



# Corporate Social Responsibility Done Correctly

Firms looking to initiate or augment a corporate social responsibility program may face a multitude of options — and an unexpected outcome.



**ERIN BRERETON**  
Owner, Chicago Journalist Media

**A number of firms have, for years, supported pro bono programs; 81 percent of attorneys say they've provided related services at some point in their career, according to a recent ABA survey.**

"Comprehensive corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs that encompass a variety of projects and causes are a newer concept for many firms. In recent years, though, more have incorporated initiatives that address community, environmental and other issues, according to Aileen Bleach, Pro Bono and Corporate Responsibility Manager at 400-attorney firm Eversheds Sutherland LLP.

"The practice of law firms having a CSR effort is growing," Bleach says. "Early on, at many firms, large ones in particular, pro bono work was often the focus. Volunteering can tie in with that — and people are starting to expand into CSR specialty areas."

## **AN ASSORTMENT OF CSR**

Law firm corporate social responsibility elements can vary from financially or physically helping a local charity to programs that have an international impact.

---

“For professional service firms, CSR is now encompassing a much wider range of issues, from carbon footprint reporting to looking at risks in the supply chain.”

---

Firm members may roll up their sleeves and, as Eversheds Sutherland employees have, spend a day building homes for Habitat for Humanity. The firm’s offices also have pro bono committees that employees can opt into and assorted volunteer opportunities that board members, leadership and other firm employees have suggested.

Numerous firms’ programs feature a focus on sustainability. For example, all food that’s thrown away in the cafeteria in Baker McKenzie’s London office is weighed, composted and assessed to determine future ways to further reduce waste, according to Director of Corporate Social Responsibility Christie Constantine.

“They’ve changed the way they serve food and portion sizes and timing of when they put things out,” Constantine says. “It’s a very sophisticated recycling effort. They do a lot of education in that office so people understand why and how to support the program.”

Some of the global, 4,000-plus-attorney firm’s offices have also installed bike racks and subsidized bicycle purchases to encourage employees to bike to work.

Sixty-attorney Denver firm Moyer White supplies transit passes to encourage employees to take the bus instead of driving. Although Equity Partner Dominick Sekich says the environmental aspects of the firm’s CSR program have been some of the most challenging to gain direct results from, the firm has been able to make a number of adjustments.

“The simplest efforts for us were looking at how to address employees and engage the community,” he says. “The area we found difficult was thinking about opportunities to improve where there would be a reasonable [effect] on the environment. There are still tweaks you can make, like creating a default for every printer to print both sides to reduce paper usage — small things actually have an impact.”

CSR initiatives can also include diversity and inclusion and human rights concerns that relate to both employees and other entities the firm interacts with.

Baker McKenzie, which signed on to the voluntary United Nations Global Compact initiative in 2015, has set aspirational gender targets for partners and principals and worked to provide more comprehensive sponsorship and mentorship opportunities, according to Constantine.

“There’s a commitment in the UN Global Compact to actually align operations with 10 principles around human rights, fair labor and anti-corruption,” she says. “For professional service firms, CSR is now encompassing a much wider range of issues, from carbon footprint reporting to looking at risks in the supply chain. The breadth of issues has definitely broadened.”

#### **RUNNING RESPONSIBILITY**

Some firms have an attorney or team manage projects — or create a role specifically to oversee CSR. Bleach’s position has existed for more than 13 years at Eversheds Sutherland, which also recently hired a pro bono administrative assistant to help manage its variety of charitable projects.

For Moyer White, the social and environmental performance, accountability and transparency standards involved in applying for B Corp certification from the nonprofit B Lab organization — which the firm obtained in 2014 — helped provide a template for its CSR program. Certified B Corporations have to meet the highest standards of verified, overall social and environmental performance, public transparency and legal accountability.

“A large, 2,000-attorney firm might have the luxury of developing a specific program policy and identifying a partner or executive who can actually be responsible for CSR,” Sekich says. “As a midsized firm, B Corp certification was an accessible way for us to try in an organized fashion to address our CSR goals.”

Once a program is up and running, individual CSR project suggestions may come from various sources. Eversheds Sutherland’s volunteer work often involves projects that an organization’s board members or leadership are passionate about, according to Bleach. Employees, too, offer ideas, and its offices have pro bono committees that employees can opt into.

---

“In the last 5 to 10 years, CSR was very much a write-a-check-or-sponsor-events [situation]; firms are taking a more grassroots approach now and not just giving money, but their time.”

---

To encourage staff members to participate in its CSR endeavors, Moyer White offers paid time off to attend volunteering outings it has identified.

“For a firm our size, that’s a meaningful commitment,” Sekich says. “We try to [offer] diverse opportunities; if someone isn’t interested in helping at a homeless shelter, you have the opportunity to go outside and help build a trail.”

Providing volunteering options can also help with program oversight, according to Sekich.

“You’ve got to measure the impact — otherwise, there’s no point in having a CSR program,” he says. “The best way to do that is to have these opportunities be more or less formal. Employees don’t have to hunt for them, and it’s also easier to track commitment.”

### THE SURPRISING CSR EFFECT

Robust CSR programs can be a significant selling point for Millennials, who research indicates value community involvement.



Thirty-nine percent of Millennials research employee volunteering and other charitable work before interviewing with an employer; 55 percent who were told about cause-related corporate philanthropy during their interview say it helped convince them to take the job, according to a report from the Case Foundation.

“I’ve heard from our colleagues who handle recruiting that they pretty consistently get asked [about CSR], especially by law students or recent graduates,” Constantine says. “Our Belfast office, for example, opened a few years ago in a very competitive talent market. Part of its proposition to attract talent was an ethos of volunteering and community service.”

CSR efforts can also, according to Bleach, help positively influence firm culture.

“You’ve got staff and attorneys building a house together [at Habitat for Humanity] — that makes it very collegial,” she says. “How you interact, how you enjoy your time with people when you get to work on different types of projects together — there’s incredible value in that.”

Clients also care about CSR. While it’s not as influential as price or responsiveness, in-house counsel say corporate social responsibility is a bigger factor in whether they choose a legal supplier than personal relationships, according to a 2017 Thomson Reuters survey.

“We’re seeing a big uptick in clients asking us to tell them what we’re doing,” Constantine says. “When I first started, it was kind of unheard of to ask about our carbon footprint; now we’re getting requests fairly regularly. There’s an expectation you’re doing those things.”

### OFFERING SUPPORT FOR THE RIGHT REASONS

The main motivation for undertaking CSR efforts should be, and in most cases is, because it’s the right thing to do.

CSR programs may, however, inadvertently offer some advantages — including helping firms more effectively manage talent and succession plans as managers

"You've got to measure the impact — otherwise, there's no point in having a CSR program. The best way to do that is to have these opportunities be more or less formal. Employees don't have to hunt for them, and it's also easier to track commitment."

approaching retirement pass the corporate social responsibility reins to younger attorneys, according to Emily Frickey, Director of Digital Operations at legal marketing agency Network Affiliates, which has advised firms on CSR.

"Having some of the older principal attorneys helping to guide them allows them to grow in the space," Frickey says. "It's very much, 'Let's see how they do handling something like this and still managing to be a practicing attorney.' It's indicative of if they can handle more — and do they want to handle more."

Highlighting a firm's dedication to volunteer work can help potential job candidates, clients and the outside world, in general, understand the firm is committed to being a principled, socially responsible service provider — which, in today's increasingly competitive legal market, may not be a bad thing.

"In the last 5 to 10 years, CSR was very much a write-a-check-or-sponsor-events [situation]; firms are taking a more grassroots approach now and not just giving money, but their time," Frickey says. "There are a ton of attorneys advertising every time you turn on the radio or TV — how do you stand out? CSR is a great way to do that. Showing you care goes a long way with people." ■

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Erin Brereton** is a freelance writer, editor and content strategist who has written about the legal industry, business, technology and other topics for 20 years.



breretonerin@gmail.com



twitter.com/erbrer09



www.chicagojournalist.com

## SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT PHILANTHROPIC WORK

A study of the top 100 English firms' websites found the majority mention their corporate social responsibility efforts — not all firms, though, in or outside England share CSR-related content with the public.

Many who do use social media, according to Emily Frickey, Director of Digital Operations at legal marketing agency Network Affiliates.

"Gone are the days of press releases. Some still do that, but [it's generally] a very social interactive piece," Frickey says. "Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the three biggest hitters, in terms of getting CSR out there."

For firms trying to reach a Millennial audience of potential employees or future clients — who research indicates places a strong emphasis on CSR involvement — sharing information on social media can be an important move.

"Social media has been a huge catalyst for firms to understand they can reach the demographic and say, 'We really do care about the community,'" Frickey says.

Conveying CSR info internally can be an additional challenge. To ensure firm members know what opportunities exist, Eversheds Sutherland LLP shares information on a blog created specifically for pro bono and corporate responsibility updates.

"Somebody can't say they had no idea someone in the Atlanta office was doing work they would've loved to get involved with," says Pro Bono and Corporate Responsibility Manager Aileen Bleach. "We can talk about projects we're doing in other offices so people can join in. We're trying to be more interconnected about it."