Seven Technology Platforms

In this document, we consider seven ICT technologies that can assist with the development of a FairShares Lab.

1. A Platform for Learning

A key part of a FairShares Lab will be the provision of education and training to business advisers as well potential members of future FairShares enterprises. A learning platform enables materials to be organised into curricula for both self-paced and collaborative learning. The platform is not the content - it is the software through which the content is presented to learners, and which educators can use to create, store and make curricula and learning activities available. The platform also offers administrative options to allocate and assess submitted work and make awards. One option is to commission a learning platform from a web developer. This option has to be weighed against using one of the numerous existing platforms.[1] Moodle, for example, is now available in a Cloud edition (simplifying the process of getting started compared to managing 'in-house' installations). Moodle's maturity is attested to by university adoptions amongst its large client base and is also an open source platform (which means it can be tailored by developers). Open source solutions compete with private ones. Google promotes 'Google Classroom' to educational institutions and this is the next in a long line of private platforms such as Coursera, edX and CanvasNet. While some require a university partner, CanvasNet is available to professional bodies.

In the context of the FairShares Labs project, IO2 will report on a platform for learning during project initiation (using a FairShares Planner). IO3 will report on a platform for project incubation and incorporation activities (using a FairShares e-Learning and Communications tool).

2. A Platform for Producing Documents

As part of the learning process (as well as for social enterprise development), a suite of productivity applications will be required. Microsoft Office is still dominant, but more and more people are attracted to Google Apps (GSuite) as they are offered 'free' with cloud-based storage solutions. In this space, there are also open source solutions like OpenOffice and LibreOffice. It is likely that a FairShares Lab will need productivity applications for its own work, as well as clients developing social enterprises.

3. A Platform for Manufacturing

Open source production brings new opportunities for sharing designs and manufacturing them through internet technologies. Social enterprises engaged in hardware projects can use platforms like Wevolver for collaborative design, then allow other social enterprises to download open source designs for manufacture with other technologies (such as 3D printers). Examples of open source 3D printing projects can be explored at https://3dprintingindustry.com/open-source/. Whilst this technology looks immature, there is space for both technical and social innovation to build new supply chains based on mutual principles.

4. A Platform for Economic Exchanges and Crowd-Sourcing

A FairShares Lab will need to engage in exchanges (of knowledge, ideas, documents, products, services) and account for these exchanges in several ways. A decade ago, systems like eBay showed how exchanges could take place online and be supported by online payment systems (e.g. PayPal). Today, there are commercial options (like eBay) alongside attempts to integrate 'stores' into social

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[1] Here is an example of a review of 15 learning platforms - https://financesonline.com/15-popular-learning-management-systems-one-best/.

networking sites (e.g. Facebook). However, new platforms committed to the social economy might make good partners (Fairmondo[2], AnyShare Society[3] and Locoso.co[4]). Their existing commitment to the FairShares Model may make them preferred partners as their technologies mature. These platforms allow their users to gift, rent, borrow, lend, buy, sell and share goods, services or just share ideas / availability. They are likely to be owned or constituted as multi-stakeholder cooperatives.

5. A Platform for Democratic Decision-Making

In addition to a platform for exchanging goods and services, any enterprise (network) will also need a way to debate and discuss ideas and reach decisions. Many decision-making platforms are emerging that support the values and principles of the social solidarity economy. For example, the FairShares Association itself uses Loomio, an OpenSource software product created by a worker co-operative in New Zealand that is part of the Enspiral network. In South America, social movements are piloting DemocracyOS. For PC users, there is an app for decision-making based on the OPERA process (own ideas, pairing, explaining, ranking, arranging). Online decision-making platforms support virtual communities as well as improved auditing of decisions after face-to-face meetings.

6. A Platform for Creating FairShares Rules

Prior to FairShares V3.0, creating a set of rules meant adopting and adapting a Word format template. From V3.0, there is an online platform to generate rules for companies, cooperatives, partnerships and associations provided (and supported) by FairShares Association Ltd / FairShares Institute for Cooperative Social Entrepreneurship at Sheffield Business School. This is achieved using a combination of Google Sites, Forms, Docs and Sheets. However, a key challenge is preparing rules in different languages, and configuring them to fit the laws and customs of different countries, states and provinces. Nevertheless, what used to take a day or more can now takes as little as 15 minutes, and pre-filled templates will ease regional development issues as knowledge is created. A key benefit is better record keeping. Copies of documents are filed and logged automatically so that impacts can be evaluated more easily. Lastly, the platform protects core FairShares IP by ensuring that everyone accepts a Creative Commons Licence before use.

7. A Platform for Financial Resourcing

The last ICT platform needed to support a FairShares Lab is one for finance. Crowd-funding technologies have advanced in the last 5 years. Through Kickstarter and Indiegogo, people all over the world have access to platforms to seed fund social ventures and projects. The choice of platform varies internationally and needs to be sensitive to local norms and laws. Each FairShares Lab, therefore, might choose local platforms for philanthropic funding (for associations) and for commercial / peer-to-peer loans and equity (for cooperatives, companies and partnerships). UK/Eire examples include Funding Circle for peer-to-peer lending, CrowdCube for commercial equity and Crowdfunder for philanthropic / community projects. There are already dedicated sites for community shares and platform co-operatives.

Beyond ICT platforms for funding, there is a choice of platforms for payment processing and accounting (such as www.xero.com and www.quickbooks.com) . Alongside PayPal and Stripe (linked to traditional banking), there are alternative networks such as the co-operatively owned Faircoin seeking to support alternative markets and new crypto-currencies. Integrated fundraising, accounting and payment processing platforms are a potential area for socio-economic innovation.

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[2] A FairShares Coop / Somerset Cooperative Rules hybrid using German platform technology (https://fairmondo.uk/about).

[3] A US-Based FairShares Company offering subscriptions to create sharing platforms (http://anyshare.coop).

[4] A UK-based social business offering online stores based on FairShares principles (http://locoso.co/).