

CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY – EMPLOYEES PUT COMPANIES ON THE SPOT

THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST POTENTIAL EMPLOYEES ARE SEEKING MORE FROM THEIR EMPLOYER THAN A WAGE AND BENEFITS.

Val McFarlane

The days when decent pay and the chance of career progression were enough for employers to lure the smartest graduates are gone.

Today's bright young things are demanding high ethical standards from the companies to which they apply, forcing them to up their corporate social responsibility (CSR) game. And not in any tokenistic way: graduates want their workplaces to live by such values and expect them to be embedded in the practices of the company.

Associate Professor Ben Neville, a researcher in CSR at the University of Melbourne, says companies are feeling under pressure to make a positive difference to society.

"One of the real triggers has been graduate students asking the question at interviews: what's your CSR policy?" he says.

"When you have got highly talented, highly educated employees asking you about your CSR strategy, all of a sudden

it gets on the radar of the top executives."

He says this desire to see employers do the right thing goes deeper than you might think. "I would suggest it's also part of a post-modern, post-religious society where we need to find meaning in our lives.

"If we can't find it through religion then we have to look for it in other ways. The marketplace has been promising it through consumption but that is ultimately empty. The younger generation, especially, are well aware of that, so are now looking for it through their work lives."

An enriching environment

Enterprise software company TechnologyOne hired 57 graduates in 2019, around double the previous year's number. Chief executive Edward Chung says that first and foremost, graduates are looking for a workplace in which they can learn, be successful and build a career. But he adds that the firm's CSR activity, channelled through the TechnologyOne Foundation, is a definite draw for candidates.

The foundation supports eight main charities and has ambitious plans to help 500,000 children and their families out of

poverty by 2032. Employees can get involved directly through Foundation Fortnight – a global, company-wide initiative that contributes 300 staff hours to community causes over two weeks.

"Aside from it being the right thing to do, we've found participating in activities like Foundation Fortnight benefits the company, too, since it builds teamwork and a stronger sense of purpose," says Chung. "It's also a potential training ground for new leaders to emerge."

Woodside Energy's campus recruitment programs promote the company's partnerships with organisations including Volunteering WA, the Australian Ballet and Surf Lifesaving WA. The 100 graduates hired by Woodside annually are offered volunteering opportunities as part of their induction.

"It is absolutely on our radar," says Jacky Connolly, Woodside's vice-president of people and global capability. "We have been very strategic in working with organisations where we can actually contribute to the communities in which we operate."

But she adds that the company also favours graduates who arrive with a commitment

to social responsibility. Previous volunteer experience is valued. "Obviously we are looking for the best and brightest, but they also have to care. That community spirit is really important. It is part of the culture of Woodside."

Many younger companies have built their brands around socially responsible values. Design marketplace Envato, founded in 2006, is one.

"When you start to look at why people join Envato, the values, the essence of Envato is what attracts people," says chief people officer Michelle Ridsdale. "Our vision is to help the community and that permeates everything we do."

"We do find candidates are asking us these questions during the interview process. Whether it is graduates or other candidates, everyone is very interested in knowing what our values are and what we stand for, and that we are responsible for contributing to the greater good."

Having a positive impact

Staff are given leave to volunteer, and any money they raise for charity is matched by the firm. In 2018, the company launched the Envato Foundation, which supports projects that create opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Envato has repeatedly been described as 'Australia's coolest company' and Ridsdale acknowledges that its offices, with their table tennis tables and gaming consoles, play a part in attracting graduate applicants.

But she says these things are just

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MICHELLE RIDSDALE,
CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, ENVATO

"accessories" that ultimately matter less than the firm's values.

"If you are not really serious about corporate social responsibility and the environment, it doesn't matter if you've got all that stuff or not," she says. "A lot of places are catching up with the fun stuff, but they are not necessarily catching up to the work practices and sustainable ways of doing business."

That's a view echoed by Associate Professor Neville, who says many companies are still working out what corporate social responsibility really means.

"They are discovering that you can't just do business as usual and then give some donations away and think that ticks the box of social responsibility. You have to go through every single thing that you do and make sure you are having a positive impact."



Tanya Matthews has hit a sweet spot working in corporate affairs for Woodside Energy.
PHOTO: TONY MCDONOUGH

CASE STUDY: TANYA MATTHEWS

A corporate career can do a power of good

Tanya Matthews had never seriously considered a career in the resources sector.

When she graduated from the University of Western Australia in 2018 with a bachelor of arts and master's degree in international relations, her plan was to find a role in the legal sector or government.

But that changed when she stumbled across Woodside Energy's graduate recruitment website and read about the Woodside Development Fund. The fund has committed \$20 million over 10 years to help children aged up to eight gain a better start in life.

It struck a chord with Matthews, who had worked with disadvantaged children and young people during her university days as a volunteer with Edmund Rice Camps.

She says she was surprised to learn of Woodside's involvement in the area. "I thought it was interesting because focusing on early childhood is probably not the most glamorous, because the returns don't come until quite some time later."

It made her reassess her view of the industry. "I think, coming fresh from university, there's quite a lot of apprehension when it comes to the resources sector because of the protests and the movement towards climate action," she says.

"And with corporate social responsibility, there's so much money going in. But where's the proof that something is being done to help the communities in which you operate?"

"It was important for me because this is my first real job outside of uni, and I wanted to make sure that I would be proud of it and be happy to tell my family and my friends where I worked."

Matthews now works on Woodside's corporate social responsibility initiatives herself, as a corporate affairs adviser with a focus on community partnerships. She has also been able to continue her volunteering through Woodside's own program.

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