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From cold start to liquidity: Escaping the chicken-and-egg dilemma

Jobtech Alliance Learning Brief

March 2026

Introduction

The chicken-and-egg dilemma, usually understood as “what comes first, supply or demand”, misses the real issue for two-sided marketplaces. Both demand and supply need to be active at the same time. Workers won’t show up if there are no jobs, and customers won’t post jobs if there are no reliable workers.

The real dilemma, however, is not about what comes first, but about how to secure what we call *liquidity*. In marketplace terms, liquidity refers to how easily and reliably supply and demand find each other. A marketplace is liquid when customers can consistently get what they need without long waits or quality issues, and workers can reliably find enough work to earn and stay engaged.

Jobtech founders are under constant pressure to show growth: more users, more workers, more customers. But marketplaces rarely fail because they are too small. They fail because they never achieve real liquidity. Focusing on building one market that truly works, understanding whether the platform is constrained by supply or demand, and rigorously measuring network health helps founders resist vanity metrics and build a marketplace that functions, before attempting to scale it.

In this learning study, we distil relevant practical lessons learned across multiple jobtech platforms, based on lived experience rather than theory. We offer a set of general principles paired with practical tactics, inviting founders and their teams to interpret and apply them to their own marketplace dynamics. After all, context, market structure, and user behaviour shape what works and what does not.

For funders, donors and ecosystem actors, we suggest how to distinguish platforms that are simply accumulating users from those that are building functioning labour markets - and to support founders in doing the hard, unglamorous work that makes scale possible.

The brief was researched and produced from October 2025 to January 2026 by the Jobtech Alliance with inputs from community members and portfolio company founders. **Special thanks go to Shaaré, Instollar, EqualReach and Mavu for sharing their detailed inputs and lessons learned.**

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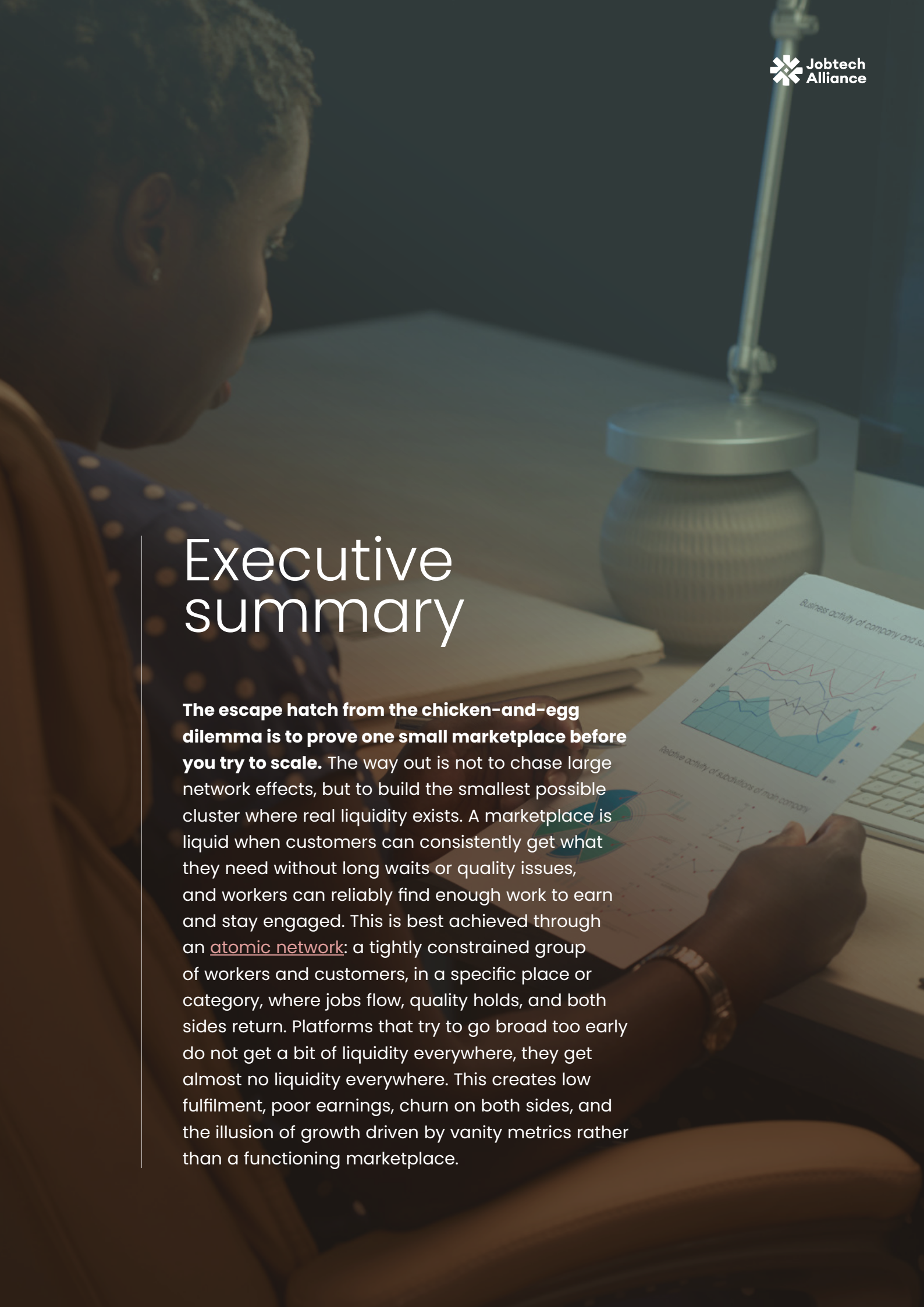
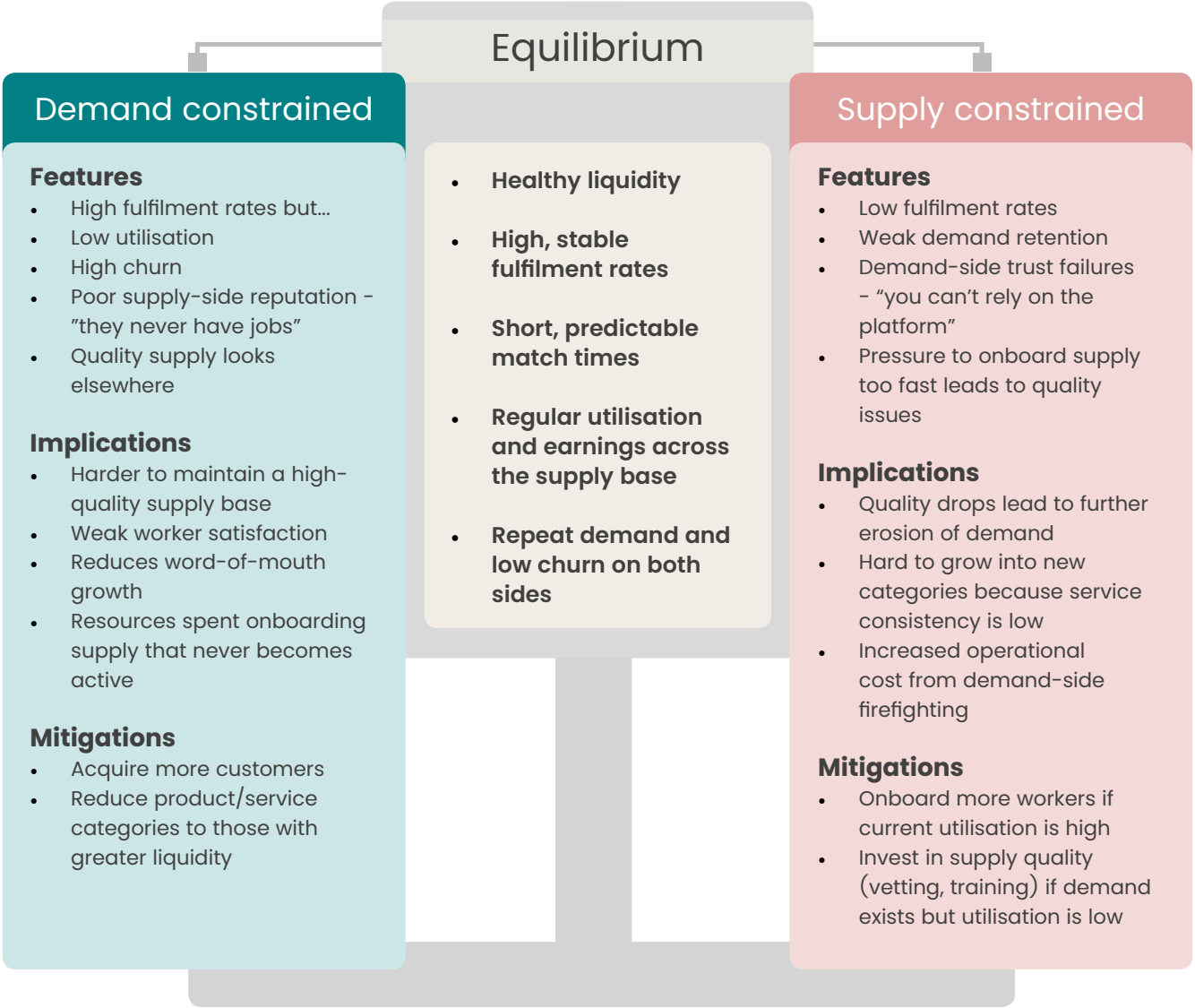


Executive summary

The escape hatch from the chicken-and-egg dilemma is to prove one small marketplace before you try to scale. The way out is not to chase large network effects, but to build the smallest possible cluster where real liquidity exists. A marketplace is liquid when customers can consistently get what they need without long waits or quality issues, and workers can reliably find enough work to earn and stay engaged. This is best achieved through an atomic network: a tightly constrained group of workers and customers, in a specific place or category, where jobs flow, quality holds, and both sides return. Platforms that try to go broad too early do not get a bit of liquidity everywhere, they get almost no liquidity everywhere. This creates low fulfilment, poor earnings, churn on both sides, and the illusion of growth driven by vanity metrics rather than a functioning marketplace.

Marketplaces are best understood as being demand-constrained or supply-constrained, with either being the "hard side". These labels are not about how many users you have - they describe which side of the market is preventing the marketplace from functioning at the quality, price, and reliability users expect. We developed a diagnostic matrix *(see below)* linking what platforms might observe (low fulfilment, idle workers, high churn, quality complaints, slow matching) to what is actually broken in the market, and how it can be fixed. With it, we are trying to turn the chicken-and-egg dilemma into something that can be diagnosed, measured, and managed.



Jobtech Alliance's venture support to a diverse set of platforms has helped us articulate five practical principles when it comes to cracking this issue. These are lenses and tactics that founders can interpret and adapt to solve for their own market context.

1 Attract supply and demand, but inside a tightly constrained market

Early liquidity comes from focus, not scale. Restrict geography, category, or both, so that activity concentrates into one atomic network instead of being diluted across many thin ones.

2 Dedicate effort to the "hard side" of the market

The hard side is the one that is slower, more expensive, or more difficult to activate — not necessarily the smaller side. This shifts over time and must be continually reassessed.

3 Invest early in credibility with both supply and demand

Liquidity depends on trust. Customers must trust quality, and workers must trust that they will get fair access to income. Without both, even dense networks stall.

4 Measure network health as an essential practice

Vanity metrics hide failure. Utilisation, fulfilment, match time, earnings regularity, and repeat usage reveal whether supply and demand are actually benefiting from each other.

5 Build a working marketplace before scaling

In the early phase, manual operations are not inefficiencies - they are how product–market fit, trust, and workflows are discovered. Automation should only come once liquidity is stable and understood.

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Principle 1

Attract supply *and* demand, but inside a tightly constrained market

For early-stage jobtech marketplaces, the chicken-and-egg dilemma shows up most acutely as the cold-start problem. Even with a strong product–market fit, getting the first real matches to happen requires disproportionate effort. In many African markets this is even harder because demand is structurally constrained: enterprises are small and fragmented, trust is low, and customers are highly price-sensitive. This can make platforms appear supply-constrained even when many workers exist, because few customers are willing or able to pay at levels that make participation worthwhile. This is why trying to go broad too early is so dangerous. Platforms that spread themselves across too many geographies or categories end up with very thin (or no) activity everywhere instead of a real, functioning market anywhere.

Restricting the marketplace to one geography, one category, or both allows a platform to concentrate effort and create enough activity to unlock its first atomic network. Some platforms allow users to sign up widely because they offer value in "single-player mode", where benefits are not only accrued with successful matching, but can encompass training, credentials, or reputation building. Even then, large user numbers should not be mistaken for liquidity.

L The dangers of oversupply: **Lynk Kenya**

Lynk was a task-matching platform in Kenya that covered a variety of service categories. Lynk initially followed a common marketplace playbook: maximise sign-ups. It recruited as many workers as possible across as many service categories as possible, ending up with more than 7,000 workers spread across over a thousand categories. The assumption was that scale alone would generate value.

In practice, this created extreme category dilution. Most service categories had too little demand relative to the supply that had been onboarded, so workers rarely received jobs. When requests did come through, many were ignored or passed on by workers because the platform no longer felt worth prioritising. This triggered the classic oversupply spiral: low utilisation, low engagement, poor responsiveness, and high churn.

Even in categories where demand was strong, such as electrical services, the marketplace developed winner-takes-all dynamics. A small number of top-rated professionals captured most of the jobs, while the rest were rarely selected. Oversupply made this worse: the more workers there were competing for the same work, the less incentive most had to stay active or deliver quality service.

Lynk reduced its active supply base **from 7,000 to 400** workers

Lynk's turnaround came from doing the opposite of what early-stage marketplaces are often tempted to do. It radically reduced the active supply base from 7,000 to around 400 workers, removed hundreds of low-demand categories, and introduced category-specific engagement metrics to ensure that each worker could realistically get work. To further solve the cold-start and distribution problem, it also stopped letting customers choose individual providers, and even guaranteed newly registered workers a first job within a set timeframe.

By standardising services, fixing prices, and centrally managing matching, Lynk was able to distribute work more evenly, improve fulfilment, and restore trust on both sides of the market. You can read more about Lynk's shift from an auction marketplace to a standardised service model here.

The right way to constrain the marketplace depends on where density is easiest to build first:

- **For place-based services like cleaning, care, or local delivery, geography is usually the binding constraint**, and even neighbourhood-level focus may be required to ensure reliable service and low travel friction.
- **For remote or digitally delivered work, such as IT freelancing, microwork, or BPO tasks, category (skill or task) focus is often more important** than location.

In all cases, the goal is the same: to build real liquidity in one bounded market before attempting to scale it elsewhere.

Winning tactics: how to quickly acquire initial supply and demand

Attracting supply:

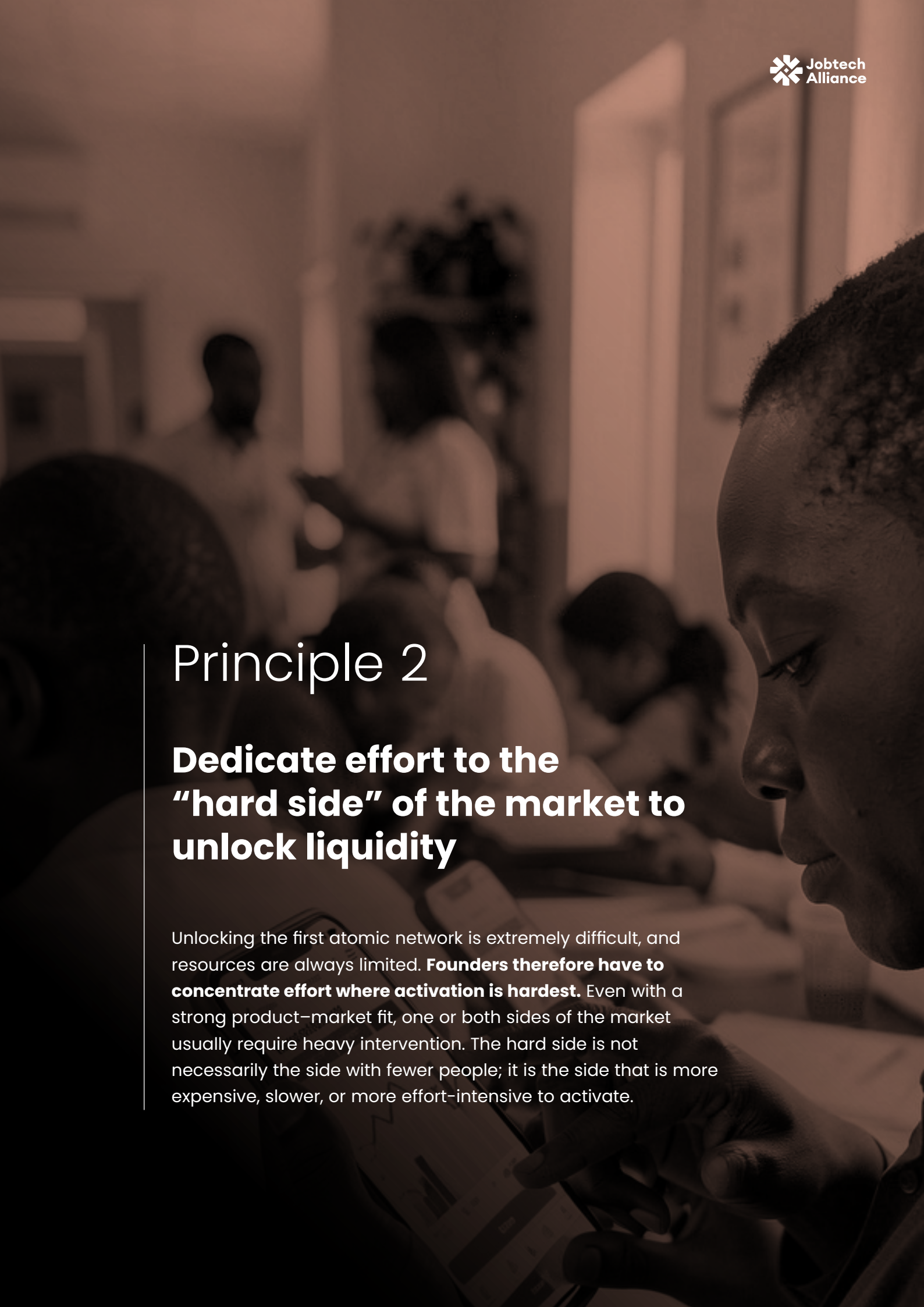
- **Start recruiting workers before you even have a working platform.** Nigerian green energy marketplace Instollar built its first supply base using a simple spreadsheet of vetted solar installers while the product was still being designed. It used that list to win its first enterprise clients at an industry conference. Early supply does not require software — it requires real workers you can actually place into work.
- **Grow through existing distribution and community networks where possible.** Microtask platform Mavu embedded itself inside Opera's MiniPay ecosystem to access a large, pre-existing user base, dramatically lowering its cost of recruiting workers. Similar leverage can come from agent networks, TVET colleges, cooperatives, and SACCOs, which can be especially effective for reaching women who are otherwise excluded from digital recruitment channels.
- **Use hands-on recruitment, referrals, and financial nudges to get early workers over the line.** Most successful marketplaces rely on some combination of direct outreach, referral loops, and income guarantees to activate early supply — a pattern echoed across many examples in 17 of today's biggest global marketplaces.

- **Use test or learning bookings to make the earning opportunity real.** Nigerian cleaning services platform Shaaré ran practice jobs and trial bookings so workers could experience what it meant to earn on the platform and learn the expected standards, even before demand had fully scaled.

- **Offer single-player mode value so workers stay engaged while liquidity is still thin**. Instollar uses training and an installer community as an on-platform value proposition that helps workers build skills, get advice, and stay active even when they are not being matched to jobs.

Attracting demand:

- **Start with the lowest-hanging demand that can generate volume quickly.** Mavu focused first on social media tasks and surveys because these were high-volume, easy-to-procure jobs for clients, giving the platform early transaction flow. Refugee-focused online freelancing marketplace EqualReach initially spread itself across many service categories and regions, which meant slower demand traction in the beginning because the marketing message and service offering range was so broad.
- **Prioritise the customers most likely to generate regular, predictable demand rather than maximising the number of buyers.** Instollar focused on landing two of the largest solar companies early on, which created immediate and predictable demand for installers and gave the marketplace real liquidity from the outset.
- **Use subsidies or guarantees to de-risk the first buying experience.** Instollar provided its initial clients with their first few installations for free so they could experience the quality and reliability of the model before committing, helping to overcome trust barriers and accelerate adoption.
- **Look for ways that supply can help generate demand.** In many marketplaces, workers, service providers, or merchants have their own customer relationships and incentives to bring clients onto the platform, similar to how restaurants promote food-ordering apps to their own customers.
- **Rely on word of mouth and direct outreach to build the first atomic network**, and layer in PR and digital marketing once the model works. Across many successful marketplaces, early demand came from hands-on sales and referrals, with scalable marketing becoming effective only after liquidity had been proven.



Principle 2

Dedicate effort to the “hard side” of the market to unlock liquidity

Unlocking the first atomic network is extremely difficult, and resources are always limited. **Founders therefore have to concentrate effort where activation is hardest.** Even with a strong product–market fit, one or both sides of the market usually require heavy intervention. The hard side is not necessarily the side with fewer people; it is the side that is more expensive, slower, or more effort-intensive to activate.

Which side is hard varies by marketplace. In some platforms, attracting customers is the bottleneck; in others, building a reliable, trusted supply base takes far more work. From a gender perspective, the factors that make one side of a marketplace hard to activate are also the factors that disproportionately affect women. Low trust, safety concerns, irregular or unpredictable earnings, and high time or onboarding costs all increase friction for everyone, but they tend to push women out of the market first because of care responsibilities, income risk, and exposure to harm. As a result, when a platform struggles to activate its hard side, women are often the first to disengage.

The hard side does not stay the same as the platform evolves. Platforms that begin supply-constrained can become demand-constrained as they successfully scale their worker base, while platforms that start with strong buyer demand can later struggle to maintain quality or utilisation on the supply side. Founders therefore need to continually reassess where friction really sits and shift their focus accordingly.

Defining the "hard side": Mavu

Mavu is a mobile microtasking platform that connects businesses to large numbers of everyday smartphone users. From the outset, Mavu made a deliberate strategic bet on supply. By embedding inside Opera's MiniPay ecosystem, a global stablecoin wallet, the platform gained access to a very large base of wallet users across multiple geographies at extremely low acquisition cost. Combined with a simple value proposition - earn small amounts in stablecoins in your spare time - and mobile-first task design, Mavu significantly reduced the friction of attracting and activating supply.

Mavu was taking advantage of this opportunity in a category where scale and geographic reach matter to buyers. The underlying hypothesis was that visible, distributed supply would itself unlock demand from organisations needing mass participation or geo-specific reach. Another hypothesis was that stablecoin payments reduced costs and improved payment processes for both businesses (lower mobilisation fee) and workers (getting paid more easily).

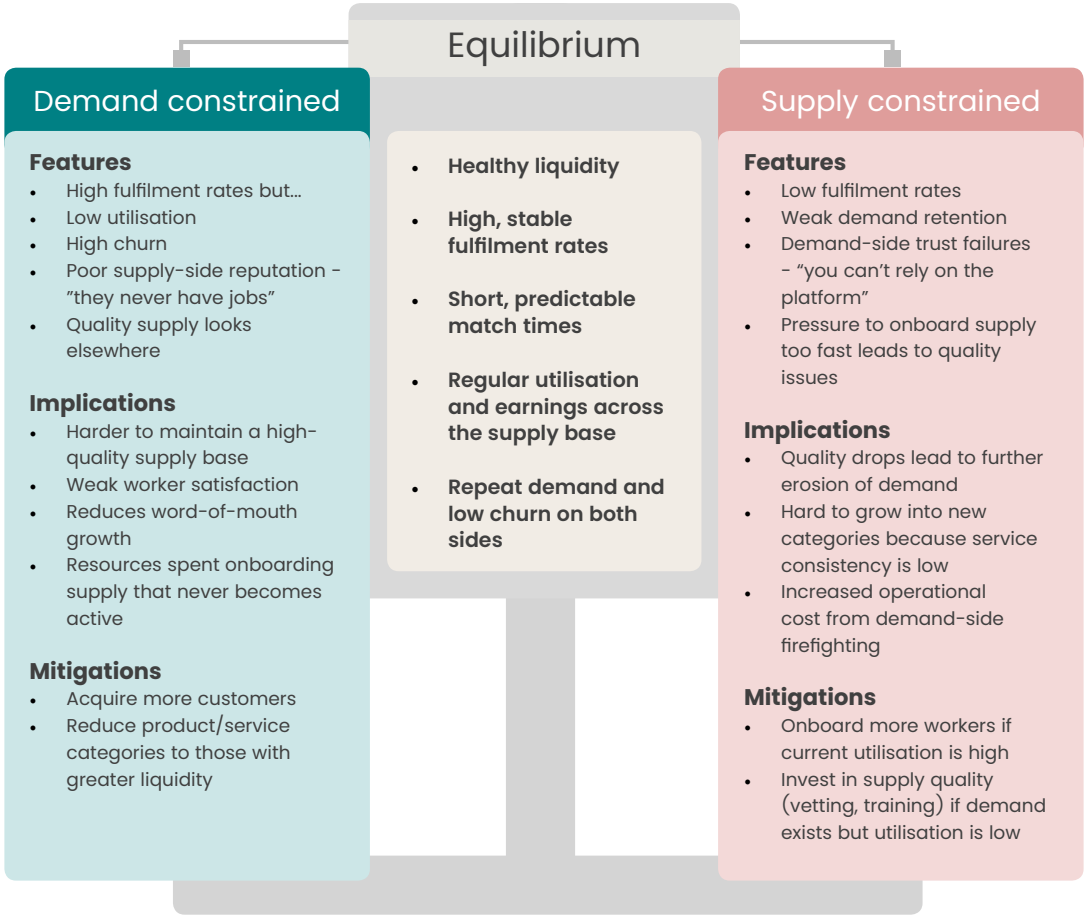
In practice, this clarified where the real constraint lay. While supply participation was relatively easy to unlock, sustained and repeatable demand proved far harder. Despite a large registered user base, the volume of completed gigs and overall earning remained limited, revealing a familiar marketplace imbalance: scale on one side does not automatically translate into liquidity.

In response, Mavu has increasingly concentrated effort on the demand side. Rather than pursuing generic task volume, the team has focused on identifying low-hanging fruit - job types that businesses already outsource cheaply and at scale, such as surveys and social media microtasks. They have also prioritised institutional buyers capable of providing predictable volume, and are currently engaging with AI companies that need a distributed workforce as a rich source of demand.

Solving the demand side is an ongoing journey. Mavu's experience highlights important lessons for marketplace founders: **structurally solving one side of the market does not unlock liquidity on its own**. Large supply is not a guarantee for a functioning marketplace without a strong demand anchor. Demand is often slower, more fragile, and harder to build than expected.

Winning tactics: how to quickly acquire initial supply and demand

Use the diagnostic tool below to determine whether your platform is demand-constrained or supply-constrained. You can do this by identifying the features and implications most relevant to your platform, and link them to some of the proposed mitigation strategies.

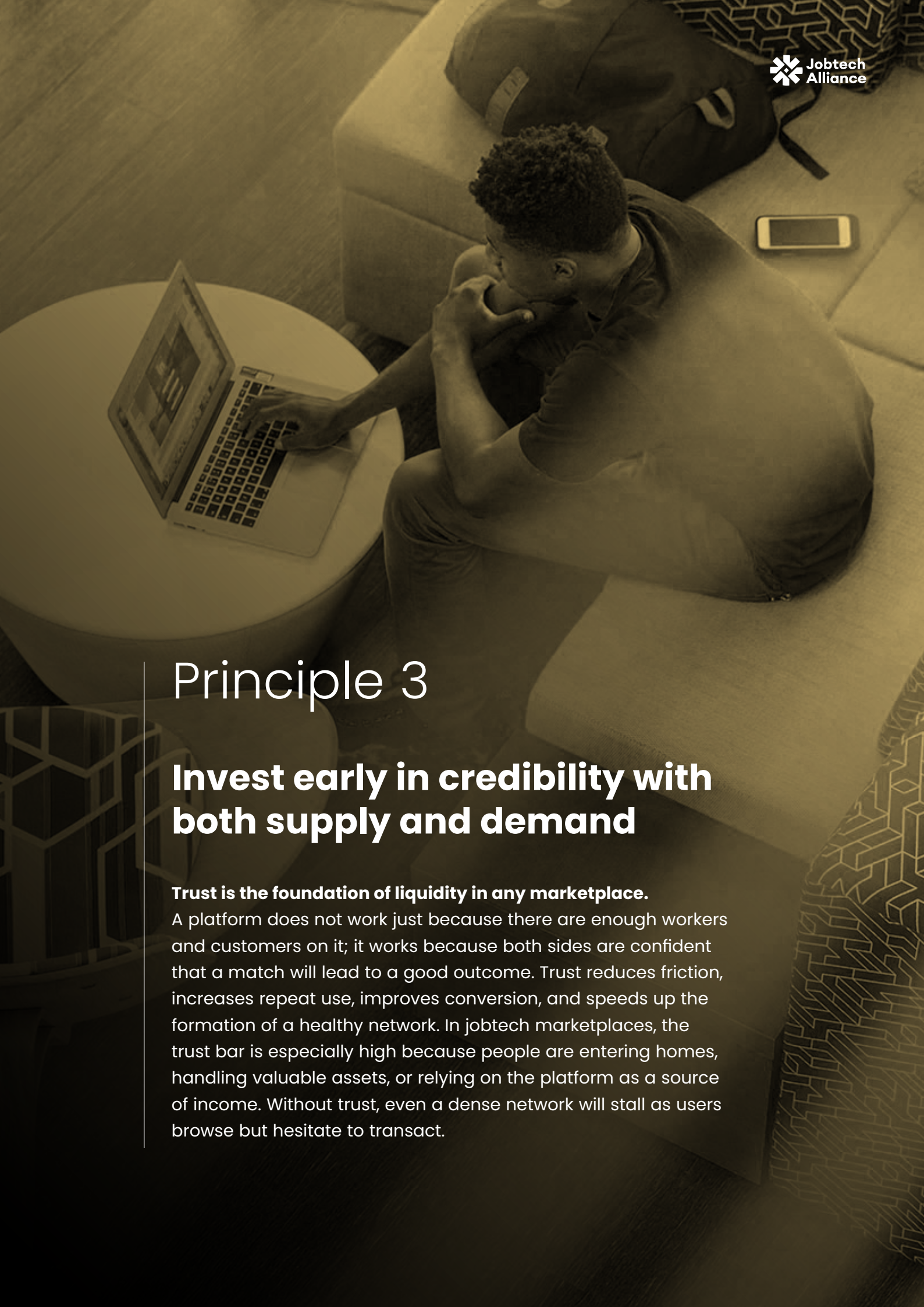


If your platform is **supply constrained:**

- **Increase usable supply before increasing new sign-ups.** Focus on converting existing workers and new joiners into people who can actually fulfil jobs through training, verification, tooling, or supervision.
- **Hire workers on staff in the early days.** If securing quality is hard, consider staffing your workforce while you work out the kinks, training, supply chain or operations of a two-sided marketplace.
- **Temporarily cap or slow new demand.** When customers are being disappointed, reduce demand inflow until fulfilment and quality stabilise, rather than burning trust.
- **Narrow geography or category to where supply is strongest.** Concentrate activity in areas or services where you can reliably deliver instead of stretching thin.
- **Use shadowing, apprenticeships, or assisted jobs to grow supply capacity.** Pair new or borderline workers with experienced ones so they become productive faster.
- **Onboard more workers only when existing supply is fully utilised.** High utilisation and long wait times mean you truly need more supply; low utilisation means you have a quality or trust problem, not a headcount problem.

If your platform is **demand constrained:**

- **Throttle or gate supply to protect earnings and utilisation.** Do not let in everyone who applies onto the platform: cap onboarding, queue applicants, or prioritise the best-fit workers so existing supply stays busy.
- **Reallocate work toward under-utilised workers.** Change matching rules, rotate opportunities, or create quotas so work does not cluster among a few top performers.
- **Increase basket size instead of just customer count.** Encourage existing customers to buy more per transaction (bundles, longer bookings, repeat schedules) rather than chasing new customers only.
- **Redesign offers to make demand more concentrated.** Standardise services, simplify menus, or narrow price bands so customers are steered toward the same few offers instead of scattering demand across many.



Principle 3

Invest early in credibility with both supply and demand

Trust is the foundation of liquidity in any marketplace.
A platform does not work just because there are enough workers and customers on it; it works because both sides are confident that a match will lead to a good outcome. Trust reduces friction, increases repeat use, improves conversion, and speeds up the formation of a healthy network. In jobtech marketplaces, the trust bar is especially high because people are entering homes, handling valuable assets, or relying on the platform as a source of income. Without trust, even a dense network will stall as users browse but hesitate to transact.

Trust is shaped by many things, from safety and professionalism to pricing transparency and the quality of customer and worker support. But across African jobtech platforms, **two trust issues have consistently mattered more than most: whether customers believe the supply on the platform will deliver quality work, and whether workers believe the platform will give them fair, reliable access to income.** These two forces determine whether users stay, leave, or become advocates.

Customers need confidence that the person who arrives will do the job properly, safely, and to the promised standard. Poor quality early on is fatal: it suppresses repeat demand, breaks the first atomic network, and creates powerful negative word of mouth. Managing quality may require serious investment in vetting, skills assessment, onboarding, training, and ongoing performance monitoring. In many categories this is unavoidably expensive, but platforms like Shaaré have shown that these activation costs can be partially recovered over time as workers start earning on the platform.

Winning tactics: how to manage quality of work

- **Design vetting as a funnel, not a one-off hurdle.** Use low-cost, low-touch screens early on - such as short quizzes, proof of prior experience, or basic checks - to filter out poor-fit applicants before investing in deeper verification.
- **Use test jobs, shadowing, or evaluation tasks.** That is how workers can engage with the platform while also proving that they can meet service and behaviour standards.
- **Treat training as a quality filter, not just an upskilling tool.** Make service standards, professionalism, and customer interaction requirements mandatory, and use completion and performance to decide who remains active.
- **Use visible trust signals to reinforce quality and professionalism.** Branded uniforms, ID cards, equipment, or profile standards reassure customers and help workers see themselves as part of a credible service, not just a loose gig pool.
- **If quality and safety are critical, consider starting with a small hired or tightly managed workforce.** Once service standards and workflows are proven, the model can then expand into a more open marketplace without eroding trust.

On the worker side of a marketplace, trust means believing that the platform will provide fair and realistic opportunities to earn. Many jobtech platforms struggle with a distribution problem in which a small group of highly rated or early-moving workers capture most of the available jobs. Over time, this creates disengagement, churn, and a growing pool of inactive supply, as capable workers stop checking the platform because they no longer expect to be selected.

This is not just an equity issue — it is a liquidity problem driven by trust on both sides of the market. When customers lack confidence in the platform, they naturally gravitate toward the same small group of highly rated workers, concentrating demand in a few hands, or the winner-take-all phenomenon. Over time this reduces the platform's effective capacity, even if many workers are technically available.

Platforms have responded in different ways. Lynk moved toward standardised services and centralised matching so customers could no longer hand-pick a few favourites. EqualReach used town halls and direct capacity building sessions to help underperforming teams learn how top performers win work. Instollar takes a deliberate, progression-based approach to work allocation - actively segmenting work by skill level and allocating simpler, lower-risk jobs to junior engineers. Over time, performance data, quality checks and client feedback are used to graduate workers into more complex, higher-value projects.

Winning tactics: how to manage worker engagement and earnings

- **Design your allocation logic to actively balance participation.** Use activity or earning caps and floors, or rotation rules, so a small group of workers cannot absorb all available work while others remain idle.
- **Segment work by skill and risk level, and reserve simpler or lower-risk jobs for newer or lower-rated worke**rs, so they can build experience, confidence, and reviews.
- **Rank and reward workers on reliability, not just stars**. Include responsiveness, attendance, and completion consistency so dependable workers are not crowded out by a few highly rated incumbents.
- **Create deliberate on-ramp mechanisms for new workers**. Practice jobs, learning bookings, and subsidised test work allow people to prove themselves and start earning without having to compete immediately with top performers.
- **Where trust is fragile, consider shifting from open search to managed matching** by standardising services and prices. That is how the platform, rather than the customer, controls how work is distributed.

Building trust across the board: **Instollar**

Instollar is a platform that connects solar installation companies to vetted, on-demand technicians across Nigeria. From the beginning, the team recognised that trust on the demand side would make or break the business. Solar companies were sceptical of outsourcing technician oversight in a market with no common standards, so Instollar created its own. Technicians were screened through multiple layers, including CV and credentials checks, project photo verification, and technical tests calibrated to their level of experience. They were then categorised into skill tiers so companies could be matched to workers who were actually capable of doing the job.

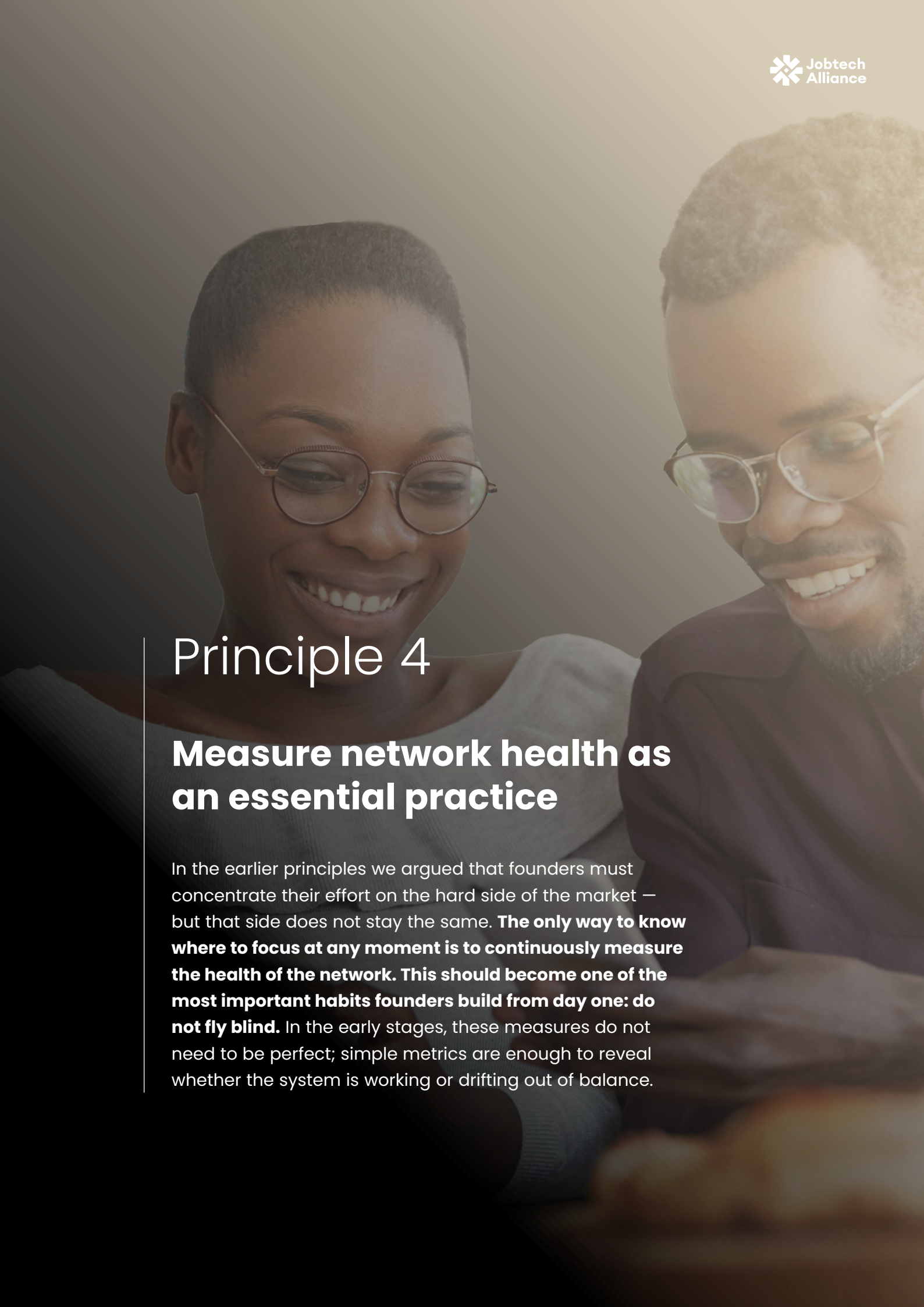
To win early customers, Instollar went further, delivering the first installations for free to prove competence and reliability before moving to commercial contracts. Strong service delivery for anchor clients such as SunKing became a powerful trust signal that unlocked broader demand.

At the same time, Instollar was looking to build trust on the supply side by preventing a winner-takes-all dynamic. The platform deliberately allocates simpler or lower-skill tasks to junior technicians, while more complex jobs go to senior ones, so that newer workers stay in the earning cycle. Weekly job distribution and earnings are monitored to avoid overserving a small group of technicians; once someone has picked up several gigs in a week, new work is routed to others unless proximity or skill requirements make that impossible.

Instollar also tracks earnings against benchmarks. While it is yet to achieve its goal, the aim is for active technicians to earn around twice the minimum wage. These targets will then guide allocation decisions. Free training and an active peer community give technicians value even when demand is slower, reinforcing confidence that the platform will deliver opportunities over time.

The platform deliberately allocates simpler or lower-skill tasks to junior technicians, while more complex jobs go to senior ones, so that newer workers stay in the earning cycle.

As the business matured, Instollar also evolved its model to reinforce trust. The team moved away from a search-style marketplace, where companies pick individual technicians, after learning that solar firms did not want to manage workers themselves. Instead, Instollar shifted to a match-based model with standardised expectations, centralised allocation, and clear performance criteria. This strengthened trust on both sides at once: companies could rely on consistent, vetted service, and technicians could rely on fair, predictable access to work.



Principle 4

Measure network health as an essential practice

In the earlier principles we argued that founders must concentrate their effort on the hard side of the market — but that side does not stay the same. **The only way to know where to focus at any moment is to continuously measure the health of the network. This should become one of the most important habits founders build from day one: do not fly blind.** In the early stages, these measures do not need to be perfect; simple metrics are enough to reveal whether the system is working or drifting out of balance.

User growth on its own is a poor signal of whether a marketplace is healthy. Total sign-ups, total users, or even average revenue per user (ARPU) can all look strong while the underlying network is deteriorating. A platform can have thousands of registered workers but most of them never get work. ARPU can remain high even when 80% of workers earn nothing because the top 20% skew the average. These vanity metrics give the illusion of scale while masking a breakdown in liquidity. Network effects only exist when both sides are benefiting from each other. What really matters is network health, not just growth.

Network health metrics make the hard side of the market visible. Low utilisation combined with low and irregular earnings points to too much supply chasing too little demand. Low fulfilment rates and long match times signal that there is not enough usable supply. Highly uneven earnings distributions are an early warning sign of winner-takes-all dynamics. This data is the diagnostic engine of the marketplace, allowing founders to see when liquidity is forming and when it is starting to break.

Setting explicit engagement and earnings benchmarks is especially important. Workers make participation decisions based on whether they believe the platform will provide stable and worthwhile income. For micro-earners in particular, we have seen that regular, predictable earnings can matter more than occasional high spikes. By defining target utilisation and earnings floors, founders can tell whether the supply side is truly thriving or quietly failing.

Many platforms track the number of "active users," but often define "active" as completing a single job per month (or similar). In practice, users rarely return if one job is not enough to generate meaningful or predictable earnings. **Measuring activity this way creates a false sense of health: the platform appears active, while users quietly disengage because the experience does not meet their earning expectations.** Without these benchmarks, it is easy to misread growth as success while the core of the marketplace erodes. Network health metrics exist to prevent this mistake: they tell you whether the marketplace is actually working for the people who rely on it.

Using network health metrics to keep the marketplace in balance: **EqualReach**

EqualReach connects businesses to digital service providers, with a requirement that delivery teams include 50-70% refugee talent. This immediately narrowed its supply base: it was not just sourcing freelancers, but organisations capable of delivering high-quality B2B work, while also meeting inclusion criteria. In the early phase, the team focused on building demand: securing their first five to ten clients and learning exactly what those clients needed before building a platform.

A small group of strong performers were winning most projects, while newer or refugee-led teams were rarely selected. This was not a demand problem but a supply readiness problem.

As demand stabilised, the constraint shifted to supply quality. Some agencies were experienced, credible and easy to sell to clients, while others struggled with the basics of B2B work — case studies, pricing, and compelling proposals. Simply adding more teams did not solve this; what mattered was whether teams could actually win and deliver work. Utilisation and proposal win-rate data made this visible. A small group of strong performers were winning most projects, while newer or refugee-led teams were rarely selected. This was not a demand problem but a supply readiness problem. Without intervention, opportunity would increasingly concentrate among a few teams.

By tracking these patterns, EqualReach's team could see exactly where the bottleneck lay. Its leadership realised many teams were not failing on technical ability but on how they presented and packaged their work for clients. This insight led them to strengthen and standardise vetting and onboarding, and to introduce town halls and peer learning to spread what top teams were doing well. Metrics have become not just a reporting tool, but a work-in-progress management system that is allowing EqualReach to identify bottlenecks, test interventions, and make more deliberate tactical shifts.

Winning tactics: turning network health into a management discipline

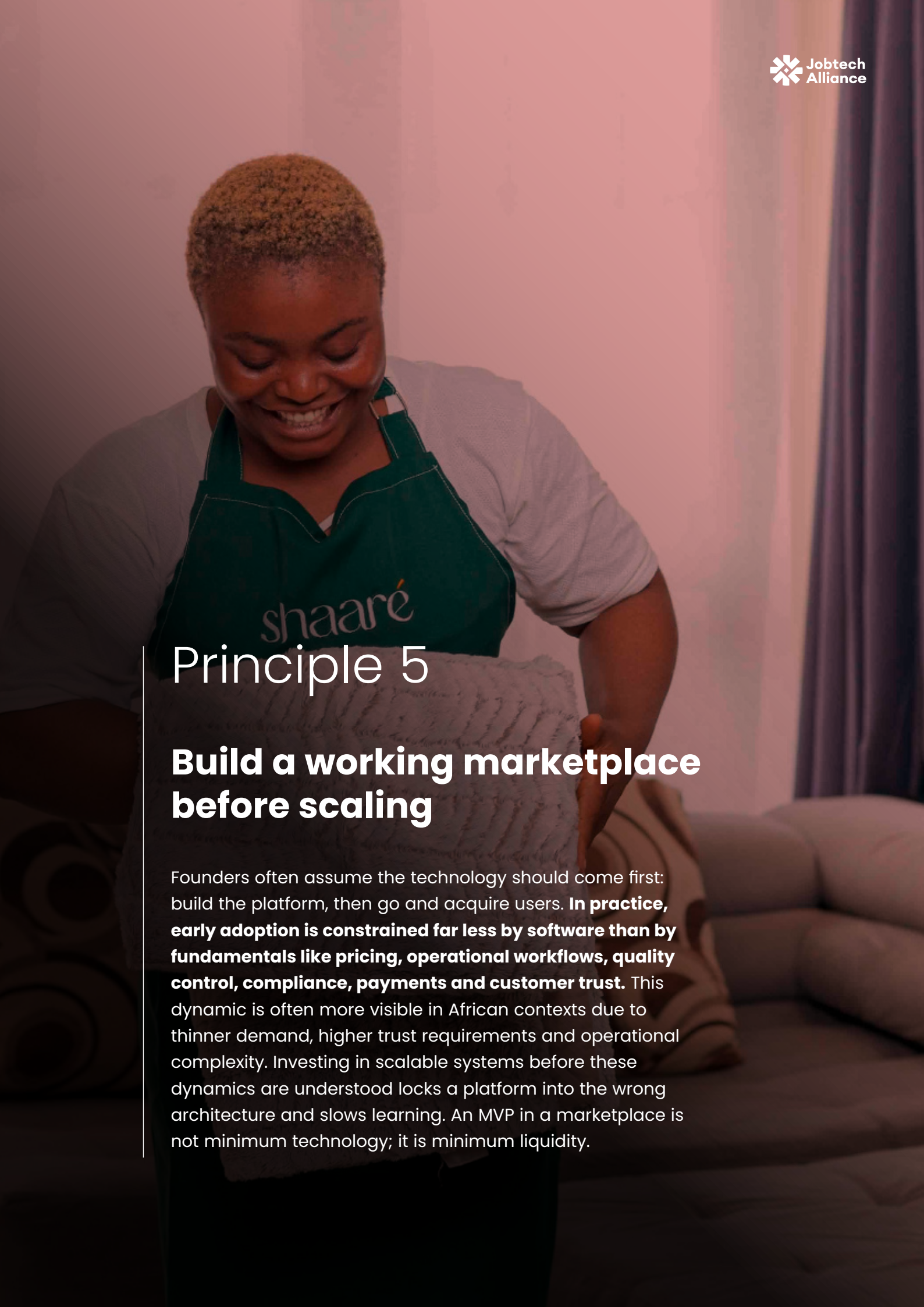
- **Set explicit engagement and earnings benchmarks early.** Minimum number of jobs per worker per week, target fulfilment rates, and acceptable match times provide a concrete definition of what "healthy" looks like.
- **Track distributions, not just averages**. Monitoring how many workers actually get work, how concentrated earnings are, and how many customers return is more productive than relying on total users or ARPU.
- **Build a simple, always-on dashboard.** Even off-the-shelf tools can track fulfilment, match time, utilisation, earnings regularity and repeat demand. Review it weekly with the leadership team.
- **Use these metrics to guide everyday decisions.** Pause supply onboarding when utilisation drops, invest in quality when repeat demand falls, or push customer acquisition when workers are idle, instead of simply reacting to anecdotes or top-line growth.

Metrics to consider tracking on the **supply side:**

- **Utilisation rates** and, if relevant, **proposal win rates** show how often workers get work.
- **Earnings per worker** and, critically, **earnings regularity** show whether participation is economically meaningful.
- **Churn** patterns reveal when workers start to disengage after long periods without jobs.

Metrics to consider tracking on the **demand side:**

- **Fulfilment rates** show how often jobs are successfully matched
- **Time to match** signals whether supply is becoming a bottleneck
- **Repeat usage** reflects customer trust
- **Customer satisfaction** indicates whether quality is holding.



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Principle 5

Build a working marketplace before scaling

Founders often assume the technology should come first: build the platform, then go and acquire users. **In practice, early adoption is constrained far less by software than by fundamentals like pricing, operational workflows, quality control, compliance, payments and customer trust.** This dynamic is often more visible in African contexts due to thinner demand, higher trust requirements and operational complexity. Investing in scalable systems before these dynamics are understood locks a platform into the wrong architecture and slows learning. An MVP in a marketplace is not minimum technology; it is minimum liquidity.

This is why early-stage marketplaces almost always need high-touch, manual and sometimes messy operations to get working. Concierge-style matching, manual onboarding, hands-on quality checks and direct customer support are not inefficiencies - they are how trust is built and how the first version of the network starts to function. More importantly, they allow a platform to discover what must work in order to scale. Before a marketplace is stable, automation cannot substitute missing fundamentals. Once those fundamentals are understood, automation is what allows them to be replicated, accelerated and expanded.

By being close to every match, every failed fulfilment, every payment issue and every complaint, founders learn what really matters, where friction lies, and what needs to be designed into the eventual automated system. **That learning is what should shape the next phase of growth, when capacity, speed and geographic or category expansion become viable.**

Automating too early simply hard-codes the wrong assumptions into the platform. High-touch processes often surface barriers that would otherwise remain invisible, such as women dropping out because onboarding takes place at unsafe times or in inaccessible locations, or because payment and compliance rules are misaligned with how women actually work. **Catching these frictions early is far easier when operations are still manual.**

shaaré Putting quality first, scale later: **Shaaré**

Shaaré is a cleaning-services marketplace connecting customers to vetted cleaners (called Sparklers) in Nigeria. From the outset, the team focused on understanding what customers needed in order to use the service - what would make them comfortable booking someone to come into their home. This shaped early choices about vetting, training, professionalism and service standards, before the team invested in technology or growth. The goal at this stage was not scale, but to make sure the service actually worked in the real world.

That led to a brutal commitment to supply quality. Shaaré built a multi-step vetting and onboarding funnel, filtering for experience, reliability and fit with their service standards. Many applicants dropped out along the way, but the ones who remained could consistently deliver the experience customers expected. This was essential to creating repeat demand and proving product–market fit. Without it, no amount of user growth would have mattered.

Only once this model was working consistently did Shaaré begin to shift toward scale. When Sparklers were earning above a clear benchmark and customers were coming back, the team knew the core marketplace was functioning. That is when the platform started moving from manual operations toward automation, including launching an instant-matching system to reduce friction and increase throughput.

Today, scaling for Shaaré means increasing capacity rather than expanding blindly. Its focus is on moving from roughly 120 bookings a day toward ten times that, while growing geography city-by-city instead of trying to cover multiple metropolitan areas at once — an early mistake that led to customer disappointment. The lesson Shaaré draws is simple: get the service working first, then use technology to replicate and expand what you know works.

Its focus is moving from **±120** bookings per day toward **10x** that amount

By tracking these patterns, EqualReach's team could see exactly where the bottleneck lay. Its leadership realised many teams were not failing on technical ability but on how they presented and packaged their work for clients. This insight led them to strengthen and standardise vetting and onboarding, and to introduce town halls and peer learning to spread what top teams were doing well. Metrics have become not just a reporting tool, but a work-in-progress management system that is allowing EqualReach to identify bottlenecks, test interventions, and make more deliberate tactical shifts.

Winning tactics: moving from a working marketplace to scale

Run the marketplace manually at first to learn what actually works:

- **Avoid building bespoke tech until you have validated real customer needs and the basic mechanics of matching, fulfilment, quality assurance and payments.** Use manual processes and off-the-shelf tools to simulate platform workflows and surface friction.
- **Do founder-led matching early to understand what actually makes a "good match".** Only turn this into algorithms once patterns are clear.
- **Observe the full customer and worker journey directly.** Speak to early users and manually monitor early jobs to catch quality and trust issues before they scale.

Use network health metrics to know when you are ready to scale:

- **Resist the temptation to grow by signing up users everywhere.** First prove that one bounded marketplace works reliably.
- **Look for signals that liquidity is stable and self-reinforcing, including:**
  - consistently high fulfilment rates
  - stable worker utilisation and earnings regularity
  - predictable match times
  - repeat demand and low churn on both sides

Let platform data guide where to scale next:

- **Use real-time activity data** to see where liquidity is already forming.
- **Track where single-player-mode users are active**, where organic demand requests come from, and where supply is logging in or waiting for work.
- **Read these signals** to identify pockets of latent liquidity that are more likely to succeed when you deliberately extend the marketplace there.