

# Corporate Social Responsibility and Job Training Initiatives

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"What kind of work do you do?"

This is one of the first questions we ask of strangers we befriend. The type of work one performs tells us something about that person, it shapes a person's identity and sense of self, and provides the person with income for living.

"I work on a garbage truck." "I am a supermarket manager." "I am a missionary." "I am a research assistant for an economic think-tank." "I am a writer." "I am a professor." Each of these descriptions of work creates a different image of the person making the claim. Although I've had all of these jobs, what I thought of myself, and what others thought of me, was greatly influenced by the type of job I had at that particular moment in time.

Despite the current trend in downsizing, and the ecstasy of Wall Street every time a company announces a major layoff, the most socially responsible action a company engages in is employing people. While attending an International Association for Business & Society conference in Leuven, Belgium, I was stunned by a statue honoring a manufacturer that was proudly displayed in the middle of town. I asked a resident why such a statue existed. The simple, yet very unAmerican response: "Because he employed us when we needed him the most."

One of the deepest potholes in the pathway to the societal bliss promised by capitalism is the increasing problem of poverty and homelessness in the United States. In a land where private property is a supreme value, one-half to 3 million people are without domicile, and over 35 million live in poverty. Twenty percent of all children in the United States live in poverty. This is a national disgrace that we often try to sweep under the rug.

For the past few years, students enrolled in my required Executive MBA and regular MBA Business Ethics classes at the University of Wisconsin's School of Business have been tackling these social problems through class projects. We've focused on applying the "Corporate Social Responsibility" concept to creating work opportunities for unemployed residents of Madison, Wisconsin in a variety of ways.

First, executives enrolled in my course have developed business plans for employing residents of low-income communities. For example, as part of the Executive MBA class project, Paul Duren, a production manager with Techline Furniture Division of Marshall Erdman & Associates, attended a meeting at Vera Court Community Center to announce that his company was willing to employ residents of this low-income community. Over the next several months a job training coalition was formed consisting of representatives from Techline, the Dane County Job Center, and four low-income neighborhoods. The community center directors and

job center employees screened residents and prepared them for the job openings. After one year, twelve people who had been living on welfare have obtained full-time employment.

Second, student groups have been investigating how to establish a network of worker cooperatives that would provide job opportunities and improve the living conditions of low-income communities. Students have developed business plans for creating job training, computer services, transportation, and daycare cooperatives that are jointly managed by local

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businesses and residents of low-income communities and housed at low-income community centers. The specific types of cooperatives implemented will be based on the working assets of currently unemployed residents within each neighborhood.

Third, the economic foundation for the above mentioned network of cooperatives will be the establishment of a credit union cooperative that funds the entrepreneurial inclinations of those living in the low-income communities. We are in the process of bringing together residents, community center directors, government officials, business leaders and credit union managers to determine how capital can be obtained, and expert knowledge garnered, to assist low-income residents in the creation of their own businesses. For example, students have developed a business plan for a woman who had been charging nominal fees for giving residents a ride to supermarkets, jobs and social service agencies.

Fourth, managers enrolled in my Executive MBA program have met with jail officials about transforming the county jail into a job training partnership sponsored by local businesses. The executives brainstormed ideas on how businesses and social service agencies could work together to train current inmates in work-release programs for jobs with local employers. If an inmate accomplishes certain performance outcomes, the company will offer the inmate a job upon completion of the jail term.

There are many other ways that businesses can participate in projects that lead to creating jobs and aiding those currently unemployed. Below is a list of projects students enrolled in my classes have undertaken during the past three years that any company could pursue. Once a partnership has been developed with a specific low-income neighborhood or social service agency, the possibilities are endless. Your current employees can:

- Create business plans with entrepreneurially-inclined people.
- Perform market surveys in association with the business plans.
- Develop guidebooks that document how certain low-income neighborhoods have reduced crime and increased employment activities.
- Create and advertise job opportunity databases for residents.
- Help community centers obtain computer hardware and software donations that can be used for job training and educational purposes.
- Work with community center directors to establish a "full-service" community center.
- Conduct a "Money Management" workshop at community centers.
- Establish a summer internship program for disadvantaged high school students.
- Extend the use of a company's computer training center to residents of low-income neighborhoods.
- Permit low-income neighborhoods to use company vehicles to commute children to free clinics for necessary immunizations.
- Use human resource department skills and materials to sponsor a seminar at the neighborhood community center on how to train for a job interview.

All of these projects are evolving. The end goal is to fulfill the employment needs of local businesses by creating job opportunities for people who are typically excluded from labor pools, namely, those living in poverty and current jail inmates. Without jobs, their living conditions, and the living conditions of the community as a whole, will only worsen.

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