Chapter 32
The Treacherous Path of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the Role of Information Systems in Its Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Despite alleged widespread adoption of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and responsible business practices by organisations worldwide, questions still remain on the motives for such adoption; effects and/or benefits of CSR adoption as well as how stakeholders can tell genuine responsible businesses from those paying lip service and using the CSR tag as a 'means-to-an end'. The litany of jargon often used interchangeably including such terms as CSR, sustainability, sustainable marketing, responsible business practice and sustainable development among others further lead to scepticism on organisations' commitments to CSR and the resultant allegations of greenwashing and CSR tokenism. This undermines genuine attempts to be corporately-responsible, fuelling confusion for any new players wishing to adopt responsible business practices. This chapter uses the Information Systems (IS) landscape as a lever to dissect issues in both CSR theory and practice, offering some practical guidelines for implementation and operationalisation, while raising further questions for research.

INTRODUCTION

While there are more organisations purportedly adopting Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies today than there ever were (Nidumolu, Prahalad, & Rangaswami, 2009; Waddock, 2008), there still remains a myriad of questions regarding the genuineness or authenticity of such organisational strategies and requisite initiatives (McShane & Cunningham, 2012), the significance of the adopted organisational CSR initiatives (Matten & Moon, 2008) as well as the real purpose and effects of such undertakings (Fernando, 2010; Strugatch, 2011). There seems to be an upsurge of annual reports, corporate activities and CSR statements on company websites together with CSR claims posted via a host of other fora pitching organisations as virtuous and responsible (Hogan & Lodhia, 2011; Lozano, 2011).

This upsurge of various conceptions of responsible corporate behaviour causes confusion to the lay eye (Quiroz-Onate & Aitken, 2007), raising questions on whether such acclaimed responsible corporate behaviours actually bear any organisational and societal fruit or not (Brunner, Esch, & Kinscher, 2012). There are further doubts on how the intended and achieved results can be objectively appraised (Parisi & Hockerts, 2008; Wigley, 2008). The organisational virtuousness domain is littered with an array of such terms as CSR, sustainability, ethics, environmental management and responsible corporate behaviour among others, all sometimes used interchangeably. As a consequence, many businesses and stakeholders get lost in trying to decipher the meanings of these terms. They face a conundrum as to which conception to adopt as an embodiment of their own business initiatives in the area of responsible business practices (Baden & Harwood, 2013; Dahlsrud, 2008; Lozano, 2008). Added to the above, many stakeholders often find it difficult to judge whether their nominated organisations deliver on the CSR promises they make (Calabrese, Costa, Menichini & Rosati, 2013).

These and many other CSR-related questions have over the past three decades given rise to a multitude of academic discussions, which due to the complexity of the topic still seem to raise new rather than answer existing questions (Elliott, 2012). While this chapter concurs that providing definitive answers to these issues is difficult, if not impossible, its position is that creating a typology of extant CSR conceptions and clearly delineating implications thereof can be a driving force enabling understanding of CSR in general and specifically within a marketing context. To facilitate a better comprehension of what CSR in marketing is, as well as why and how marketers can bring it to life, this chapter focuses on CSR, its conception within a marketing environment, and the role IS can play in implementing and measuring CSR. This chapter therefore sets forth the following objectives:

1. To introduce more clarity to CSR terminology in use within a marketing context,
2. To outline rationale for pursuing CSR,
3. To provide guidelines for practical implications of CSR initiatives and highlight risks and opportunities in this area.
4. To show how information systems present opportunities for clearer conception, delivery and measurement of CSR results.

Pursuant to the above objectives, the chapter content is organised around four main discussions: CSR terminology, rationale for CSR adoption, practical CSR implementation as well as IS-reliant CSR management. The section below explores issues related to CSR terminology highlighting implications for theory and practice.

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