Description

What Is CSR?

In the simplest terms, *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) posits an argument that organizations should operate under social and environmental obligations in addition to the standard financial obligation of fiscal stewardship and shareholder value. As consumers of natural resources in the manufacture of products and services, organizations should share in the responsibility of maintaining the long-term viability of those resources rather than using them up and moving on to a new site.

In addition, when a factory holds the position of being the largest employer in a community, the corporation should have an obligation to participate in the long-term viability of that community rather than simply closing the factory in search of cheaper production costs overseas with no concern or obligation for the devastated community economy that such a move leaves in its wake.

As recently as the 1970s, this perspective was dismissed as representing a “Pollyanna” view of the hard, competitive reality of business. Even Nobel-prize–winning economist Milton Friedman advocated that when corporations paid their taxes, they were meeting their social and economic obligations and should not be asked to contribute more. In addition, he argued, corporate executives were stewards of shareholder dollars, not the owners of the company, and therefore had no power to make such choices.

Move forward almost five decades and the relationship between corporations and the public remains even more strained. Throw in a couple of recessions and so much corporate malfeasance that the Sarbanes Oxley Act had to be passed in response to a public outcry, and the prospects for more socially responsible corporation would seem to be limited.

The “Big Sellout”

In the world of academic research, corporate collaborations have, by contrast, never been better. Facing declining federal funding, universities and research institutions have welcomed corporate research dollars with no apparent concern for the direction in which such funding will move research over the long term. Cries of agricultural and land grant universities selling out to agro giants like Monsanto and Big Pharma members such as Pfizer have made for great press coverage. In addition, stories of farmers being sued for patented seeds (that blew over from an adjoining corporate farm) growing in their fields haven’t done much to present a collaborative working environment.

CSR Collaborations

The debate as to whether corporate funding will steer institutions in the direction of applied research that can turn a profit rather than basic research that contributes to a broader body of knowledge, will no doubt continue for many years yet. However, CSR has continued to gain popularity as companies have opened their eyes to the fact that customers respond positively to public commitment to social causes, and by *positively*, we mean spend money.

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How does this help academic research? Companies that have no need for high-level applied research projects in the development of new treatments or cures can still support the research activities of major institutions through collaboration in research and development in the name of social responsibility. Seafood processors can support marine research, for example, without having to take the collaboration to the level of genetically modifying shrimp. By delineating a supporting role that their customers are willing to endorse, research institutions may be able to tap into a source of funding that comes with significantly less strings. For companies that choose to examine such collaborations, they see the opportunity for good media coverage in the name of CSR with minimal operational challenges.

Category

1. Industry News
2. Publishing News

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