

Corporate Social Responsibility

How AI and Social Intrapreneurship Can Help Companies Navigate Today's Political Headwinds

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Creating an environment that supports social intrapreneurs and employ AI to accelerate social innovation.

From corporate social responsibility (CSR) to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, initiatives aimed at helping companies create a positive societal impact are facing heightened scrutiny. Citigroup, Google, Target, and Goldman Sachs are just a few examples of companies that have **modified or eliminated discussions** of DEI in their annual reports and other documents, and BlackRock — one of the world’s largest asset managers and a pioneer in ESG — has **shifted from its aggressive stance**.

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Collina, Luca, Mostafa Sayyadi, and Michael Provitera. “**Corporate Social Innovation: The Convergence of Business Innovation and Social Good.**” California Management Review Insights, December 12, 2023.

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These changes may have begun when the new U.S. administration was sworn in, but the problem these programs face goes much deeper than having run afoul of today’s political realities. Indeed, academic and business studies have long highlighted a much more

fundamental issue: In a **2020 McKinsey survey** of 1,000 U.S.-based employees, 82% reported that purpose was important to them personally — but only 42% said that their organization's purpose statements had an impact. A **2022 study** found that while CSR reporting is increasing, stakeholder skepticism is as well...and for good reason: Even with third-party audits, the report found that organizations often only disclose activities that are having a positive impact and that many overstate the impact of those initiatives. More recently, a **2024 IBM** survey of 5,000 C-suite executives found that spending on sustainability reporting exceeded spending on actual sustainability innovation by 43%. In other words, long before today's political turmoil, frustration that many organizations seem to be simply checking boxes without actually making substantive progress has been becoming increasingly widespread among companies' own employees, customers, and shareholders.

So, what will it take to address this deep-rooted disconnect? It's more than a political issue, and as such, addressing it will take more than a superficial policy change. To the contrary, aligning organizations with their stated CSR goals and values will require *social intrapreneurship*: empowering employees to identify, develop, and deliver authentic approaches to social innovation that are not the result of some external initiative or marketing messaging but reflect a sustained, internally driven effort.

Importantly, this requires going beyond simply **creating an environment that is conducive to social intrapreneurship** or even **championing the successes** of individual social intrapreneurs. To build organizations in which social intrapreneurs are truly empowered to drive the lasting, genuine change that the current landscape demands, leaders must take steps to integrate social intrapreneurship into their operations **holistically and authentically**. AI has recently emerged as a powerful tool for enabling this type of integration — but businesses also need to stay ahead of the risks these new technologies can pose. Specifically, through a **comprehensive literature review** of professional and academic research on the topic, I identified three strategies that companies should leverage to begin to bridge this gap:

Strategy 1: Invest in Identifying and Developing Social Intrapreneurs

Companies should begin by investing in practices, tools, and organizational structures that identify, recruit, and develop social intrapreneurs within the context of their overall business strategy. Importantly, these efforts will only be effective if companies also invest in truly understanding their employees' values, motivations, and skills. For example, leveraging AI-powered people analytics tools such as **Workday** and **Eightfold AI** can help organizations understand their workforce and determine who might be motivated and capable of being a social intrapreneur. Through automated job analyses, competency assessments, employee sentiment analyses, and other features, these tools can help shed light on the people within an organization who are most likely to drive positive change.

Of course, while these AI tools can be incredibly powerful, they also come with real risks. For example, **Amazon** made headlines when it attempted to use AI to reduce bias in screening job applicants, only to find that a bias against women had been trained into the model based on historical hiring data, and similar issues have arisen at **Google and Meta**. From data leaks due to sensitive information being inputted into tools like ChatGPT to algorithmic bias and the costs associated with accessing the quantities of data necessary for AI tools to be useful, AI is far from a silver bullet — but it does have the potential to add a lot of value when used thoughtfully and responsibly.

Next, once you've identified your high-potential social intrapreneurs, it's equally important to help them develop the skills they'll need to succeed. These include hard skills, such as technology and finance, and soft skills, such as communication and leadership. Here, too, AI can help: **J&J**, for instance, uses an AI-powered career mapping tool to provide its 135,000 global employees with learning and development, career, and mentorship opportunities tailored to their current skills and future aspirations. Similarly, **DHL** uses a skills mapping platform from **Cornerstone** to pinpoint skill gaps and available training. AI platforms like **Together** and **MentorcliQ** can be used to match employees with mentors inside and outside their organization who share their interests.

Finally, organizations can also explore formal partnerships to further support their social intrapreneurs. From **ICICI Bank in India** to **SAP, Shell**, and even a **Belgian soccer club**, research has shown that companies can team up with NGOs, form foundations, acquire subsidiaries, and build other kinds of partnerships that will help ensure their social intrapreneurs have access to the long-term investment that impact-focused projects often require.

Strategy 2: Empower Social Intrapreneurs to Pursue Their Passions

It's one thing to say you want to support social intrapreneurs. It's another to give them the freedom and resources to explore their ideas and pursue their passions. That means trusting social intrapreneurs with a level of discretion in how they use their time, encouraging their innovative and entrepreneurial behavior, and ensuring that top management sets the tone by promoting a proactive, risk-taking culture throughout the organization.

Another important way in which senior executives can put their support of social intrapreneurs into action is by using AI to identify opportunities for social intrapreneurship that connect individual employees' passions with the company's broader strategic goals. AI models can identify problems, opportunities, and risks, as well as assist with evaluating, assessing, and scoring ideas. For example, **Unilever** partnered with Google's Earth Engine platform to use AI to identify opportunities to improve its business operations and societal impact, from concept development through launch and implementation. Another AI provider, **Crayon**, has developed and deployed an AI model that enables energy companies to accelerate market research and enhance the insights available to their employees and customers.

Strategy 3: Demonstrate Organization-Wide Support for Social Intrapreneurship

At the end of the day, you can invest in all the development and support resources in the world — but a company's best people are unlikely to pursue social intrapreneurship unless they see it as a good career investment. Through both words and deeds, executives should position social intrapreneurship as an integral part of their overall business strategy. This includes recognizing and rewarding individual social intrapreneurs through bonuses, raises, and promotions tied to their efforts, as well as showcasing the new customers, partners, and markets that their contributions have unlocked. It also means investing in programs specifically designed to spur social intrapreneurship and showcase its value.

Research has **identified several ways** companies have created high-profile, organization-wide initiatives designed specifically to galvanize social intrapreneurs, provide them a platform for their ideas, and recognize and reward their efforts. For example, Ericsson, Barclays, and Intel launched worldwide innovation contests, collaborative idea management programs, incubators, and competitive awards programs showcasing social intrapreneurship. Similarly, Danone, BlackRock, and Unilever created product and process innovation programs that explicitly prioritized social and environmental goals and engaged all of their employees in these efforts.

Initiatives like these flatten and democratize organizations, which is another area where AI can help. For example, former global managing partner for client service at EY Andy Baldwin **has shared** how EY's AI assistant, **EYQ**, provides every employee with direct access to the company's collective knowledge, insights, and experiences. In this way, the AI tool enables all employees to ideate, research, create, and be recognized as active contributors to the company's overall business strategy and approach to social responsibility.

Donna Wood, former professor of business administration at the University of Pittsburgh whose work is considered foundational to the field of social responsibility, once **wrote**, “A company's social responsibilities are not met by some abstract organizational actor; they

are met by individual human actors.” In a climate of rising backlash against DEI and other forms of corporate social responsibility, social intrapreneurship represents a more innovative, entrepreneurial, and authentic approach to driving real change.

Rather than focusing on some abstract organizational purpose or cliched set of values, social intrapreneurship is driven by those with a direct financial interest in the company: employees who recognize and passionately pursue opportunities to address customer and shareholder interests while advancing positive societal change. It avoids the perception that today’s top-down programs primarily originate from outside organizations with little to no direct investment in the company, and it engages the entire company in the process. Most vitally, it is not just another symbolic gesture. Investing in social intrapreneurship takes time, commitment, and a reimagining of the very nature of how companies integrate their interests with those of society at large. That means recognizing that everyone involved in a corporation is both a business and social actor, empowered to simultaneously pursue their personal, professional, and societal goals.



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Michael Corbett, DBA, specializes in outsourcing, business strategy, and social intrapreneurship. He helped develop IBM’s outsourcing business and co-founded IAOP, creating industry standards adopted in over 50 countries. Corbett authored "The Outsourcing Revolution", has served on private and NYSE-listed boards, and is an Associate Editor of Engaged Management Review.