

Issue of modern slavery needs urgent action to reduce growth

3 years ago



The latest [Ethical Business report](#) from [Achilles](#) shows that millions of people are affected by modern slavery and the numbers are continuing to grow.

Having focused on the issue of modern slavery for some time, Achilles has published the latest version of its Ethical Business report showing the issue is continuing to affect more people around the world.

The company states that it is estimated that almost 50m people live in modern slavery around the world, with just under 28m being in forced labour. These figures demonstrate that modern slavery continues to impact many people globally, highlighting the need for businesses to ensure the ethical treatment of people in their direct employment, and those working within their supply chains.

Poor ethical employment practices vary in severity from the most critical forms of modern slavery such as human trafficking to poor working conditions and employment practices which potentially affect an even larger group of workers. Many industries have been highlighted as being associated with modern slavery.

The [latest Achilles report](#) highlights significant findings identified during the company's Ethical Site Surveys conducted across Europe which cover construction, infrastructure, distribution and retail sectors; it has been compiled using anonymised data from 4,396 confidential worker interviews that its team has carried out. Ethical Site Surveys have provided valuable insight into employment practices across Europe.

Using this insight, the company is able to work closely with its clients and partners to understand the employment practices of individual companies within the supply chain through the implementation of the company's Ethical Employment Audit, an important element of its Ethical Business Programme.

Three main issues were highlighted in the Achilles 2021 report including eligibility to work, wage reductions and the provision of terms and conditions of employment and these continue to provide major cause of concern. The company explains that 35% of companies had not requested or verified appropriate right-to-work documentation in the 2023 study. This shows an increase of 9% since the publication of its previous report.

The report also reveals that 16% of workers had experienced deductions of up to £80 of their weekly wage via a range of administrative methods, a reduction of 1% based on its previous findings showing a small improvement since 2021.

The third area of concern is that 36% of individuals interviewed advised that their terms and conditions of employment had either not been provided or had been communicated verbally. Whilst not questioned at an individual level, the high percentage correlates with the company's 2021 Ethical Employment Audit finding where 11% of audited companies had not communicated employment terms with indirectly employed labour.

Achilles states that whilst the findings above do not directly indicate instances of modern slavery, they demonstrate that there continues to be a high prevalence of poor ethical employment standards that may lead to more serious cases of exploitation. Despite UK legislation being introduced in 2015 to prevent modern slavery and many companies having policy statements, there continues to be a disconnect between policy commitment and implementation, the company states.

Companies are continuing to fail to collect appropriate right-to-work documentation within the construction industry in the United Kingdom. Achilles found that a reliance was frequently placed on third parties to conduct checks such as labour agencies or payroll companies and its report found that 65% of workers who presented recognised right to work documentation, but 35% had not been asked to supply this and 5% of those included had not been required to present any documentation before starting work.

The company states that reliance on third parties places more risk on the correct processes not being followed. Employers should verify hiring processes of agency providers and conduct their own follow-up checks during site inductions. Survey data suggests that there has been an increase in UK nationals engaged in construction projects, but Achilles states that checks should still be carried out regardless of nationality.

Almost half (46%) of the people contacted reported not being directly employed by the contractor they were working for on site. Many of the individuals employed via third parties or acting as self-employed workers reported receiving administrative deductions, with 16% receiving non-standard deductions.

Achilles suggests that employers should aim to reduce deductions – which can amount to more than 10% of workers' wages – with many individuals stating they had not been made aware of these before starting work. Companies should also ensure that these deductions do not take wages below the National Minimum Wage or other relevant guideline requirements.

Another area of consideration highlighted by the report is that many workers are engaged at short notice and this results in a lack of documented information being provided. While a number of those included in the survey stated they were aware of general arrangements, the lack of information did not compound issues around wage deductions and right-to-work document checks.

The company states: “Many companies that we audited in 2021 expected third parties to provide information to workers or to conduct checks on behalf of themselves. This assumption has led to gaps which impact individuals as well as potentially having legal ramifications on an organisation. Our 2022 focus on the voice of the worker clearly demonstrates that the failings at company level are being felt by the individual.

“The gaps identified during our Ethical Site Surveys are consistent across industries and the countries we’ve visited,” the company continues. “Without a review of the robustness of engagement processes with third parties and clear communication of expectations, it is likely the story will continue to be repeated. Sharing of best practice across industries will provide the opportunity for companies with gaps to improve their processes. Using the voice of those on-site to guide better processes which ensure fair treatment and employment practices.”

The focus on capturing the voice of workers in 2022 has re-emphasised the issues that were raised during Ethical Employment Audits in 2021 and continues to demonstrate that there are gaps in the way workers are employed across the UK and Europe. Although they do not necessarily present an immediate threat to an individual or a case of modern slavery, they open doors which enable individuals to be exploited.

Findings from the 2022 Ethical Site Surveys provide better insight into the failings that are occurring in the supply chain. In June 2022 Norway introduced the Norwegian Transparency Act as a means of legislating increased risk assessment and due diligence to prevent modern slavery in the supply chain and other countries are expected to follow suit.

Additional challenges include the changing demographic of the workforce, geopolitical tensions, changes in migration patterns and an aging population have left some industries with recruitment issues. This leads to the potential for more unethical practices to be adopted, the company states. Ensuring that effective work planning is maintained in conjunction with robust recruitment processes that a detailed overview of an individual's employment rights needs to be a main focus for all employers.

Job descriptions and methods to report improper practice are key, along with communication within each supply chain and across industry through collaborative methods to better educate people on minimum standards and how to ensure ethical employment.

The Achilles report is designed for use by all sectors to both highlight the existing and potential issues and encourage more employers to adopt ethical means of working.