

THE STATE OF THE CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY PROFESSION: A Snapshot and Path Forward

Presentation of Preliminary Findings

KEY QUESTIONS: Where does the field stand today? How will the field's set of knowledge, skills and attributes mature?

FINDINGS:

1. CR remains a nascent profession.

A mature profession has certain characteristics: recognition by society; an accepted body of knowledge, applied research related to that body of knowledge; a recognized professional society; an ethics code; and a professional credential. These characteristics are currently lacking or underdeveloped for the corporate responsibility (CR) profession, indicating the need for focused attention and effort to fully mature it.

2. No real career path.

To date, few have entered this profession via a deliberate career path; however we are at the dawn of Generation 2.0 for the CR profession. In Generation 1.0, people got these jobs without formal training or experience in the field, often coming from related but narrower disciplines like environmental health & safety or corporate philanthropy. Generation 1.5, which began during the last decade, was marked by lateral transfers – corporate responsibility officers (CROs) from one company taking the same or similar job at another – recognizing that this role encompasses a transferable skill set. Recently, Generation 2.0 leaders have emerged, with formal education and work experience in the field prior to obtaining manager- or executive- level positions. Nevertheless, people seeking to advance in this field still have to make their own way without the benefit of a clear career path. Moreover, Generation 1.0 leaders are not always focused on clearing that path.

“[CR professionals] don't have to have expertise to be a CR leader. Rather, we bring in business leaders instead of [CR] leaders.”
– A CRO

3. CR's future looks more like the Chief Financial Officer than the eCommerce Officer.

Some see CR rising in response to recent events and sun-setting as a formal function once it is “embedded” throughout companies and management decision-making, similar to how eCommerce Officers sprung up at the beginning of the Internet-boom and then faded away. However, the overwhelming consensus of people interviewed for this study was that the CRO would follow a path more like that of the CFO: while finance is embedded in decision-making at all levels of the company, a formal officer and function persists.

4. Dearth of educational capacity with no clear leaders.

A mature academic field has certain characteristics currently lacking for the field of CR: pipeline of educators; program specialties and sub-specialties; academic research and publishing; graduate level programs; and a core curriculum. Regardless of whether CR persists as a distinct function or not, without educators and a curriculum future business leaders will not have the conceptual frameworks, hard data and proven practices they need. Putting these pieces in place will help advance the field and embed CR into business-thinking.

“The state of play in the academic study of CSR is not great. There is no center of excellence that I know of.”
– An academic

5. Fulfilling CR's promise requires leadership education.

Improving the role of business in society is predicated on improving the effectiveness of management's discipline; the ability of business leaders to integrate CR

"The real question is not how to build a specific CR curriculum; it's how do we embed CR into leadership thinking." – A CRO

principles and stakeholder approaches into mainstream strategy. This will link CR initiatives directly to business goals and create the ability to measure a company's resulting performance.

6. Need CR professionals willing to take calculated risks.

In a mature profession, the professional feels greater allegiance to the profession than to their specific employer, which empowers them to do what they feel is best in the name of the profession. Today's CR professionals are unable to rely on this same sort of professional backing, so may be afraid to confront their employers on the tough issues.

In addition, just as business leaders need CR integrated into their education, CR professionals need a strong business foundation integrated into their course curriculum in order for them to succeed.

7. Many CROs are ambivalent about the development of their own profession.

The majority of CROs interviewed were of two minds about the future of their profession: they like their jobs but are uncertain about the future of their profession. As a result, some have adopted a "wait and see" attitude while others wanted to take deliberate action to help mature the field but aren't sure what steps to take. There is no

"I don't really know if this is a profession with a future." – A CRO

clear consensus on how to move the profession forward, as evidenced by the lack of agreement around whether or not there is a need for credentialing in this field.

8. Some CROs are disturbingly apathetic.

As touched on above, some – though certainly not all – Generation 1.0 CROs seem unwilling to actively help build the CR profession. They remain unconvinced that a profession even exists or that it's worth investing time or effort in developing.

9. It will take deliberate, collective action to mature the profession.

The "original" professions – doctors, lawyers, educators, police, soldiers – came into being because the state reserved for them special powers that it restricted for the rest of us. Later professions – finance and HR most notably – arose through a combination of state action and advocacy. Governments either licensed some parts of these professions (e.g., accountants) or required complex regulatory reporting resulting in the need for specialized skills (e.g., bookkeeping and employment-related filings). At the same time these professionals and their societies actively worked for recognition. This lends important insight for how CR can become a true profession. The preconditions already exist and are growing for government-required reporting in this area. What is missing is active advocacy and deliberate action by professionals and a recognized professional society.

"I got this job from inside...It's not a profession...It's more a response to a crisis." – A CRO

Conclusion:

The CR profession is stuck in a chicken-and-egg conundrum: before employers establish a CR career path, CR needs a defined curriculum; before educational institutions invest in a defined curriculum, they need to see a clear demand for CR professionals. CROs need to be more engaged in shaping the future of their profession through deliberate, collective action.

Staff Note: These preliminary findings are made available to attendees of the Corporate Citizenship Awards 2011 Finalists Luncheon. In early 2012, the complete research report will be released by the Chamber BCLC and the Corporate Responsibility Officers Association. To inquire about the launch, contact Chamber BCLC's director of communications, Catherine (Kitty) Keller, ckeller@uschamber.com.