

On Worker Well-Being—Suggestions for the Electronics Industry

On 12 November 2018, two days prior to the public release of the Economic Rights Institute and Electronics Watch [study](#) on the link between employment conditions and employee suicide in China's electronics industry, the Responsible Business Alliance announced a new [initiative](#) to improve “worker well-being” in manufacturing supply chains in Asia. The timing was not coincidence. Six months prior to this announcement, ERI and Electronics Watch sent their study to electronics companies to request comments and build support for a collective effort to reduce the risk of employee suicides. Following months of discussion of extensive comments on the study by prominent electronics firms, the industry publicized its new initiative on workers’ “quality of life.” This new effort represents a visibly bigger investment, a larger number of firms involved, and a widening of the scope of the issues under review than previous industry initiatives in this area.

Together with the findings of the study, ERI and Electronics Watch issued a “[call to action](#)” for a multi-stakeholder taskforce to develop, implement, and monitor an action plan to effectively address employment conditions that heighten the risk of employee suicide in the electronics sector. We drew particular attention to high risk conditions including:

- “Soft” forms of forced labour, including forced overtime and restrictions of workers’ right to resign from their jobs without forfeiting their wages.
- Punitive forms of discipline.
- Hostility and violence in the workplace.
- The repression of workers’ collective voice to influence enterprise decisions connected to conditions that heighten risk of employee suicide, including productivity requirements, overtime and the structure of incentives.

Though RBA notes that their initiative “will seek input from health experts, researchers and civil society”, they rejected the multi-stakeholder approach suggested by ERI and Electronics Watch. Their worker well-being program is now proceeding without involvement from ERI and Electronics Watch.

We still hope a multi-stakeholder effort is possible and grounded in analysis of the original quantitative and qualitative data reviewed in our study. We therefore offer the following suggestions to RBA to guide its efforts:

The RBA initiative looks like it prioritizes the role of medical expertise to address questions of “health and wellness.” We urge the industry not to lose sight of the link between these issues and employment conditions. It is in this intersection where employment conditions risk workers’ well-being that improvement efforts should directly confront the, admittedly thorny, question of employers’ responsibilities to protect workers’ rights. Though medical experts deserve a prominent role in this effort, exploring the link between wellness and employment conditions will require prominent roles for experts in other fields, including sociology, the organization of work and workers’ rights.

The RBA initiative steers away from explicit mention of suicide to discuss worker “well-being.” This wider scope opens useful opportunities and promotes a positive mindset while driving needed improvements to employment conditions. However, efforts to promote “well-being” should include, and not be designed to substitute for, conscious efforts to explore and remedy links between employment conditions and suicide. The risks of suicide represent the risk of serious injury to workers. To the extent evidence links the likelihood of suicide to the more extreme problems of some work environments, which we believe it does, the effort to improve worker well-being should include conscious effort to define employers’ responsibilities, and the limits of those responsibilities, in explicit connection with suicide.

One of the first steps of the RBA initiative is a “comprehensive, industry-wide worker survey in the manufacturing sector.” Such a survey can yield valuable knowledge. We urge the industry to build on the ERI and Electronics Watch study to test our hypotheses of specific links between employment conditions and employee well-being, and to work with civil society and sociological experts to administer the survey in a manner that allows workers to raise concerns, whether about their wellness or working conditions, without fear of reprisals.

Another step of the RBA initiative is to “improve grievance and reporting mechanism tools.” This step has the potential to address key conditions that we believe heighten the risk of employee suicide, hostility and violence in the workplace. If done thoroughly, this work could open the door to more comprehensive and enduring efforts to prevent employee suicide by involving workers in collective decisions. We urge the industry to work with qualified experts and civil society organisations to ensure grievance and reporting mechanisms are not just set up to serve individual workers to express their dispersed concerns to companies. We urge the industry to consider going further to support systems of joint problem solving that give workers constructive, collective influence on enterprise decisions that would otherwise pose serious risks to workers’ well-being.

“Enhancing worker-management training curriculum and tools,” another component of the RBA initiative, could also become a step in the right direction. For example, if this training includes worker-management dialogue training that inculcates management respect for workers and trains workers on their rights and how to bargain with management to improve conditions in the workplace, these trainings could help to strengthen workers’ voices, which RBA also states are a “key element” in advancing worker well-being.

It is understandably more challenging for companies to shift from charitable efforts to promote the individual wellness of workers to the wider issues of employers’ responsibilities in connection with production and employment relations. This deeper work is more likely to require critically examining business practices and systems to hold suppliers accountable for labour rights issues that harm workers. We still hope the industry is ready for this challenge.