

# The end of dangerous working conditions starts with informed consumers

November 8 2019, by Patrick Neumann and Cory Searcy

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Halloween has just passed and your kids are probably still polishing off

this year's candy haul. As recently reported in the *Washington Post*, there's a good chance that some of those chocolate [treats were made using child labour](#). Would knowing that change your mind about purchasing that product?

What about reports of [beatings and abuse](#) of Bangladeshi textile workers sewing clothes destined for our closets? Should companies that produce goods responsibly be identified? How can consumers make the right choices?

Work causes more than [2.1 million deaths globally every year](#), whether it's due to the child labour used in the production of cacao or electronics, or [contract food preparation workers dying on the job in Canada](#). The costs of work-related injuries account for about [four percent of the total world GDP](#).

In fact, studies have shown that the costs of workplace injuries are on par with those of [all cancers combined](#). A survey of more than 5,000 workers in Québec has found that [one in five are suffering](#) from work-related musculoskeletal pain, particularly shoulder and back pain, with women being affected in greater numbers than men.

Workplace injuries also [erode companies' profits](#). And this doesn't begin to address the cost of mental health issues associated with work.

Working environments should not cause pain and injury in employees—it's bad for business.

## **Consumers also to blame**

Bad work environments, and their associated burnout, injury, pain and fatalities, plague workplaces around the world. While it's tempting to blame companies for egregious working situations, consumers should also look in the mirror.

Companies will provide you with goods according to your demands. If you don't demand products made under good working conditions, then the all-too-common status quo —dangerous, dirty and demeaning conditions —is what you are supporting with your purchases.

[Our research](#) has shown that consumers, when asked, would prefer goods made in favorable working environments. When we interviewed millennials, they expressed a [willingness to pay 17.5 percent more](#) on a \$100 product for goods made under healthy conditions than those that are not. The main barrier noted in this research is access to trustworthy information about the working environments in production.

When we examined how 100 companies listed on the Toronto Stock Exchange are currently reporting on their working environments, we find almost [900 different indicators](#) reported, with almost no organizations using the same indicators in their reports. This makes it virtually impossible for a responsible consumer, or a [company](#) seeking a responsible supplier, to compare practices and make informed choices. A standard for reporting is needed.

Recently the Canadian Standards Association has begun to lay the groundwork needed [to create a standard providing advice and guidance](#) to help companies report on their working environments in a consistent and comparable manner.

When you consider the complexity of characterizing all of the physical, mental, environmental and social dimensions of a [workplace](#), it's clear that creating a consistent reporting approach remains a challenge. Further work is needed.

## **Demonizing not enough**

Demonizing companies with poor working conditions and operational

practices is not enough. We also need to support companies with good track records and work to foster favorable environments in our own workplaces. For companies trying to communicate the quality of their workplaces, [there is a need for clear guidance](#) of what and how to report.

Without good reporting, consumers won't trust companies, and the potential for consumers to become socially responsible disappears. Furthermore, a reporting standard would give companies with stellar workplaces a credible means to demonstrate their leadership to clients and customers.

There is a growing awareness that we, as consumers, can influence broad issues like climate change just by making smarter choices about where we spend our money. This is equally true for the working conditions of the people who produce our food and manufacture our products.

But we have not yet reached the tipping point of public opinion—and employees around the world are still literally [dying for a paycheck](#).

Work shouldn't hurt. The food we eat and the products we use should not be made in pain or contribute to human misery. While companies hold some blame, so do [consumers](#) who willfully avoid dealing with the consequences of their purchasing decisions.

Access to reliable information on working conditions needs standardized reporting, and Canada is well-positioned to show leadership on this issue.

Without clear reporting, how are we to know about the conditions our food and goods are made in? Let's make sure the chocolate we buy leaves no bitter aftertaste.

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