
The Rise of the Social Intrapreneur



By Filipe Santos, INSEAD Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship, with Jane Williams, Editor, Knowledge Arabia

As corporations recognise the link between CSR and sustainability, opportunities arise for socially conscious leaders to change the world from the inside out.

Up-and-coming leaders today are looking for more than a good salary - they're searching for significance in their day-to-day work and they tie their personal values more closely to their career than previous generations

"There is a longing for a sense of meaning with many executives," Filipe Santos, INSEAD Associate Professor of Entrepreneurship and Academic Director of the INSEAD Social Entrepreneurship Initiative, noted outside the school's 2013 INSEAD Global Business Leaders Conference in Abu Dhabi recently.

"They are told to run a company for profit but now they're thinking. 'I want to go beyond that, I want to have impact in society which is sustainable and makes a difference.'"

This leaves companies with the choice. Either they increase the opportunities for very highly skilled employees to engage with societal issues or they don't, and are likely to find many of their best people leave the organisation to find one that meets their expectations.

Shifting corporate mindset

By giving a platform to these 'social intrapreneurs' and creating an environment that incubates and promotes their initiatives, smart companies are finding that not only are they able to keep their most talented and highly skilled people, they are fulfilling society's growing expectations of the company's role and opening the way for new ideas, broader markets and innovative ways of doing things.

"Once you shift the mindset of the people in your organisation from a short-term focus on the value that we get from the activities and focus on the value that we can create for all stakeholders, the possibilities become much greater," notes Santos.

People will think differently by being more in tune with societal needs and will find innovative ways of doing business, creating new revenue streams, expanding core capabilities and achieving competitive advantage in new markets.

From CEO to junior employee

Firms don't have motivations to engage in social issues, he argues. It's the people inside the corporation, the social intrapreneurs from all ranks of the corporate hierarchy, from CEO to junior employee, who spark change. Able to leverage off a corporation's network of resources, market share and distribution channels, they address some of the toughest social and environmental challenges while delivering long-term value for their company.

Whether this is by finding more inclusive ways of doing business with previously excluded sections of the population; pushing forward ideas on energy conservation; or introducing methods of reusing or recycling within the company itself, social intrapreneurs push boundaries beyond their regular role and introduce changes to internal operations or business initiatives which enable their company to become more engaged with societal issues. They disrupt the way business is conducted, with the backing of corporate heads.

Getting that support from the organisation, says Santos, is the tricky part.

Pushing through change

While social intrapreneurs may avoid the continual search for funding, faced by social entrepreneurs looking to run their own mission-based enterprise, they have to navigate complex corporate structures, meet the often diverse needs of multiple stakeholders and risk being seen as the lone wolf.

Social intrapreneurs seek to create social impact through the firm's resources but without primary concern for profit as the main outcome, Santos and co-author Christiane S.Bode, PhD Candidate in Strategy note in their recent paper [**The Organizational Foundations of Corporate Social Entrepreneurship**](#).

They challenge the perceptions of other organisational members who think that corporate initiatives which do not focus on value capture are unjustified.

So they need in some way to articulate why the ideas and initiatives they want to create are good for the company. And they need to find the way it resonates with each of the internal stakeholders.

"[Successful intrapreneurs] engage in creative and selective framing of the initiative, generating multiple rationalisations for its existence, to gain the support of various stakeholders."

The reason why people within a corporation support an idea may be very different, Santos explains. "Some may do so to benefit their reputation, some because it improves the loyalty of employees and some may genuinely want to have a direct impact on society.

"A clever social intrapreneur has to understand what motivates different people, and frame ideas slightly differently when seeking individual support."

Social intrapreneur vs entrepreneur

While social intrapreneurs, don't get the recognition which comes with founding a successful company branded with their name, they do have the satisfaction of getting their disruptive ideas to market — and to more customers sooner than the more widely-recognised social entrepreneur. Greater environmental or social impact is achieved as a result.

For companies, the benefits may not be obvious straight away, says Santos. But as they engage more generally with those issues across the entire value

chain, they will actually find opportunities for value creation and then it will become “not just a public relations exercise with a nice report but actual and genuine change... creating meaningful activities and changing areas of the business to incorporate issues that society cares about.”



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