



# Your company may unwittingly be conducting business with human traffickers: How can you prevent this?

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## KEYWORDS

Human trafficking;  
Slavery;  
Supply chain;  
Corporate social responsibility;  
Human rights;  
Code of ethics

**Abstract** A new concern is beginning to gain notoriety in society: human trafficking. This issue, which can result in slavery, should concern businesses. Almost 30 million slaves exist globally today. The fact that human trafficking is a \$32 billion business indicates either indifference for human rights or an ignorance of the injustice occurring. Even though companies may be against the idea of human trafficking, they may not recognize that they could be contributing to this problem through their business operations and relationships. However, companies can exercise social responsibility by using their influence over suppliers and business partners to prohibit human trafficking. This article examines the extent to which companies are involved in combating human trafficking, and helps companies identify where they are at risk for involvement with human trafficking. Moreover, steps are suggested to prevent human trafficking from occurring within company operations and supply chains.

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## 1. Consider this

A poor, young girl gets on a bus with the promise that there is a job awaiting her. She is drugged and wakes up in a brothel. If she tries to escape or does not perform for customers, she is beaten and starved, possibly to death. At the end of the year, she may have endured multiple abortions as a result of being raped thousands of times (Bilheimer et al., 2011). In

an interview with a girl who had been rescued from a brothel, she described how customers were allowed to do whatever they wanted with her; no one came to help, no matter how loud she screamed. Human trafficking exists in part because there is a demand for the products and services connected to it. In some business dealings across the globe, paying for commercial sex is an acceptable form of entertainment for guests.

A 15-year-old boy, a school dropout, is recruited by a broker who promises him a good job. Instead, the boy is confined to a factory to work. He is given little food; is severely beaten, branded, or burned with cigarettes; and is allowed only a few hours of

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sleep each night. The boy is occasionally allowed to talk on the phone with his parents, but the factory owner is always present and threatening. Someone is keeping this factory in business by purchasing its products. Could it be your company?

In the United States, nine owners of convenience stores were arrested in 2013 for participating in human trafficking and oppressing dozens of people through forced labor in their stores. Human trafficking is more rampant than most people realize, and unbeknownst to you, it may be occurring in your business or your community. What businesses supplied products to these convenience stores? What vendors stocked the shelves? Did anyone notice employees who looked under-nourished, wouldn't look people in the eye, or seemed afraid? While there are laws against forced labor and human trafficking, Secretary of State John Kerry admits that millions of victims go unnoticed by law enforcement every year ("[Modern Day Slavery](#)," 2013).

The purpose of this article is to examine the extent to which corporations are involved in combating human trafficking and to help companies identify and avoid situations in which there is a potential for human trafficking.

## 2. Should human trafficking be included in corporate social responsibility?

Corporate social responsibility (CSR)—the duty companies have to society beyond their duty to stockholders—is in a continuous state of transformation ([Human Rights Council, 2011](#)). In 1998, the most common issues regarding CSR were community/civic involvement, the environment, education, and charity ([Esrock & Leichty, 1998](#)). Since then, the focus of CSR has broadened. In 2012, community and environment were still key issues, but additional concerns emerged pertaining to health and wellness, diversity, and ethics ([Smith & Alexander, 2013](#)).

CSR has evolved to include the ethical, legal, economic, and philanthropic expectations society has for businesses ([Carroll, 2010](#)). Furthermore, a new concern is beginning to gain widespread notice in society, thus emerging as an issue about which businesses should take note: human trafficking. Some governments have declared human trafficking as one of the worst abuses of human rights of our time ([Fukuda-Parr, 2003](#)). Public outcry and legislation have not been strong enough to abolish the human trafficking industry, but a problem of this magnitude requires the efforts of *all* participants in a civilized society: citizens, governments, and businesses.

## 3. Specifics of human trafficking

According to the United Nations Trafficking Protocol ([UNODC, 2014](#)), human trafficking represents the recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons by threat, coercion, force, abduction, or deception for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes prostitution, forced labor, slavery or similar practices, servitude, and the removal of organs. Human trafficking entails three basic elements: (1) the act of recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons; (2) the means employed, such as threat, coercion, force, abduction, or deception; and (3) the purpose of exploitation.

Other terms are used in connection with human trafficking: modern-day slavery, forced labor, and debt bondage. Common to all these terms is the idea that a person is being deprived of his or her freedom for the purpose of exploitation. Although human trafficking is often equated with slavery, they are not technically the same thing. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, slavery occurs when someone is legally owned by another person and is forced to work for that person without pay. Victims of human trafficking may not start out as property, but they may become slaves. In today's marketplace, a human being is an inexpensive commodity; the cost of a slave reached a record low of \$90 in 2011. With an increase in the world's population, especially in developing countries, there is a bountiful supply of 'slaveable' people ([Inocencio, 2011](#)).

Forced labor is estimated to be the largest category of human trafficking, with sexual exploitation ranking second ([Farrell, 2012](#)). An estimated 50% of human trafficking victims are children ([U.S. Department of State, 2004](#)), and almost 70% of children involved in sexual exploitation are between the ages of 1 and 10 years old ([Enough Is Enough, 2013](#)). Children are in demand for pornographic websites, often in highly abusive scenarios. In addition to labor and sexual exploitation, children may be used in beggars' networks or for the brutal act of forcibly removing their organs for sale. Victims may be lured in or abducted and then sold into bondage, or daughters and sons may be sold by parents who are either deceived or hard-hearted.

The [Global Slavery Index \(2013\)](#) provides information regarding the number of slaves within countries globally and the amount of human trafficking occurring in and out of each. The actual number of slaves in the world is hard to measure because it depends upon the goals of each researcher and the definition they use for slavery. However, according to the Global Slavery Index published by the Walk Free Foundation—the goal of which is to end slavery—there are

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