

# Do recessions hurt "Sustainable Business" jobs?



**Mark Swartz**

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**Question:** I work in a global firm that prides itself on setting up "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR) initiatives that help its many stakeholders. For example, we were the first in our industry to go green with our production process, we have negotiated "fair labour" contracts with indigenous populations in less developed countries, and we insist that our major suppliers adhere to high levels of environmental and social ethics. I have been leading up a fair number of these programs over the last two years and feel that there is a bright future in this area. But do you think that our economic slowdown will cause employers to cut back on CSR for now?

Rashid D., Edmonton, Alberta

**Dear Rashid,**

Interesting question. I think the answer depends on how you define Corporate Social Responsibility, which is also known as CSR, corporate sustainability, the triple bottom line, or responsible business.

According to Adine Mees, President and CEO of Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (a Canadian business-led, non-profit consultancy and peer-to-peer learning organization), CSR can be interpreted in a variety of ways. "Some employers consider such basics as corporate philanthropy or community involvement to be sufficient," says Adine. She adds, however, that this is merely a beginning; an important though relatively superficial definition of responsible business.

Employers who are at this sort of level only in CSR are unlikely to invest heavily in additional support for this area during our economic downturn.

## **The Maturing of CSR**

Adine does point out that there is an evolution in a number of organizations to a higher stage of corporate citizenship. At this deeper level, "Companies are more mature in their CSR efforts and have begun to realize increased return on investment" based on these activities. For instance, an employer may have gained entry into new international markets by introducing the "fair labour" practices you mention above, or have convinced government to reconsider passing tough legislation that might have unnecessarily restricted a firm's operations. After all, why impose new laws when your operating standards exceed that of the proposed bill?

For employers at this higher level of engagement, CSR will likely continue to play a key role despite a rocky economy, adds Adine. "The next 18 months to two years present a challenge in terms of living up to expectations and commitments in a cash constrained environment." But as a CSR employee (sometimes called a *Social Intrapreneur*), "You will need to push back and ask, does your employer see the value you are contributing? Are staff, suppliers and customers aware of your efforts?" If you can put forward a solid business case, including a Return On Investment (ROI) analysis, your ability to secure needed resources increases.

And in this writer's view, you bolster your own job security at the same time, by differentiating yourself as a capable employee who can also get profit-enhancing CSR done.

## **Being a Strategic CSR Employee**

Adding to the discussion is Dr. Andrew Crane, George R. Gardiner Professor of Business Ethics and Director, Business & Sustainability Program at the Schulich School of Business, located at York University. He says that this the right time to clarify your role as an employee involved in CSR initiatives: "You are not

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merely the company's conscience or donations person. You are uniquely prepared to deal with complexity and multi-stakeholder relationships on a strategic basis."

Andrew adds that those who can create new socially responsible products and services (e.g. fair trade coffee, green mortgages), or who can reshape processes to enhance the triple bottom line (e.g. using fewer scarce resources, leaving less of a carbon footprint, making governance more effective), will be in demand. He also notes that "Consumers will purchase responsibly - assuming that price, quality and branding are equal to the alternatives. Thus we need business-savvy employees who can make or promote exciting products and services that have CSR built-in and the potentially daunting tradeoffs removed."

### **Jobs for *Responsible Business* Employees**

As for where the jobs might be, Andrew says that you needn't focus your search exclusively on employers in the environmental or not-for-profit sectors. "When you look at who is winning awards for being socially responsible, it includes companies such as Walmart, IBM, Loblaw's, Vancouver City Savings and Home Depot; places you may not have thought to look first." Each of the companies cited above is on the "Best 50 Corporate Citizens" list for 2008, prepared by Corporate Knights (the Canadian magazine for responsible business).

How to find an employer that might value your CSR credentials? Well, it makes sense to look at that Best 50 list above and review the CCSR membership roster, for starters. Also that of EthicsCentre.ca, and the top performers on the Jantzi Social Index.

Another tip from Adine: "Seek out industries where there are already obvious aspects of CSR that directly impact profitability and the capacity to function within communities, such as mining or oil and gas." Your goal is to be at the intersection where "significant stakeholder concerns and corporate strategy meet head on." As well, search for employer websites where they boast of their sustainability efforts. And keep an eye out for those that issue a CSR Report in addition to the standard Annual Report.

Andrew adds that "So far there are few actual jobs with CSR in the title, yet employers often look for people who match their values and vision statement, who can position themselves as a solid recruit based on respecting integrity while also being a champion of innovation, profitability and sustainability." He reminds us that to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders (both internal and external), you may need to prepare yourself to be "politically astute and tough, declaring yourself a true agent of change."

### **Earn and Return**

So Rashid, there's your reply. Employers who aren't serious about CSR yet may well cut back in this realm during a recession. Those who have seen that the benefits of deeper corporate citizenship outweigh the investment are likely to continue their core commitment to CSR, though they may need to defer major projects until conditions improve. In any event, I salute your efforts to *make a living while making a difference*. It's a great way to improve your marketability as an employee - while genuinely making our world a little better.

### **full disclosure:**

I (the writer) am a graduate of York University's MBA program, from back in 1984, years before the business school became known as Schulich. I chose to interview this school for the article because they are ranked number one in Canada (and number three *in the world*) for their CSR/Sustainability program, by Corporate Knights magazine.



Mark Swartz, MBA, M.Ed., is [Canada's Career Activist](#). His insights reach millions as the Workopolis Career Advisor, as author of the best seller "Get Wired, You're Hired," and as a professional speaker and coach on career/work issues. A former Toronto Star careers columnist, Mark's advice is forthright and practical. For many more free articles, and for personalized coaching, please visit Mark's site at [www.careeractivist.com](http://www.careeractivist.com).

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