



INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Selective Purchasing Guide

BACKGROUND

As the United States transitions to energy sources outside fossil fuels, ethical challenges around technology become even more complex. From artificial intelligence to cloud storage and electric vehicles, the actual social and environmental impact of technology can be invisible but significant. Raw materials come from areas rife with conflict and poor labor practices. Cloud storage and AI require vast amounts of energy input, not to mention poorly paid human labor, and they risk human rights violations at every turn.

ELCA SOCIAL TEACHING

[Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All](#), 1999 social statement

“No one should be coerced to work under conditions that violate their dignity or freedom, jeopardize their health or safety, result in neglect of their family’s wellbeing, or provide unjust compensation for their labor” (p. 9).

[Human Rights](#), 2017 social message

The ELCA supports the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Declaration on the Right to Development (p. 13), a right that includes full sovereignty over natural resources. It also encourages governments and corporations to uphold the United Nations’ [Protect, Respect and Remedy Framework and its Guiding Principles on Human Rights](#) (p. 13).

[Caring for Creation](#), 1993 social statement

The ELCA builds its sense of justice around four principles:

- Participation, which means that all living things are entitled to be heard and to have their interests considered when decisions are made.
- Solidarity, which means that we stand together as God’s creation.
- Sufficiency, which means meeting the basic needs of all humanity and all creation.
 - Sufficiency charges us to work with each other and the environment to meet needs without causing undue burdens elsewhere (p. 7).
- Solidarity, which means providing an acceptable quality of life for present generations without compromising that of future generations.

Corporate Social Responsibility in the ELCA uses the tools of screening of investments, shareholder advocacy and community investing to work with corporations, calling them to ensure that people are treated fairly and with dignity and to create sustainable communities.

More at [ELCA.org/CSR](https://www.elca.org/CSR).

DO YOUR RESEARCH—THE MANY CONCERNS IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Raw materials for computer components are often mined under very poor conditions that would be considered human rights violations. The [Responsible Minerals Initiative](#) is one source for information on country-specific labor practices, and it publishes [a list](#) of members.

The *carbon footprints* of cloud storage and AI are invisible, but each technology uses a vast amount of energy that rivals that used by the airline industry. In terms of labor standards AI does not simply materialize magically; the human laborers who compile AI are poorly paid and work under subpar conditions. Before uploading a lot of photos to cloud storage, or using what seems like “free” AI, know that these are not neutral.

Environmental ratings of companies are manifold and ever evolving. The tech business leaves a significant environmental footprint, so keep that in mind when deciding how important it is to buy a new computer or printer. [Morgan Stanley Capital International](#) (MSCI) rates businesses in multiple categories and can help you decide how the company you intend to purchase from stacks up against its peers.

Another concerning human rights issue is what else the *technology* in your computer is being used for. Examples at the time of this writing include several considerations: Facial recognition technology is useful for opening apps without a password, but it also contributes to human rights violations and doesn't work as well on people with darker complexions. AI is ubiquitous in our day-to-day life, in both benign and annoying ways, which may lead us to think of it as harmless. But the same technology attached to weaponry is extraordinary in its potential for harm. Check [Ranking Digital Rights](#) to learn how different corporations are protecting the rights of their users.

Large corporations such as Apple and Dell publish annual supplier reports, which are useful to see if human rights violators are part of their supply chain. [Know the Chain](#) publishes global supply chain rankings in information technology (IT), apparel and footwear, and food and beverage industries. Quite a few companies have received negative publicity for using prison and forced labor in China in their production process.

The [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre](#) collects data on individual companies and publishes rankings. Choose a company under “[Company Dashboards](#).”

The World Benchmarking Alliance ranks over 100 companies, using a [Corporate Human Rights Benchmark](#) in a searchable database.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

“We consume goods and use services to meet our needs. To increase consumption and expand sales, businesses stimulate ever new wants. Rather than human need

shaping consumption, advertising and media promotion both shape and expand wants. Our very being becomes expressed through what we have or desire to possess. When consuming to meet basic needs turns into consumerism as an end in itself, we face a serious crisis of faith” (*Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, p. 13).

1. Do I need to buy this?
 - Am I being swayed by our consumer culture or marketing into believing I need something I do not?
 - Is there something else I could use or recycle instead of buying a new one?
 - Could I put off buying it just a little longer?
2. What impact will this purchase have on the environment?
 - What environmental impact does the sourcing of raw materials have?
 - How much pollution does its production involve?
 - How much pollution does its operation involve?
3. What impact will this purchase have on the people who produce it?
 - Are human rights violations common in the supply chain?
 - Are the raw materials sourced from conflict-affected areas?
 - What are the labor conditions in the country where it is produced?
4. What happens when I am finished with it?
 - Can someone else use it?
 - Is it possible to reuse or recycle it?