

insight

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Corporate Social Responsibility in Practice



In a series of 10 interviews with Business Leaders in the Czech Republic, Mark Hamill (pictured), Global Managing Director for SpenglerFox, an Irish Executive Search organization and external partner with UNICEF across the CEE markets discusses social, professional and corporate social responsibility challenges facing business leaders in these demanding times.

Muriel Anton is CEO of Vodafone Czech Republic. She first came to Czech republic in 2000 to become finance vice-president for the mobile operator Oskar, later acquired by telecommunications giant Vodafone. Before that, Muriel was responsible for financial planning and analysis management in several large Canadian telecommunication companies. She studied Music and Economics in Edmonton and in her free time enjoys skiing, squash, cooking and golf.

We sat down to lunch in the Vodafone HQ Fuel café in Vinohradska, a trendy café situated in the basement of the office building occupied by Vodafone. Muriel was one of the first approach for the interviews having earlier in the year been voted one of the Top 25 Women Business Leaders in the Czech Republic.

I opened the questions focusing on Vodafone's approach to CSR, and Muriel excitedly spoke about how in Vodafone the 'CSR' approach is well integrated into their business, and how it's more important to build a value based organization where employee values come to the fore and bubble over. Muriel explained that in her opinion, developing a sense of belief that **'how you do' is as important as 'what you do' is critical in developing a strong CSR approach in business.**

Muriel went on to describe how respect and trust are fundamental to helping organizations develop a natural sense of CSR. Muriel discussed the role of the organization beyond making money, and more about what and how people think and act. She sees that part of her role as a director of the organization is to help with that process.

She goes on to explain that in Vodafone they have a CSR team analyzing 4 key areas: employees, environment, customers and community. The team's task is to constantly look for projects that Vodafone can support locally. At a Group level Vodafone have a Vodafone Foundation which gives group direction on CSR projects worldwide.

When I asked if she believes that Vodafone's CSR activity helps when recruiting talent, Muriel agreed that it is important, but that being a strong brand and having a strong corporate culture, the environment either suits or doesn't depending on the person. While the 'right' profile may find Vodafone an entrepreneurial, stimulating environment to work in others may not succeed in this fast paced environment.

A recent example of how the values in Vodafone work right throughout the firm was when they were deciding what to do with older computers. The challenge was set for the CSR team when an employee came forward and presented the case for donating the computers to his old school in the countryside which had no funds to buy its own computers. The idea was very positively received and Vodafone set about making it happen, while at the same time extending the opportunity out to the rest of it's employees to see if they could also think of worthwhile recipients of the computers in their communities.

Employees responded with lists of schools, community centers etc. The enthusiasm thrown at the project was a very pleasant surprise for Anton, and she was delighted with the high levels of excitement it created in the firm.

Within Vodafone The concept of CSR seems to be hard wired into its employees. Anton describes how many of its employees are involved in community work in their spare time and how it has become part of their culture. Vodafone employees have the opportunity to spend a day working for an NGO. Instead of going to Vodafone, they spend one day working in non-profit organization of their choice. An example was set by their top management helping out in the Animal Rescue Centre Pasíčka.

The 'World of Difference' program carried out by Vodafone Foundations worldwide and introduced in Czech Republic last year isn't on the other hand only restricted to Vodafone employees. It is a fantastic opportunity for experts working in the commercial or state sectors to take part in the project of a lifetime. Over 120 candidates from all over the country applied for the program where they get to work in an NGO of their choice and Carry out their chosen project for a period of 1 year with their salary paid for by Vodafone.

There were five winners of this year's selection process – a blogger, a business director, a ministry officer, a manager and an environmental protection activist. They have already left their warm chairs in business and now work for their chosen NGO's. Seeing the results of these projects happen organically is what makes it exciting says Anton.

When asked about the people she has worked with and the nature of the mobile business Anton mentions the entrepreneurial spirit within Vodafone, and how they have always been a challenger brand in the Czech market. She feels that this entrepreneurial spirit is a key factor in identifying people who will work well in the organization.

On the topic of 'work/life' balance Anton claims she doesn't switch her blackberry off, but is able to disconnect when she is doing other activities, she has 'blackberry etiquette' and did not once look at her blackberry while we talked. Having said this even during her off hours she will sneak a look at the blackberry to see if anything important is going on.

We discussed the importance of mentors, a topic which has been high on the HR radar now for many years and Muriel reflects on some of her previous managers. She greatly appreciates the amount of time they invested on coaching and developing her. She speaks eloquently on the importance of coaching and mentoring and spending time with her key people giving them opportunities to grow and develop.

As a CEO she believes totally in the importance of teamwork and hitting her goals through her team, she does not understand the approach of doing it 'all by myself' and not trusting direct reports.

Currently we work in challenging times, with the economic crisis blowing around us; I asked Muriel how she would advise people who find themselves after years of employment suddenly unemployed. Her answer made a lot of sense when she suggested people should use the opportunity to look at 'filling in the gaps' in their education, examining any other career paths they would like to take, making new contacts, applying for courses to improve skills or develop new expertise. This is sound advice for a growing number of people who have found themselves 'on the market'.

Anton really enjoys life in Prague and sees the rise of shopping malls as one of the major changes locally, although she is happy that a balance between the old and the new architecture has been maintained. Having grown up in Edmonton, Canada where the nearest shop was a ten minute drive, Anton is delighted to live in Prague and describes Prague as a walking town which is very easy to get around. In her spare time, Muriel enjoys working out in the gym, playing squash and having been in the Prague since January 2000, her favorite restaurant is the original Kogo's on Havel'ska.