Be Part of the Solution – How Your Business Can Help End Child Labor

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For many, Labor Day weekend marks the end of the summer season and one last long weekend to soak up the warm weather before getting the kids back to school and otherwise preparing for a busy fall.

Few of us pause to acknowledge the origin of Labor Day, a federal holiday created by Congress in 1894 to recognize and celebrate the social and economic achievements of American workers and remind us of the need to protect the rights, health and safety of the workforce.

The need to protect workers' rights persists 130 years later, along with the need to re-focus on a problem that needs to be eradicated once and for all: the scourge of child labor.

It's a crisis I've been working to solve for nearly 30 years, beginning when I was 12 years old and launched a small children's charity that grew surprisingly large called Free The Children, which focussed on freeing enslaved children forced to work in factories in Pakistan and India.

Despite some progress over the years, the data on the number of children being deprived of an education and forced to put their physical and mental development at risk remains alarming.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there are over 160 million children (those between 5 and 17)

engaged in child labor. The numbers are highest in the least developed countries, with 23% of children in those countries forced into work.

The agriculture sector accounts for 70% of children in child labor (112 million), followed by 20% in services (31.4 million) and 10% in industry (16.5 million).

Unsurprisingly, there is a direct correlation between poverty and the prevalence of child labor. When Free the Children began its work in southeast Asia, we helped to physically remove children from the unsafe factories where they worked. But all too often, we would find the same kids back in the same factory a few weeks later because their families needed the income to survive.

We realized then that we needed a holistic approach focused on the root causes of child labor – poverty. But throwing money at the problem would not solve it. Poor community health, a lack of access to clean water and food coupled with poor education options and a lack of employment opportunities for adults all contribute to situations in which children working was seen as the only solution.

To break the cycle, all the root causes must be addressed simultaneously. Economic opportunity for parents means families don't have to rely on their children working. Direct access to healthy food and clean water means children don't have to spend their days walking dozens of miles to obtain drinking water and food. Proper healthcare ensures a healthy community in which adults can work, and children can attend school and thrive.

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Addressing these issues on a village-by-village basis helps to mitigate child labor on a micro level within communities. However, on a global, macro level, businesses play the biggest

role in removing child labor from global supply chains.

The first step is acknowledging the problem and committing publicly to eliminating it. Global brands like IKEA and Costo have taken the lead in making such commitments.

IKEA has said that as global business it has a responsibility to demonstrate leadership by ensuring its own supply chain is free from child labor.

Costco has ramped up audits in countries that form part of its supply chain to ensure compliance with its Supplier Code of Conduct, which specifically prohibits child labor and only allows workers over the age of 18 to work in potentially hazardous conditions or with heavy machinery.

But it's not just billion-dollar companies that will be part of the solution. Companies of all sizes and sectors can do their part by taking concrete steps to help end child labor in their own operations and supply chains.

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Here are a few steps you can consider for your own business or organization:

1. **Become a member of the ILO's Child Labour Platform**: Join other member companies like Coca-Cola, Chanel, Samsung and IKEA in their commitment to ending child labor. Members gain access to tools, events, workshops and partnerships with other businesses to help them identify, prevent and remediate child labor in their supply chains. Even if you don't formally join, the ILO website offers multiple resources to help educate and address child labor.
2. **Conduct a due diligence audit:** These audits can help you understand where to look within your supply chain and what to watch for. If you make clothes, you can work to

ensure that children do not pick the cotton you use. If you are in agriculture, you can conduct age verification audits or work to verify that children are not exposed to harmful pesticides.

3. **Hire young people into appropriate roles:** There's nothing wrong with a 16-year-old getting their first job. In North America, that might be serving ice cream in a retail shop or checking tickets at the movie theatre. It's important to know the distinction between that kind of job for a younger person and child labor, which the ILO defines child labor as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.

Try to create roles at your company, like student internships or summer jobs, that allow younger people to save for college or buy a car in a safe environment doing age-appropriate work.

While these may seem like small steps, every impact helps in the global fight against the permanent elimination of child labor. As you enjoy the Labor Day holiday, consider going into fall by making a pledge for your company to be part of the solution.

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