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## Verite leader Dan Viederman honored for efforts to make work fair, sustainable

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By **BRIAN ROGERS**  
Gazette Contributing Writer

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Monday, October 3, 2011

AMHERST - In today's economy, in which supply chains for products extend across the globe, multinational companies must often face the stark reality that they are supporting exploitive labor systems.

Asia and Latin America are well known for "sweatshops," a term used to describe a variety of less-than-legal working conditions. For a long time, the global business world has seen it as inevitable, as companies seek to satisfy the bottom line in a world of diminishing returns.

A nonprofit organization in Amherst called [Verité](#) is trying to change all that.

Since 1995, Verité has worked with multinationals to make globalization more equitable and sustainable for workers around the world. Its mission is to ensure all workers involved in making the products that end up in stores across the world have safe working conditions and are being paid according to law.

"Our role is to push globalization toward helping the most vulnerable people," said Dan Viederman, Verité's chief executive officer and the recent recipient of the Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award from the Schwab Foundation, which supports and promotes sustainable social innovation.

"Companies come to us because of some sort of crisis or because they decide there is a better way to do business."


Verité's focus is on child labor, slavery, systemic discrimination against women, dangerous work conditions and unpaid work, which it targets through direct audits, worker training and collaboration with in-country civil society organizations.

Viederman said Verité's aim is not to stifle globalization, but to accept it as inevitable, and work toward making it better for workers. Millions of people in the developing world depend on jobs from large multinationals. Eliminating these jobs would only create a new problem, massive unemployment, but making these jobs better and safer can provide tangible improvements in the lives of workers. By working with companies instead of against them, Verité hopes to embed a sense of worker well-being in the decision-making practices of companies.

For instance, a company that becomes aware of unlawful business practices at one of its factories will partner with Verité to devise a plan to evaluate conditions and eradicate the problems.


In some cases, the company can leverage the factory to change the way it operates. Or it might become clear that the company is demanding too much from the factory, forcing it to cut corners

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MIKE BRADLEY

Dan Viederman, chief executive officer of Verité, is seen outside his office in Amherst on Friday.



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and break the law. Verité helps companies to honestly assess their supply chain so it complies with the law while causing the least amount of damage to the workers and the company.

Viederman said Verité has been such a success because it is seen as a neutral party. There are well-established ethical standards across all business, and labor laws on the books in almost every country across the planet. The trick is getting all parties in the supply chain to adhere to these laws and proper business practices. Verité works by studying the kinks in the supply chain and coming up with solutions that benefit both the workers and the multinational.

"It's not for us to set rules or expose bad behavior," he said. "It's to accept that people would usually like to do better in most situations if they could. We give them the resources to do that."

In his role as Social Entrepreneur of the Year, Viederman recently traveled to Dalian, China, where he participated in Summer Davos, a conference hosted by the World Economic Forum to discuss issues facing the global economy.

"It was amazing to see such a large network of incredible people," Viederman said. He participated in a panel discussion on rethinking business practices with the heads of the United Way and Tsingtao Beer, among others. "It was a great opportunity to meet people from all over the world - people from government ministries, labor organizations, businesses, universities - to talk about our goals to support business and support employment, but make it fair."

He was also appointed to the Global Agenda Council, where he will work on looking into where the global manufacturing industry is headed.

For Viederman, the trip to China was also a return of sorts to the place where he originally became aware of the tension between social justice and globalization. Twenty-six years ago, just after finishing college, Viederman went to teach English in China.

As one of only a few foreigners in a city of 8 million people, he remembers being treated like a celebrity, and at one point he was treated to a tour of two of the city's model factories. On the first tour, at a silk processing factory, he saw girls dipping their bare hands into near boiling water to untangle balls of raw silk. The second tour was at a polyester plant, where workers breathed noxious fumes all day.

It was then that Viederman realized that unless the private sector was recruited to support sustainability in its own practices, it would never happen.

Today, Verité is a global nonprofit working in more than 60 countries with an annual budget of \$5 million. It publishes a handbook for companies seeking to improve conditions for workers along their supply chain, which has been distributed all over the world.

There have been good results for the Amherst-based company: since its start in 1995, Verité has contracted mega-companies like Apple, Hewlett-Packard, Hershey's, New Balance and s, to name a few.

By the summer of 2008, Verite had already conducted some 2,500 "social audits" or investigations of factories' working conditions. Still, there is much work to be done, said Viederman.

"We are miniscule compared to the problem," said Viederman. "Multinational corporations are big institutions, and they are not always rational."

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