

# **CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN MANAGEMENT STUDENTS' OPINION**

## **Summary**

Recently, numerous enterprises are increasingly interested in social responsibility. In the period of economic crisis and negative public attitude towards business, enterprises seek to improve their image. Social responsibility harmonizes with the trend of corporate activities aimed at getting public confidence.

In this paper it is assumed that education of future managers and customers leads to better CSR implementation. An analysis of the management students' attitudes towards CRS was carried out and obtained results were compared to those of representatives of society as whole. The students as a young generation require no changes of conducts gained in work so far, that is often a difficult and time consuming task, therefore they can have an advantageous effect on CSR implementation, both as managers as well as customers. Research findings indicate high sensitivity of the students to social needs and ethical business conduct expectations, influencing the company image and selection of their products, that is connected with market success. As a company's assessment criterion they adopt product quality, how the employees are treated and environmental protection, while charity and sponsorship are recommended only.

**Key words:** corporate social responsibility, stakeholders, enterprises, management, students opinion

## **Introduction**

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), as defined by the European Commission, means a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to include social and environmental concerns in their business operations beyond common regulatory and conventional requirements. This is a concept of business conduct by building clear, long-term and durable relations with all groups directly or indirectly interested in company operations.

CSR implementation causes that companies wish to be perceived to be not only a business entity but also social organizations. An enterprise has not only economic but also social,

environmental, ethical and other impacts. A socially responsible company undertakes actions targeted at solving important social problems on a voluntary basis.

Companies' commitment in implementation of CSR principles gave also an opportunity to create a positive reputation of the company and to perceive its good image by public opinion. The benefits from CSR implementation include better recognition of the brand and increasing reputation of the company.

In opinion of managers and advertisement agencies just reputation will perform the leading role in competitive struggle equally well as product and service quality and the brand strength as a selection criterion for potential clients [ Plompen, 2005].

Expectations for increasing responsibility of present-day companies from increasingly demanding public opinion are currently such rigorous as never before. Concurrently, competitiveness belongs to significant and positive CSR conditionings. It secures consumers' interests, as it creates choice conditions, thus leading to natural selection of companies that resign from CSR. As market economy provides room both for socially responsible companies as well as for those of lower sensitiveness to environment's needs, CSR implementation by enterprises will depend on community expectations.

Corporate Social Responsibility may be interpreted as an undertaking to transparent and ethical business conduct following the sustainable development rules in striving for social prosperity while considering the stakeholders' expectations in compliance with the law and conduct norms.

This is a concept of business conduct by building clear, long-term and durable relationships with all groups directly or indirectly interested in the company's functioning. On the one hand Corporate Social Responsibility means the necessity of taking the consequences of performed activities, but on the other hand the necessity of responding to the needs of specified people, social organizations and business entities constitutes the company's environment. This includes all the company's voluntary activities targeted at solving problems of great social significance (e.g. maintaining environmental valours and quality of life, unemployment prevention, participation in cultural development, prosperity).

### **Social responsibility models**

The social responsibility model suggested by A. B. Carroll includes four responsibility levels [Carroll, 2005]. The first of them, according of the author, is economic one of utmost importance, and then in decreasing order of importance are legal, ethical and, the last but also the most distinguishable, philanthropic level (Fig. 1).

A. B. Carroll assumed the economic responsibility level to be a base of social responsibility. He thought that only a profitable business activity allow other responsibilities to be taken. He assigned second position to legal responsibility considering that an enterprise must obey laws when striving for profits. Ethical responsibility points out that business activity should be conducted fairly, justly and harmlessly. The last level, concurrently being on the top of the pyramid, is philanthropic responsibility and despite of its small size it is highly visible like a tip of the iceberg. The philanthropic activity is connected with performing or financing actions for the selected social problems by sponsoring, charity activity, local community supporting programmes etc.

**Fig. 1. Social Responsibility model according to A.B. Carroll**



Source: A. B. Carroll, *The pyramid of CSR: Toward the moral management of organizational stakeholders*, "Business Horizons" 1991, vol. 34 (4), s. 39 – 48.

In the Carroll's approach the after profit obligation is a base of social responsibility. Such approach is justified but when being compared with philanthropic activity, as the fulfilment of business profitability opens a way to philanthropy. However, it is difficult to agree that profitability is accepted while ignoring both legal and ethical rules.

In turn, the model of social responsibility as a before profit obligation published by Y. Ch. Kang and D. J. Wood puts moral values first [Kang, Wood, 1995]. According to this model any corporation is obliged to obey moral and social norms at each stage of its activity. According to this approach, a profit gained without compliance with ethical norms is morally

unjustified. The following conclusion should be emphasised that not all corporation should operate without time-limits, but only those obeying ethical norms.

In the approach of Y. Ch. Kang and D. J. Wood the ethical activity level is of utmost significance and it should decide on consent to the enterprise's activity. However, the conclusion that not all corporation should operate without time-limits, but only those obeying ethical norms, is just but it is difficult to enforce it in practice. In the model developed by Kang and Wood an enterprise is obliged to consider the stakeholder expectations as equal to those of its own. If this assumption has not been met, an enterprise is given a free way for profit generation. If only legal and ethical conditions are fulfilled, an enterprise may increase its profits and perform its philanthropic activity. However, it is difficult to assess it in practice due to lack of information.

The justification of social responsibility has been put forward by K. Davis based on the following propositions:

- social responsibility arises from the power of society that demands from enterprises to take responsibility for social conditions resulting from its activity;
- an enterprise should operate as a clear system open to social signals and disclosing its activity;
- social costs and benefits should be estimated in decision making related to any activity, product or service;
- social cost of business activity are in consequence shifted on consumers;
- both enterprises and citizens are obliged to be engaged in social problems beyond direct area of their activity.

The above justify the necessity of adaptation of social responsibility and social goals achievement by an enterprise. The acceptance of social responsibility requires that:

- social goals to be included into a strategic goal system,
- measuring methods and meters for evaluation of social goals performance are to be adopted;
- social program costs and profits to be measured;
- corporate social responsibility task completion reports are to be prepared and made available to stakeholders,

Social responsibility most often refers to corporate obligations to society or the environment or both of these. The acceptance of these rules requires positive results to be achieved in the triple bottom line (TBL or 3BL). This concept, introduced and developed by J. Elkington [Elkington, 1998], extends the organization/s obligation to include activities for benefit of

local community, the government, customers, employees, the environment, religions or branch organisations.

The extended meaning of these three dimensions was explained by D. Matten as follows [Matten, 2006]:

- environmental protection perspective – its main reason is to reasonable use natural resources due to its scarcity; the aim is to provide future generations with necessary resources for the continuance of economic growth and enabling them to exist at the level not lower than the present one [Hediger, 1999];
- economic perspective – in the narrow sense it includes the enterprise activities expressed by the Board responsibility for creating such products and services that enable long-term sale; in the broader sense it applies to a positive involvement of an enterprise in developing global occurrences that will contribute to performance of the sustainable development idea and to extend the scope of social responsibility [Meadows, Meadows, Randers, Behrens, 1974];
- social perspective – as a relatively new phenomenon it constitutes the backgrounds of two other perspectives and applies to social expectations addressed to the organisation and its response to these needs [Scott, Park, Cocklin, 2000].

The concepts of social responsibility presented above allow the following CSR platforms to be identified.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility platforms**

It is possible to indicate a number of corporate social responsibility platforms, namely: legal, economic, sociological, ecological, ethical and philanthropic.

The economic platform of social responsibility refers to the basic aim of an enterprise. M. Friedman thought that an enterprise is responsible primarily for profit maximisation. Therefore, it should use its resources and undertake activities to increase its own profits in compliance with the rules of overt and free competition, while social problem solving should be left to governmental institutions. According to M. Friedman, an enterprise cannot be “moral”, much less to allocate the means belonging to shareholders to activities related to social activities [Freidman, 1970].

The right to take profits is defended also by A. Flew, who claimed however that it should not be a leading motive. He submits a proposition that an organisation may go the need of gaining an assumed growth rate (*interestmotive*) or, normally, the need to work out salaries by managers (*wagemotive*) [Flew, 1976].

Enterprises are not obliged to act for benefit of society. However, if they undertake such activities, this may have an effect on attenuation of potential conflicts. In addition, they may stimulate a rise in incomes. Thus, when enterprises conduct in such a way as they have obligations to society or the environment, they can get profits enabling society to gain them, too. The benefit of society will be more effective resource allocation, while the organisation will derive benefit, as its surroundings become less conflicted. In turn, actions conflicting both parties can be detrimental to both parties due to decreased business activity, but in a long term perspective, the company will be the real loser. Thus, a collaboration based on partnership rules and social responsibility propositions may be advantageous both to the enterprise and society [Heal, 2008].

According to N. Bowie, an enterprise should be oriented towards achieving the specified strategic goals understood much widely than profits themselves. On the contrary, an excessive concentration on gaining profits may be getting worse. Such phenomenon is referred to as profit-seeking paradox [Bowie, 1988].

Currently, the views that profit is the only corporate social responsibility are questionable. Considering an enterprise as a one dimensional business entity oriented towards profit maximisation simplifies its responsibility. Taking responsibility in the economic sphere means not only the desire to create profits, but also striving for innovations and growth, competitiveness improvement, increase in market share and propagation of the company's positive image. The enterprises performing such tasks are verified by the market and superseded by more profitable and competitive ones. The company's desire for profits and the necessity of survival under competitive conditions, bring a temptation to use unfair means and breach the interests of others. The key goal may be the desire to maximise the enterprise's value (such goal is set by quoted public companies) or to meet the needs of local communities (e.g. utility companies). This leads to diversified goal hierarchy, but it does not indicate that in both cases one goal only is established instead of a set of goals.

The sociological plane of corporate social responsibility is oriented primarily towards employees, investors, customers, suppliers, distributors, local communities and non-governmental organisations. The basic sociological responsibility indicates the desire:

- to provide jobs and occupational safety;
- to increase prosperity of local community;
- to implement quality standards (processes, environment, life).

The taking sociological responsibility manifests itself at first place by education, training and developing skills of employees.

Social responsibility for employees should take into account:

- employee prosperity – healthcare, aid in trouble financial conditions, health leaves, retiring allowances;
- working conditions – occupational safety, workplace ergonomics, fringe benefits, retirement insurance;
- planning employee tasks, responsibilities and clear pay scheme;
- improving employee satisfaction and self-realisation capabilities;
- maintaining employment stability – improving employee feeling of financial safety.

Disclosure of information on the enterprise's relations with employees should apply to salaries and other benefits, health and occupational safety, training and qualifications, retirement scheme costs and benefits, employment changes.

The ecological plane of corporate social responsibility results from its activity for the environment. Increasing environmental degradation for many years has started a discussion about its consequences. When assessing this phenomenon the fault was assigned mainly to enterprises. Some formal steps have been taken (international conventions and legislation of individual countries) to impel enterprises to respect environmental protection regulations. Increasingly, there are views that an enterprise should be responsible not only for its products and employees but also for the environment. An adverse impact on the environment obligates companies to be responsible for environmental condition. To prevent economic growth being restrained, companies shall take responsibility for minimising adverse environmental impacts. Should an enterprise did not take such responsibility voluntarily, it will be forced by the law to do it. An enterprise is also pressed to force it to take more responsibility both in economic and social aspects. Functioning of companies depends on the degree of its acceptance by the local community where the company's activities are performed. The items related to responsibility for environmental safety and working conditions can take the form of claims for damages to human health and life [Steinman, 1973].

Social responsibility includes all voluntary activities performed by an enterprise and targeted at solving socially important problems such as nature preservation for posterity and maintenance of life quality. Socially responsible conduct may be forced by the law or under social pressure.

The ethical plane of corporate social responsibility covers mainly the perception of decision-making consequences and taking responsibility for them as well as going with the respect for public goods within the commonly accepted norms. The ethical plane of responsibility

penetrates into all aspects of business activity. Considering ethics in business is based on the expectation that an enterprise may support the law on a voluntary basis.

An enterprise as a team can follow ethical standards and assess its activity in terms of morality, especially if it required by a long-term goal, e.g. the company's social image. Thus, an enterprise is operating within a specific structure of rules. These rules come from various interconnected sources, including the law, customs, practice, governmental policy and increasingly international law. Enterprises adopt these rules, while being subject to influence of various institutional structures, opinion-making bodies (scientific institutes, churches), different pressure groups (trade unions, consumer and ecological organisations) as well owners, shareholder and managers. The development of such structure is a key dominant for considering ethical norms in business activity. This "moral infrastructure" of economic life is understood as detailed standards being known and accepted by society and groups to which it applies. These standards give a basis for obeying business ethics and ethical assessment of the company.

Recently, companies show increasing interest in social responsibility. The company engagement in social activity gives an opportunity to shape the company's positive image and good public's perception. In practice, social responsibility has been often indentified with philanthropic activity or participation in ecological actions intended to create an "environmentally friendly" image [Adamczyk, 2010].

### **Social responsibility vs. public's opinion expectations**

Social activity defined as a contribution to community and society has been characterised scoring to social involvement as well as a share in social and economic development.

According to the Green Paper [Green Paper Promoting..., 2008], there are many factors arising interest in corporate social responsibility:

- new problems and expectations of inhabitants, customers, public authorities and investors in the context of globalisation and large-scale industrial changes;
- social criteria increasingly affect investment decisions made by entities and institutions performing the roles of consumers and investors;
- increasingly environmental damages caused by business activity are taken into account;
- business activity transparency enhanced by media and informative and communication technologies.



The adoption of social responsibility rules by organisations is not unequivocal in opinion of problem investigators and practitioners. Some controversy surrounds the question whether such engagement is necessary or proper only? When considering that enterprises, as well as other organisations, have to achieve the specified strategic task contained in its strategy that rarely includes social items [Frederic, Davis, Post, 1988].

One of the basic arguments for taking social activities by an organisation is the fact that such entities form a society subset of significant influence on surroundings functioning. This influence is related to the strength of organisation's interaction, while targeting at improving general public's goods. There are opinions that enterprises are ought to head towards social responsibility primarily because both profitability and development are closely connected with appropriate treatment of employees and customers as well as relations with surroundings [Waddock, Graves, 1977].

Each organisation is subject to influences of stakeholders identified as various interest groups. The organisation being situated in the centre of the whole process must subject its activities to their evaluation. Assuming that internal stakeholders are much more connected with the company's management and activity, it is justified to analyse thoroughly external stakeholders as hard critics of the organisation's achievements.

Socially responsible practices in the internal dimension of the enterprise include primarily employees and such matters as investing in human resources, health and safety as well as change management, while the environmentally responsible practices are connected primarily with management of natural resources in the manufacturing process. These practices open the doors to implementation of changes and reconciliation of social development with better competitiveness.

Corporate social responsibility in its external dimension goes beyond the enterprise's borders and enters local community, and in addition to employees and shareholders involves also other stakeholders, for example trade partners and suppliers, customers, public authorities and non-governmental organisations that represent local communities as well as the environment. In the world of international investments and global supply chains, corporate social responsibility must go also beyond country borders. Rapid advance of globalisation encourages discussions on the role and development of global management; this may be facilitated by development of voluntary practices related to corporate social responsibility. At the same time, the adverse effects of globalisation induce the necessity to take actions pertaining standardisation and assessment of the organisation's social impact.

An increasing role of social responsibility comes from increasing stakeholders awareness and adoption of its assumptions by the managements. Other reasons presented by P. Raynard and M. Forstater include [Raynard, Forstater, 2002]:

- globalisation and consumption growth;
- increasing size, range of operation and resulting increased company incomes;
- changes in legislature position and role;
- fight for talents and knowledge;
- an increasing activity of citizen society on a global scale;
- changing consumers to be critical, interested and engaged in the manufacturing process;
- increase of significance of the company's intangible assets;
- changing investors' approach to expect also other results than financial ones.

In addition, as Ch. Arena says "Europeans have high standards and can be unusually demanding and critical" [Arena, 2007]. Some significant differences in reporting of undertaken activities are also recognised. The European media show higher severity in assessment of organisations and lesser tendency to gloss over undertaken actions combined with higher resistance to *public relations* activities. In Europe the concept of social responsibility is connected with the idea of sustainable development and there is a strong social pressure on responsible business activity.

The first polls pertaining attitudes to social responsibility were carried out in Poland by Ipsos in the years 2002 and 2003 [Ipsos Polska 2003]. However, this all-Polish poll was carried out on a representative random sample of 1000 Polish adults interested in economic matters, thus affecting the results. The respondents demonstrated relatively good knowledge of CSR, but also stockholders were among them. The most important goal of the company's activities has been attributed to gaining profits, paying taxes and giving work to people (53% of respondents). In perception of social responsibility a relationship between the idea of CSR and building the company's image is visible, and this is characteristic of managing personnel. Further poll related to understanding of the term corporate social responsibility were carried out in 2009 on a sample of 1003 people representative to Polish society [Dziawgo, 2010]. The results indicate that even 61% of respondents never heard about CSR. Also the scope of the company's engagement in social affairs according to the poll mentioned above should apply to aid for poor people, children, charity actions and fight against unemployment.

When considering the significance of the teaching young people process and high percentage of university students, it has been concluded that education of future managers not only within the scope of financial and social management aspects is a way towards rapid implementation of CSR rules in enterprises.

The poll was carried out in the years 2010-2011 on a group of 100 third-year management students (Table 1 and 2).

**Table 1. Business activity area priority ranking in students' opinion**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Most important</b>	<b>Equally important</b>
1.	Providing high quality products	80 %	11 %
2.	Care of occupational safety	60 %	21 %
3.	Providing steady jobs	55 %	26 %
4.	Gaining honest profits	51 %	33 %
5.	Just employee treatment	40 %	44 %
6.	Corruption avoidance	40 %	24 %
7.	Informing the customers about product contents	33 %	55 %
8.	Contribution in economic growth	29 %	57 %
9.	Informing about the company's environmental hazards	29 %	29 %
10.	Reliable reporting	26 %	53 %

Source: Author

The enterprise's activity area priority ranking in respondents' opinion indicates the most important issues: providing high quality products (80%), care of occupational safety (60%) and providing steady jobs (55%). The results indicate students' expectations as customers and also the importance of possible employment to each graduate.

**Table 2. CSR business activity areas in students' opinion**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>% of indications</b>
1.	Good treatment of employees	77 %
2.	Ethical conduct	44 %
3.	Environmental protection	42 %
4.	Care of common goods	35 %
5.	Support for charity organisations	29 %
6.	Tax payment	18 %

Source: Author

Among CSR areas the students indicate the most important ones, namely good treatment of employees (77%), ethical conduct (44%), and then environmental protection (42%) and care of common goods (35%). Thus, one can conclude that the activities connected directly with the respondents are of utmost importance, while those related to general society are of secondary significance.

Among the CSR motivations for companies the students have indicated:

1. Building a positive image;
2. Promotional element;
3. Building good relationships with society;
4. Creating a good image among employees.

In turn, in students' opinion the following decisions have an effect on negative image of the company:

- do not use the products in the future;
- share bad opinion with others;
- do not purchase products and services of this company.

In general, the students have indicated that the scope of information about company's activity within the CSR framework is insufficient and expressed their will to gain more information on concrete actions and its effects. The information gathered so far was not trustworthy.

In students' opinion the reliability of information related to social responsibility could strengthen reports prepared by an independent institution. The students get information and opinions about CSR activities primarily from reports published by media, product labels, ecological and charity organisations as well as university and research institutions. Among trustworthy institutions the students list in decreasing significance order: universities and university institutions, charity, social and ecological organisations and the European Union.

## Concluding Remarks

The awareness both among society and company's managements has reached such level that there is no question whether social responsibility items are to be implemented or not. The debate about this problem was predominated by the question how do it [Zerk, 2006]? Increasingly, many enterprises, business, social, governmental and multi-party organisations show a great interest in social responsibility. This results from the process institutionalisation by spreading the OECD rules and the UE strategies. An increasing number of legal regulations or international activities promoting socially responsible businesses and social reporting practice [Utting, 2003] play an important role. This testifies that organisations are aware of the needs arisen by society. Obviously, the problem of implementation of these rules as well as effectiveness of activities and achieved social effects will be different, but the fact that such actions are taken voluntarily indicates common maturation and development of both organisations and society.

Universities play a not trifling role in spreading the idea of CSR due to including such items into syllabuses, thus increasing awareness among future social and economic leaders. Knowledge gained by students not only on material factors affecting competitive edge, but also on the need to consider non-material aspects gives a chance for change of enterprise goal priority and hope for approach changes in management practice.

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