

Managing a career while navigating an evolving field

By Sylvia Kinnicutt

Corporate citizenship hardly could have been considered an area of management practice 10 years ago. Few companies were applying this title to their activities, and fewer had staff to manage it. A lot has changed in that time.

The Center for Corporate Citizenship has been tracking this with its biennial Profile of the Practice survey and in other research projects. From these, as well as a dynamic discussion at the Center's 2010 International Corporate Citizenship Conference, it is clear that corporate citizenship is demanding more senior and skilled managers.



Photo by Michael Dillon BC class of '13

In the latest Profile of the Practice survey on corporate citizenship structure and strategy, 46 percent of respondents report that their companies have a vice president or director of corporate citizenship/corporate social responsibility. Other analysis supports the finding that the field is growing. Conversations with CSR leaders indicate that in many cases they are the first in their company to hold such a position. Now that they are in these positions, they are growing their team and developing successors. However, some suggest that one day in the not too distant future, they may be out of a job. This is not because CSR is a passing fad, but because they are working to integrate responsible management into all aspects of their business.

“All of us would probably agree at some point that ultimate success is ‘you don’t need us,’ that the company gets this, and you don’t need this centralized model, we all end up going away,” mused Dave Stangis, vice president of CSR at the Campbell Soup Company. Just as a quality manager hopes to ingrain quality into the business operations, CSR leaders are also working to embed CSR into the core business. But most companies still have quality managers, even a few decades after the initial trend took hold.

Will companies still need CSR leaders in the future? At least for a while, the answer seems to be yes. Stangis notes that there is a learning curve in effect, and early on a CSR expert is highly valuable in getting the right policies and strategies in place. A tipping point is still far in the future, as most companies still do not have official CSR executives or teams in place, and those that do are fairly new. You could call this the growth period for CSR, as more and more companies are looking to create and grow their teams.

In the Center’s 2010 Profile of the Practice study, the “age” most frequently cited for CSR teams at companies was three years. In 2008, the most frequent age identified for CSR teams was one year. Even at companies with more experience in CSR, teams are not shrinking yet. Timberland created its integrated team in 2007, and fully staffed it with 20 employees, including 11 supply chain assessors. Three years later, staff levels remain the same.



Beth Holzman, CSR manager for Timberland, believes that having a formal CSR team is becoming a “minimum expectation” of companies. Even when CSR becomes ingrained in the DNA of an organization, strong CSR leaders will still likely be needed to ensure CSR remains a high priority.

As the numbers of CSR positions are increasing, they are also becoming more senior. “If we’re saying that it (CSR) is critical to the commercial sustainability of the enterprise, it shouldn’t be anywhere else than at the top of the house ... visibility and accountability are critical,” said Katherine Hopinkah Hannan, national managing partner and chief responsibility/diversity officer at KPMG, who reports directly to the CEO/chairman. These senior jobs are highly competitive.

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Katherine Hopinkah Hannan, KPMG

Since CSR leadership is a relatively new role, it is continually being reshaped. Today’s successful CSR professional is an expert in the business as well as in an array of social issues from energy efficiency to healthy living, depending on the industry. “The ability to understand the business is critical, because you really have to be able to demonstrate the linkage to the sustainability of the commercial strategy,” Hannan said. CSR

leaders must be savvy communicators who possess the ability to influence others without direct authority.

Joseph Reganato, corporate communications manager for the Mitsubishi International Corporation said, “It takes a dynamic individual who can relate to and connect with people of all kinds of backgrounds and really sell the value of CSR.”

What is in store for those working in this fast growing field? For job seekers, Net Impact Deputy Director Maggie McArthur observes that there many more people interested in working in this area than there are job opportunities. So what should those interested in advancing corporate citizenship do to advance their careers? Many senior executives advise that bringing CSR thinking to whatever role they occupy currently is useful. CSR must be integrated across the business to be successful, so having employees in every aspect of the business engaged in the corporate citizenship strategy is crucial to success and allows for many points of entry into CSR leadership roles.

In the future, there are some who predict that working in CSR may be a step on the ladder to the executive suite. “The leaders of corporate America are going to come from those that understand the corporate responsibility issue,” Hannan asserts. Hannan herself rose through the ranks of KPMG to assume this new role just last year.

Signe Spencer, senior consultant with the Hay Group, agrees with Hannan. “Some of the competencies most needed for effective CEOs today and into the future include the ability to incorporate and integrate the perspectives of multiple stakeholders as well as to develop, maintain and leverage a range of relationships outside the company, and to define and communicate the purpose and priorities of the organization beyond simply increasing shareholder value,” Spencer notes. “When we look for situations where leaders could develop these necessary abilities, CSR provides one of the very few roles in which these broad perspectives are evoked and strengthened.”

This should give extra motivation to current and future CSR leaders. ■

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