

# 'They want to see action': Engaging employees is key to the success of CSR

BY DIANA McLAREN

Providing decent wages for textile workers in India. Ensuring safe working conditions in the gold mines of Africa. Safeguarding the rights of indigenous people in the Brazilian rain forest. For many Canadians, such lofty goals are prime examples of corporate social responsibility in action.

But for most Canadian business leaders, being a good corporate citizen begins much closer to home – in their own offices and factories, working with their employees to foster CSR as a viable, everyday reality rather than simply an admirable mission statement.

Consider the efforts of Jacques Whitford, a Halifax-based environmental consulting firm that wasn't content to focus on reducing its carbon footprint by doing more teleconferencing and less business travel. The company, which has 1,700 employees in 40 offices across Canada, decided to also inject a little fun into CSR with a vegetable-growing contest for staff.

"Get your green thumbs ready!" read the contest announcement. "Use sustainable practices to grow your own fruits and/or vegetables and compete in the company-wide Veggie Idol competition."

A 750-gram cucumber grown by a Fredericton employee was the horticultural heavyweight champion, while the Veggie Idol award went to a strange-looking zucchini dubbed Spookini by the judges.

It was a lighthearted way to involve employees while also increasing knowledge about artificial pesticides, healthy soils and water conservation. "It has nothing to do with their work directly, but it was engaging, educational and fun," says Marty Janowitz, the company's senior vice-president of sustainability.

Jacques Whitford has made a concerted effort to engage employees in its more serious CSR goals. "We've made a ma-



"We attract critically minded people, analytical people. They want to see action – clear measurable objectives," says Marty Janowitz, senior vice-president of sustainability at Halifax-based Jacques Whitford. With him are staffers Cristin Dawson, left, and Elizabeth Kennedy. PAUL DARROW FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

nor investment in teleconferencing," Mr. Janowitz notes. "This year we've spent \$1-million on it to reduce our carbon emissions."

Not only is the company saving money in the long run, he says, but the shift to teleconferencing is also changing how work is done. "People are not jumping on planes all the time, which affects their quality of life, their health and family time," Mr. Janowitz says. "And now we can have six to eight offices participating in one meeting."

As companies struggle to balance profitability with increasing demands to improve their records on social and environmental issues, it's important that employees be fully engaged in CSR programs, experts say. Attracting and retaining talented, committed workers will be key to their success.

"For younger employees, CSR is fundamental in choosing where to work," says William Greenhalgh, chief executive officer of the Human Resource Professionals Associ-

ation (HRPA) in Ontario.

"How a company contributes to charity, has green practices and ethical treatment policies – these are a big factor in their minds," he says.

Having a "strong CSR platform will help you attract and retain top talent, the key element in performance of a company," agrees Barb Steele, director of membership for Canadian Business for Social Responsibility, a business-led, non-profit group in Toronto.

"In the shift to a knowledge-based economy, talent is what will determine the winners and losers of the future," she says.

With Canada's aging work force, "the pool of talent is declining and CSR is the perfect way to attract people."

For Jacques Whitford, CSR practices within the company are a logical fit with the environmental focus of its engineering and consulting work. Mr. Janowitz says that appealing to the new generation of workers is also a key factor.

"We attract critically minded people, analytical people," he

explains. "They want to see action – clear measurable objectives. They want to hear specifically, 'How much did you lower carbon footprint or reduce greenhouse gases?'"

"We're in a competitive environment, with regard to both clients and employees," Mr. Janowitz adds. "We have to have a critical eye on whether we are greenwashing or doing things for real. When you think about CSR, you realize pretty quickly it's not just about environment, it's also about the social and cultural dimension of your organization."

The push toward greener, more ethical workplaces also comes from within an organization itself.

For example, Mr. Greenhalgh says his Toronto-based organization is changing to meet employee expectations: vending-machine food is healthier and there are no Styrofoam cups or bottled water.

CSR initiatives need to be consistent throughout a company, because employees "will pick up on hypocrisy very

quickly," he adds.

"The average age of our employees is under 35," Mr. Greenhalgh says. "They are looking at what employers are doing for all stakeholders, not just shareholders and clients. That includes the local community, employees and the environment."

Toward that end, HRPAs gives staff time to work with non-profit groups such as Habitat for Humanity, encourages involvement with charity fundraising through raffles and potluck lunches, and has supported a child in Kenya.

Employers agree that while there may be greater emphasis on CSR from younger employees, all ages respond to corporate initiatives that make workers feel good about their workplace.

"CSR policies in our company have increased morale particularly, although not exclusively, with our younger employees," Mr. Janowitz says.

Recent Jacques Whitford initiatives include fair-trade procurement policies for office supplies (including coffee) and a new standard for sustainable office locations. "As leases come up, we may have to move operations," Mr. Janowitz says, adding that this took some getting used to for senior managers, some of whom found the changes "creative" but more complex than past practices.

"This flies against our tradition, which was to locate an office that was least expensive and people would just have to scramble to get there," he says. "Now we'll be looking at location for things like public transit or walking distance to work."

Jacques Whitford also decided to buy hybrids for its new company vehicles and while there was "initially some resistance" because the vehicles cost more, Mr. Janowitz says "now people not only feel good about it, but as fuel costs rose, managers were saying, 'Isn't this good?'"

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## A WORKPLACE PRIMER

Overcoming possible employee cynicism about a company's green initiatives requires commitment from the top, combined with bottom-up involvement, experts say.

Here are some tips to help your company's CSR initiatives succeed:

### MAKE IT CORE

Corporate social responsibility must be a key part of your company's business, not an add-on or afterthought

### TAKE THE BROAD VIEW

Review all aspects of your corporate strategy and consider how engaging employees in CSR can contribute to every area of the business.

### SUPPORT IT

Engaging your staff in CSR will fail without sufficient resources to support efforts such as charitable fund-raising or eco-friendly initiatives. Consider giving your staff time to work on community or charitable projects, for example.

### COMMUNICATE

Don't hide your CSR activities from current or potential employees. This is one time to blow your own horn, but make sure it's legitimate, not simply a public relations exercise.

### RECRUIT EARLY

To attract younger workers who are inclined to support CSR efforts, take part in college and university career fairs as well as joint projects with schools.

By Diana McLaren