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A Review of the Leading Information Technology Companies' Modern Slavery Statements

By Peter Jones* & Daphne Comfort[±]

Modern slavery is an insidious problem in many sectors of the global economy, and it poses a challenge for the information technology industry. However, the issue of modern slavery in the information technology industry has received little or no attention in the business and management literature and this paper looks to provide an exploratory review of one of the ways in which the leading information and communication technology companies have addressed this issue, by reviewing their modern slavery statements. The findings reveal that five interlinked themes, namely, corporate commitment; risk assessments and due diligence in supply chains; codes of conduct; awareness, capability building, and training; and future plans and key performance indicators illustrated the spirit of the selected companies' modern slavery statements. Identifying and tackling the risk of modern slavery within supply chains presents the major challenges for the information technology companies, and the paper concludes that the leading technology companies' modern slavery statements can be best seen as a work in progress.

Keywords modern slavery, modern slavery statements, leading information technology companies, supply chains, auditing

Introduction

Modern Slavery, simply defined as “the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain” (Anti-Slavery International 2021a) is an insidious problem in many sectors of the global economy. More specifically, KnowTheChain (2018), a resource for businesses and investors who need to understand and address forced labor abuses within their supply chains, suggested that “the information and communications technology sector is at high risk of forced labor”. While Caruana et al. (2020) argued that modern slavery offers “potential for innovative theoretical and empirical pathways to a range of business and management research questions”, they suggested that the “development into what we might call a “field” of modern slavery research in business and management remains significantly, and disappointingly, underdeveloped”.

The issue of modern slavery in the information technology industry has received little or no attention in the business and management literature and this paper looks to provide an exploratory review of one of the ways in which the leading information technology companies have addressed this issue by reviewing their modern slavery statements. As such, this paper looks to contribute to addressing a gap in the academic literature on modern slavery and will hopefully stimulate future research in the field. The paper includes an introduction to modern slavery and modern slavery statements, a brief discussion of the challenges for research on modern slavery and of some of the relevant academic literature in this field, a description of the frame of reference and method of enquiry, an exploratory review of the modern slavery statements developed by the world's leading information technology companies, some reflections on these statements.

Modern Slavery and Modern Slavery Statements

There are many definitions of slavery and modern slavery and Allain and Bales (2012) argued “the very term slavery and its contours are contested”. Mende (2019) argued that there “is no single definition of the scope and form of modern slavery”, but that “a certain image of modern slavery” can be identified, and that “this image can be summarised by three denominators”, namely “the control of a person over another”, “an involuntary aspect in their relation”, and “the element of exploitation”. For Manzo (2006), “the constituent elements of modern slavery are identified as control without ownership; violence (or the threat of violence); coercion (loss of freedom and choice); and exploitation (of labour power through unpaid work)”. Landman and Silverman (2019) drew attention to the “Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery” which emphasised “the notion of control and the lack of agency for victims of slavery, where different forms of coercion maintain power over individuals and prevent them from leaving the conditions of their enslavement”.

Landman and Silverman (2019) suggested that “popular understandings of slavery often conjure up images of African slaves brought to the Caribbean, Brazil and the US, where such images typically include slave ships, slaves bound in chains and slaves auctioned at market”, but that “such imagery tends to obscure current realities of slavery and relegate it as a problem of the past”. However, far from being a relic of a bygone era, Landman and Silverman (2019) argued that “slavery is alive and well and that it has taken on new forms or updated old forms, comprising a variety of practices that include debt bondage, domestic servitude, forced prostitution, forced labour, forced marriage and human trafficking”. Debt bondage, for

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example, perhaps the most widespread form of modern slavery, occurs where people trapped in poverty borrow money, and are forced into work to pay off the debt, and in so doing, lose control over their employment conditions, and the original debt. Human trafficking, involves the use of violence, threats, or coercion to transport, and often to recruit or harbour people, for labour, forced prostitution or marriage.

Bannerjee (2020) suggested that while slavery is a crime under international law, it remains “a viable and profitable management practice for business”, and that “modern slavery, far from being an aberration, is a logical outcome of the way our political economic system is organized and its historical origins in the colonial system”. Conservative estimates put the number of victims of modern slavery at over 40 million (International Labour Office 2017), with the annual profits from modern slavery estimated to be some US\$ 150 billion (International Labour Office 2014). Geographically, National Geographic (2016) suggested that India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan have the largest number of slaves, while the percentage of the total population in slavery is highest in North Korea, Uzbekistan, Cambodia, India and Qatar.

A number of governments, as well as a wide range of national and international organisations, have been active in looking to tackle the issue of modern slavery. Some of the major political initiatives to tackle modern slavery have focused on urging large companies to address modern slavery both within large own operations, and arguably more importantly, in their supply chains. In 2015 the UK Government, for example, pioneered this approach in introducing the Modern Slavery Act, described as “the most far reaching global legislation on forced labour and human trafficking” (KnowTheChain 2018). This legislation required all organisations with an annual turnover in excess of £36 million, to produce an annual modern slavery statement, setting out the steps they had taken to prevent modern slavery in their businesses and supply chains. Here the challenge is for businesses is to take serious and effective steps to identify, and root out, modern slavery and all businesses were encouraged to be vigilant and to focus on continuous improvement. More recently a small number of other countries have also introduced legislation to tackle modern slavery within supply chains. In 2018 Australia, for example, introduced a Modern Slavery Bill, modelled in part on the UK legislation, which included prescribed criteria for corporate modern slavery statements.

More specifically, the UK’s 2015 Modern Slavery Act gave law enforcement agencies a variety of provisions to tackle modern slavery including a maximum life sentence in prison for perpetrators and enhanced protection for victims. Under the terms of the 2015 legislation, while all organisations are not expected to guarantee that all of their operations and supply chains are free from slavery, their modern slavery statements must describe the steps the organisation has taken during the financial year in question to address modern slavery risks. The Government’s statutory guidance recommended that modern slavery statements should include information on the organisation’s structure and supply chains, its policies on slavery and human trafficking, risk assessment and due diligence processes, training, and key performance indicators. In July 2018, the UK Government commissioned an independent review of the 2015 legislation to examine if its provisions should be strengthened. Following this review, the Government announced it planned to introduce binding rules on the content, timing, and publication of modern slavery statements, and possibly to introduce a single enforcement body to oversee compliance.

Research Challenges and Literature Review

To date, modern slavery in the information technology industry has attracted no attention in the academic business and management literature. In part, this may reflect a reluctance within the industry, and its supply chains, to permit researchers access to documentation and decision makers to allow them to pursue research investigations into modern slavery. Denying access for such research may reflect commercial sensitivities and/or fears about essentially publicly unspoken corporate concerns about employee recruitment and labour practices within supply chains, and attendant fears of damaging publicity, and possibly criminal prosecution, if modern slavery practices are explicitly revealed. In part the lack of published research on modern slavery within the information technology industry may also reflect researchers’ fears for their personal safety if looking to undertake research, in settings where illegal, and criminal activity may be commonplace, and then publish their research findings. Here covert approaches might seem to offer a way forward, but such approaches are unlikely to offer genuine security in an environment where anxiety, suspicion, and the threat of physical violence, may be rife.

While the issue of modern slavery in the information technology industry, has yet to receive attention in the business and management literature, three strands of literature, namely general approaches to modern slavery, modern slavery in large companies’ supply chains, and theoretical approaches to the study of modern slavery, merit attention. While Crane (2014) recognised that “scant attention has been paid to the phenomenon of modern slavery in the management literature”, he looked to “redress this by identifying modern slavery as a management practice comprising exploiting/insulating capabilities and sustaining/shaping capabilities”. Further, he presented a model which demonstrated “how these microorganization-level capabilities enable enterprises that deploy slavery to take advantage of the macroinstitutional conditions that permit the practice to flourish in the face of widespread illegality and illegitimacy”.

Phung and Crane (2019) explored the role of a range of “business perspectives”, including human resource management, organizational and strategic management and supply chain management, in illuminating the practice of modern slavery. In a similar vein, Caruana et al. (2020) outlined research on modern slavery within the business and management discipline. While

the authors recognised that the supply chain management literature “had paid more attention to modern slavery than any other subdisciplines of business and management”, Caruana et al. (2020), also identified work on modern slavery in a number of other fields including strategy, accounting, human resource management, strategic inventory management, and marketing. In focussing on marketing, for example, Caruana et al. (2020) outlined the role of marketing communications in leveraging consumer activism about modern slavery practices.

The most extensive work on modern slavery in the business and management literature has focused on supply chains. Stevenson and Cole (2018), for example, examined how organisations in the UK reported on the detection and remediation of modern slavery in their supply chains. Their work revealed many firms used the same practices to detect and remediate modern slavery as for other social issues, but that the hidden, criminal nature of modern slavery and the involvement of third-party labour agencies effectively demanded innovative investigative approaches. Gold et al. (2015) looked to draw attention to the challenges modern slavery posed for supply chain management and argued a lack of ineffective indicators meant that new tools and indicator systems should be developed to consider the specific social, cultural and geographical context of supply regions. At the same time, Gold et al. (2015) suggested that once incidences of modern slavery had been detected, then “multi-stakeholder partnerships, community-centred approaches and supplier development appear to be effective responses”.

Meehan and Pinnington (2021) looked to assess if transparency in companies’ supply chain statements indicated that substantive action was being taken to tackle modern slavery in supply chains. This research suggested that companies were using ambiguity in their supply chain statements “as a highly strategic form of action to defend the status quo, reduce accountability and delay action for modern slavery within supply chains”, and that this ambiguity, effectively “protects firms, rather than potential victims of modern slavery” (Meehan and Pinnington 2021). Benstead et al. (2020) investigated modern slavery detection and remediation in supply chains via an action research case study in the textiles and fashion industry.

On the conceptual side, Gold et al. (2015) called for new theory development to facilitate the understanding of modern slavery, and while Caruana et al. (2020) suggested that modern slavery presented many opportunities for novel theory building, they concluded that existing theories were limited in their ability to conceptualise modern slavery. That said, Bales (2006) looked to build a “theory of modern or contemporary slavery through a set of assertions concerning the impact of global demographic and economic change on the nature of the slavery relationship over the past fifty to sixty years”. Manzo (2006) proposed an alternative approach to that adopted by Bales, which she classified as being drawn from “Marxian or neo-Marxian political economy”. Here the key themes were commodity production and trade, labour costs within a hierarchical division of labour, unequal terms of trade, capitalist expansion vis commodification and economic liberalisation, and the varied and uneven effects of the worldwide expansion of capitalism.

At the corporate level, three sets of theoretical approaches, namely institutional theory, stakeholder theory and contingency theory, merit attention. Flynn and Walker (2020) employed institutional theory, to explore how large companies were responding to modern slavery risks in their supply chains. Institutional theory was selected because Flynn and Walker (2020) argued that the transparency provision in the 2015 UK legislation represented institutional, rather than market, pressure on companies. Stevenson and Cole (2018) suggested that stakeholder theory offered potential for future research on modern slavery. Here, Stevenson and Cole (2018) argued that stakeholder theory was valuable in that while the primary audiences for modern slavery statements were external stakeholders, it was important for companies to consider what their modern slavery statements revealed to their suppliers. Gold et al. (2015) argued that research questions about modern slavery could be fruitfully framed by contingency theory and institutional theory. The former was seen to help to achieve a deeper appreciation of the importance of culture, geography, legislation, and regulation, while the latter could help in investigations of how, and why, modern slavery traders can continuously resist pressures to adopt more legitimate forms of business.

However, while modern slavery within the information technology industry offers a potentially rich variety of research opportunities, it is important to recognise that it is a very challenging research arena. While slavery is illegal in the vast majority of jurisdictions, it can also be a lucrative economic activity, and those individuals and organisations involved in modern slavery, human trafficking and bonded labour, will generally do all they can to hide, and maintain the secrecy of, their activities. Researchers who look to conduct primary research into modern slavery activities may be placing themselves, possibly their research colleagues, and those who participate in such research, in serious personal danger. Problems, and tactics designed to minimise such problems, are rarely addressed in the research literature but they may curtail many potentially promising modern slavery research agendas. At the same time, researchers may face a range of ethical issues, not least researchers’ responsibility to those who participate in their research. More generally, there are some guidelines for social science researchers looking to pursue hidden activities (e.g., Ellard-Gray et al. 2015), but researching modern slavery within the information technology industry seems fraught with difficulties and dangers.

Frame of Reference and Method of Enquiry

In looking to conduct a review of the leading information technology companies’ modern slavery statements, the authors

chose a simple method of enquiry, which they believe to be fit for purpose. The leading ten information technology companies, as listed by Alertify (2019), namely Microsoft, IBM, Oracle, Accenture, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, SAP, Tata Consultancy Services, Capgemini, Cognizant, and Infosys, were selected for investigation. In selecting these companies, to provide the framework for the review, the authors took the view that as leading players in the information technology industry, they might be seen to reflect good practice on modern slavery statements.

The vast majority of large companies post their policies on a wide range of issues on their corporate websites, so the authors undertook a series of Internet searches, using modern slavery statement and the name of each of the selected companies as key terms, on Google in June 2021. These searches revealed that all of the selected companies had published modern slavery statements, and the most recent modern slavery statements from the selected information technology companies provided the empirical material for this paper. As these statements are in the public domain on the selected companies' corporate websites, the authors took the view that they did not need to seek formal permission to use them. The modern slavery statements were relatively brief and clearly structured, and the authors felt that any form of content analysis would be unnecessary. Rather, the authors undertook a close reading of the statements and drew out the important themes. The paper draws extensively on selected quotations drawn from the selected companies' websites. The aim here, was to explore how the leading information technology companies publicly expressed, and evidenced, their approaches to tackling modern slavery. Here, the authors were of the opinion that an important way of capturing such approaches was to cite the selected companies' own words, not least in that such citations could convey corporate authenticity and offer greater depth of understanding.

Microsoft is a US multinational company, which develops, manufactures, licenses, supports and sells computer software, consumer electronics and personal computers. IBM is a US multinational technology, and consulting company, founded in 1910, with operations in over 170 countries. Oracle is a US multinational corporation, which sells data base software and technology, cloud engineered systems and software products. Accenture is a multinational company headquartered in Ireland, and its business operations span strategy, consulting, technology software, and business process outsourcing. Hewlett Packard Enterprise is a US multinational information technology company, and its operations include financial technology, computer software, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. SAP is a German multinational software corporation, with operations in over 180 countries. Tata Consultancy Services is an Indian multinational information technology services and consulting company. Capgemini is a French multinational corporation, which provides consulting, technology, professional, and outsourcing services. Cognizant is a US multinational corporation, which provides a range of digital, technology, operations, and consulting services. Infosys is an Indian multinational corporation, which provides business consulting, information technology and outsourcing services.

Findings

The scope and content of the modern slavery statements posted by the leading information technology companies varied, but rather than looking to describe each statement in detail, the authors looked to identify, and draw out, a number of general themes. More specifically, the authors identified five interlinked themes, namely corporate commitment; risk assessments and due diligence in supply chains; codes of conduct; awareness, capability building and training; and future plans and key performance indicators; which illustrated the selected companies' approaches to their modern slavery statements.

The information technology companies' corporate commitments were expressed in a variety of ways. For some companies, such corporate commitment was expressed specifically and succinctly, while for others it is seen as part of a much wider set of corporate social responsibility and human rights policies. In his "Preface" to Accenture's (2020), "Modern Slavery Act Transparency Statement 2020", Oliver Benzecry, the company's UK Chairman and Managing Director, for example, claimed "Accenture maintains a long-standing commitment to respecting human rights including the elimination of slavery and human trafficking in our supply chains and business operations". In a similar vein, Hewlett Packard Enterprises (2020) emphasised the company "is committed to combatting the risk of modern slavery in our global operations and supply chain", while Tata Consultancy Services (2020) reported "we are fully committed to the prevention of all forms of slavery, forced labour or servitude, child labour and human trafficking, both in our business and in our supply chains. We do not tolerate it". Infosys (2020) reported "we are committed to upholding human rights and the steps we have taken to ensure that slavery and human trafficking do not operate within our business and supply chain", while Cognizant (2019) claimed that the company "has a zero-tolerance approach to any form of modern slavery".

IBM's (2020) "Modern Slavery Act Transparency Statement 2020" was seen as part of the company's extensive approach to corporate social responsibility and corporate citizenship, though its statement included the commitment that "forced, bonded (including debt bondage) or indentured labour, involuntary or exploitative prison labour, slavery or trafficking of persons shall not be used". Microsoft's (2019) "Global Human Rights Statement" enshrined the company's commitment to a number of specific human rights instruments, which prohibit slavery, forced servitude and forced labour. More specifically Microsoft (2019) emphasised the company was "committed to our responsibilities to respect human rights across our operations and to

minimise the risk of modern slavery and human trafficking in our business and supply chains”.

Risk assessments offered some insights into the leading information technology companies’ perceptions of the location and scale of modern slavery within their industry. Here, the companies’ supply chains were seen as presenting the major risk of modern slavery. Oracle (2020), for example, reported its ongoing assessment of modern slavery risks within its supply chains and that its assessment procedures involved the identification of both Tier 1 suppliers, which sell their product directly to Oracle, and Tier 2 suppliers, which sell their product to a company that then sells the product to Oracle, and the identification of the risk factors related to all those suppliers. Further, Oracle (2020) reported commissioning both in house, and third-party, audits to assess “high risk suppliers” performances’ on modern slavery concerns. Such audits were reported to include factory tours, meetings with management, on site interviews, document reviews and assessments of dormitories, cafeterias, and wastewater treatment facilities.

Accenture (2020) reported that it assessed its overall modern slavery risk profiles in relation to its suppliers by referencing several factors including the geographical location of the supplier and the industry in which their suppliers operate. Microsoft (2019) claimed that “preventing modern slavery and human trafficking in our business and supply chains requires the engagement of key business units where we have determined there is a potential risk of human trafficking and forced labour”. More specifically, Microsoft suggested that US government advice was that the manufacture of electronics posed a risk for forced and child labour, and reported the company’s focus was on minimising the risk of modern slavery in its supply chains was focussed on their business units that supply electronic devices and servers. Further, Microsoft (2019) reported that “third part audits are conducted to ensure supplier and sub-tier conformance”, and that „suppliers must correct any identified nonconformance or risk termination of our Microsoft business relationship”.

Due diligence processes are reported as an important element of risk assessments in some of the selected information technology companies’ modern slavery statements. Capgemini (2020), for example, claimed “we have committed to conducting due diligence on all procurement policies to identify any area where Capgemini could be unintentionally putting pressure on our suppliers leading to modern slavery”. SAP (2020) reported “we conduct strict due diligence measures to ensure that our suppliers are not guilty or participating in any offenses relating to modern slavery or human trafficking”. Hewlett Packard Enterprise outlined its due diligence processes, which are an important element of its commitment to assessing and managing the risk of modern slavery. Here, Hewlett Packard Enterprise reported working to identify emerging risks of modern slavery in its supply chain at global, regional, and local levels, and as part of that process the company claimed to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, including employees at suppliers, industry bodies, governments and appropriate non-governmental organisations. Hewlett Packard Enterprise (2020) also reported that its “supplier risk evaluation”, designed to “to analyse the potential for practices that can lead to forms of modern slavery”, included “on-site social compliance audits”.

A number of the selected companies outlined a variety of codes of conduct designed to identify and prevent the incidence of modern slavery within their businesses and supply chains. Accenture (2020), for example, reported that the company required all its suppliers to comply with its global “Supplier Standards of Conduct”, which sets out the standards that “suppliers must adhere to particularly in relation to slavery and human trafficking”. More generally, Hewlett Packard Enterprise (2020) claimed its broad commitment to human rights was enshrined in its supplier, and its contingent worker, codes of conduct. In a similar vein, Tata Consultancy Services (2020) reported that its “Transparent Supply Chain Code of Conduct” looked to ensure that all suppliers are committed to ensuring that there is “no slavery, forced labour, servitude, child labour or human trafficking” within their businesses.

Many of the leading information technology companies acknowledged the importance of awareness raising, capability building and training in looking to tackle modern slavery. In addressing “training on modern slavery and trafficking”, Oracle (2020), for example, reported that “employees are trained on the risks and issues associated with human trafficking, including methods of mitigating risks within hardware supply chains”, and that “to increase awareness of human trafficking and modern slavery risks, Oracle provides annual training to its sourcing teams”. Accenture (2020) emphasised its commitment “to advocating awareness of slavery and human trafficking within our global ecosystem of Accenture suppliers”, and Hewlett Packard Enterprise (2020) reported on its supplier training programme, first introduced in 2011, and designed to help suppliers understand the company’s expectations on tackling modern slavery.

A number of the leading information technology companies reported on their future plans to continue their battles against modern slavery. Under the banner “Next Steps”, Cognizant (2019), for example, reported “we will continue to monitor the effectiveness of our actions against modern slavery and human trafficking, ensuring measures support our zero-tolerance stance to modern slavery”. More specifically, Cognizant suggested that its next steps might include the continued education of its employees on the issues and implications of modern slavery, the continued enhancement of its supplier and vendor due diligence processes, and the auditing of supply chains on a regular basis. Capgemini (2020) listed a number of “future commitments”, including developing specialised and focused training for specific groups, and introducing modern slavery awareness to all new employees.

A minority of the leading information technology companies reported developing key performance indicators in their

battles to combat modern slavery. In addressing “our effectiveness in combating slavery and human trafficking”, Infosys (2020) reported using a number of loosely defined “key performance indicators”, including working with suppliers to acknowledge and socialise the company’s supplier code of conduct, providing information to support staff, and conducting periodic internal audits and, where necessary, specifying remedial action. Capgemini (2020) reported on its development of a number of more tightly specified key performance indicators designed “to give transparency to our aspirations, actions and performance”. These key performance indicators included 100% compliance with the company’s standards in relation to modern slavery for all suppliers, the annual mapping of supply chain spend and the introduction of debt pondage detection measures on each payroll run.

Reflections

The leading information technology companies’ modern slavery statements illustrated their public approach to what is a complex and challenging issue, but a number of wider issues merit reflection and discussion. The findings reported above suggested that while the selected companies were at their most emphatic in expressing their corporate opposition to modern slavery, their modern slavery statements can be best described as a work in progress. Identifying, monitoring and tackling the risk of modern slavery within supply chains present major challenges for the information technology companies, and they are challenges that are at least one step removed from their direct corporate control.

That said, while many of the leading information technology companies claimed their approach in addressing modern slavery within their supply chains was effectively underwritten by auditing, concerns have been expressed about the efficacy of the audit process in safeguarding against modern slavery. The pressure group Anti-Slavery International (2021a), for example, argued that such approaches have their limitations, not least in that “the quality and scope of auditing may be questionable, or there may be practical difficulties such as auditors being unable to speak with workers in their own language”. Anti-Slavery International (2021b) also argued that “forced labour is often hidden”, that “it is often found in the informal sector, in the early stages of production, often some steps down the supply chain”, and that “subcontracting can also hide forced labour as it adds layers between the company and the worker”, which “are out of the scope of many audits”.

Gold et al. (2015) used the term “audit fraud” to describe illegal activities hidden by the supplier from the auditing company. Gold et al. (2015) also suggested that “slave-holders skimming huge profits from their activities will not be susceptible to change in response to premium-price incentives for social standards from the buying company”, rather “they might instead take the premium and at the same time extend their existing profitable business model”. In a similar vein, LeBaron et al. (2017) argued “the growing adoption of auditing as a governance tool is a puzzling trend, given two decades of evidence that audit programs generally fail to detect or correct labor and environmental problems in global supply chains”. More positively, Benstead et al. (2020) argued that “a targeted audit”, which investigates “the end-to-end recruitment process by using a parallel structure of management and worker interviews and documentation review”, is “more likely to reveal key indicators of modern slavery”.

Secondly, the concept of the modern slavery statement itself has attracted a number of criticisms. Simic and Blitz (2019) argued that modern slavery statements are “often perfunctory and are used to satisfy international agendas and country commitments, or to enhance the perception of the country and its position in the global outsourcing business”. Further, Simic and Blitz (2019) also argued that the capacity of modern slavery statements “is often limited, especially as it regards remedying risks”, and that “the quality, scope, depth, and regularity of reports are frequently compromised, especially since there are no meaningful sanctions for non-compliance”. The issue of non-compliance is pressing, not least in that Monciardini et al. (2021) suggested that within the UK, for example, non-compliance with the 2015 legislation “is a common occurrence”.

This, in turn, raises fundamental questions about the effectiveness of modern slavery statements in tackling, and ideally eradicating, modern slavery. New and Hsin (2021), for example, argued that while modern slavery statements “present interesting information about the management of working conditions in the firms’ supply chains, they do little to address the problems of modern slavery per se”. In posing the question “What are corporations, as responsible citizens doing to eliminate modern slavery”, Bannerjee (2021) suggested “most corporations do very little apart from issuing public statements and commitments to eradicate forced labour”. More critically, Bannerjee (2021) argued “there is a real danger that corporations involved in modern slavery can use the Modern Slavery Act to bolster their corporate social responsibility credentials, which then serve as a smokescreen to conceal practices of modern slavery”.

This review of modern slavery statements published by the selected information technology companies also has some implications for the theoretical approaches mentioned earlier. On the one hand, other than highlighting the links between modern slavery and the information technology industry and the importance of global raw material supplies and cheap sources of international labour, the review of the selected companies’ modern slavery statements provided little insights into the theories proposed by Bales (2006) and Manzo (2006). On the other hand, the review suggested that the selected information technology companies had responded positively to political pressure and legislation to introduce modern slavery statements, and these actions can be seen to be consistent with institutional theory.

At the same time, contingency theory helps to shed some light on how the leading information technology companies approached modern slavery, but perhaps only in so far as it signals that some of the characteristics of the industry, namely its use of globally sourced raw materials and labour supplies, seem to make them susceptible to modern slavery. Stakeholder theory might be seen to be useful in informing how the leading information technology companies have developed their modern slavery statements, but stakeholder theory is generally seen to be based on open relationships, trust and shared goals, and these qualities are certainly not common to all the stakeholders involved in modern slavery.

Conclusions

Having identified modern slavery in the information technology industry as a gap in the management and business literature, this paper outlined some of the challenges for research on modern slavery and some of the relevant academic literature in this field, before reviewing the modern slavery statements adopted by the ten leading information technology companies. As such the paper makes an initial contribution to the literature on modern slavery in the information technology industry. Five interlinked themes namely, corporate commitment; risk assessments and due diligence in supply chains: codes of conduct; awareness, capability building and training; and future plans and key performance indicators; illustrated the selected companies' approaches to their modern slavery statements. The authors argued that Identifying and tackling the risk of modern slavery within supply chains posed the major challenge for the information technology companies. and concluded that the leading technology companies' modern slavery statements can be best seen as a work in progress.

The authors recognise that the paper has a number of limitations. The empirical material for the review is drawn exclusively from the corporate websites of the selected information technology companies, and does not include any primary information supplied by, or obtained from, the companies' executives, managers or employees, or any information obtained from the companies' suppliers. However, the authors believe this approach is appropriate in what is an explanatory review, and that the paper makes a small contribution to an area that has received no attention in the business and management literature, and that it may provide a platform for future research into modern slavery in the information technology industry.

A number of potential research opportunities into corporate approaches to modern slavery within the information technology industry can be identified. Here, the ways in which the industry addresses the issue of modern slavery merits attention, and could include questionnaire surveys of, as well as personal interviews and focus groups with, senior company executives to learn how their companies have developed, and continually look to strengthen, their policies on modern slavery. Such research agendas may also explore if, and how, employees, customers, subcontractors, suppliers, governments, and law enforcement agencies are involved in the policy development process. In addition, research into modern slavery within the information technology industry may help both to test, and to illuminate, theoretical approaches to modern slavery

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