an ISSP's ability to successfully achieve its social goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The central recommendation from this research is for ISSPs to engage their commercial customers in a shared social mission. The studies reviewed offer a number of recommendations on how best to achieve this goal.

For ISSPs to achieve significant job creation in marginalized communities, they need to find ways to link their organizations to the social interests of their customers. However, this linkage is particularly challenging to create when working with large global corporations. One strategy is for ISSPs to work to establish meaningful relationships in customer executive ranks. Executive-level involvement is key to obtaining needed organizational support and resources. Involving customer executives in initiatives, such as the support of schools, scholarships, job training, and similar programs, can resonate with the executives' personal and professional interests. ISSPs should explore a wide range of opportunities for engaging customer executives, including

in areas that may appear to be tangential to the ISSP's primary social mission of job creation. Because ISSPs operate on the front line of today's social needs, they are uniquely positioned to help customer executives and their teams identify areas of impact for themselves and for their companies' CSR program. ISSPs should leverage this advantage.

However, this level of engagement with executives across the global supply chain of technology-enabled outsourcing services takes time and investment. For this reason, I recommend that ISSPs begin by focusing on local and regional customers. Although international customers offer a larger potential for social impact, starting locally is generally more effective. Local and regional commercial, government, and non-governmental organizations have a shared appreciation for common social issues. In addition, they often are seeking lower volume, less commoditized services, which may better align with the ISSP's operations. Similarly, ISSPs can have early success working with local and regional lead suppliers, which then sets the stage for future relationships with larger global customers. Starting local is one of the best ways for ISSPs to build their ability to ultimately engage with global customers.

Finally, I recommend that ISSPs focus on becoming known to and promoted by influential third-party organizations that support their mission. Many of these organizations offer award programs that can bring awareness to an ISSP and its mission. Many also offer certification programs that enable the ISSP to demonstrate its ability to both achieve its social mission and meet rigorous industry standards. Third-party organizations, such as professional and industry associations, consultants, and economic development agencies often serve as advisors to customers seeking new service providers. Being known and promoted by these organizations is critical for ISSPs working to expand their customer base while achieving their social mission.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This academic literature review is limited in a few ways. First, the amount of research on ISSPs, particularly in relation to the specific question of engaging customers in their social mission, is fairly limited. In addition, all of the currently available published research is qualitative in nature. Future quantitative studies could provide valuable testing of the hypotheses derived from these qualitative studies. Second, the analysis in this paper looked only at what ISSPs, and social enterprises more generally, can do to improve their success by better connecting their social mission to larger, and particularly global, corporations. At the same time, large corporations are well aware of the growing demands that they be proactive in addressing the social concerns of their customers, employees, and stakeholders. Future research should examine how large corporations can better address social concerns through their supply chains. This research could be key to achieving the kinds of global sustainability goals proposed by organizations like the United Nations (UN, 2015).

Technological advances will continue to fundamentally reshape the types of jobs available and potentially will undermine the actual effects of what ISSPs do for job creation today. Recent advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning have the power to completely upend the outsourcing industry as we know it. As a result, where technology, business, and society intersect will continue to be an important area for future research, both for the academic community and for practitioners.

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Michael F. Corbett is currently a doctoral student at the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC). His professional career has taken him from the early days of large-scale mainframe computing at IBM to a leading figure in the global outsourcing industry. He is co-founder and past chairperson of the International Association of Outsourcing Professionals (IAOP) and has advised and served on the board of directors of companies across the country and around the world. As a subject-matter expert on outsourcing, he has written extensively on the topic, including the book *The Outsourcing Revolution: Why It Makes Sense* and *How to Do It Right* (Dearborn, 2004). Mr. Corbett's current research interests are in how to improve the success of social enterprises operating within global commercial supply chains, particularly as it applies within the outsourcing industry to Impact Sourcing Service Providers (ISSPs).